

The Temple of Love, Past and Present

Just to the left of Saigandenji Temple is a lava-rock path known as the Shakyogabashi (“bridge of sutra copying”). The name refers to the practice of transcribing phrases from Buddhist sutras onto stones and burying them as a form of prayer. Before a road to the crater was built, the Shakyogabashi was the main route leading there, although only monks and priests were actually permitted to go all the way up to the sacred heart of the volcano. Ordinary people would have to stop at a barrier after about 150 meters. Many of the visitors were young couples, who would make a pilgrimage to the place in a pre-marriage practice called *ondakesan-mairi*.

Only those who were pure of heart and physically clean could walk upon this path. The patterns on the lava rock resemble the underside of a snake. To people of impure heart, the path supposedly looked like an enormous serpent, frightening them and preventing them from going any further up the mountain.

Ondakesan-mairi pilgrims came to the temple on the spring and autumn equinoxes. Until the late 1860s, they would be guided up the mountain by the ascetics who lived on the open ground to the west of the temple. Although the ascetics were evicted when the Meiji government turned against Buddhism, labeling it an unwelcome foreign import and forcibly separating it from home-grown Shintoism, pilgrims continued coming in great numbers. There are reports from the Taisho era (1912–1926) of long lines of women in red kimonos resembling a row of red spider lilies as they made their way up the mountain.

Marriage and romantic ties (*enmusubi*) have long been a key theme of Saigandenji. In a modern take on the same idea, the temple won designation as an official “Lovers’ Sanctuary” (meaning a romantic spot perfect for proposing marriage) in 2011. (There are around 140 Lovers’ Sanctuaries in Japan; a nonprofit organization launched the project in 2006 in a bid to help revitalize outlying regions of the country and boost the low birthrate.)

The old temple once contained a metal sculpture of a horse, but it was melted down for the war effort in 1940. In November 2022, the horse was replaced with a seated and rather contented-looking red granite cow. Because metal is too easily damaged by sulfurous gases and acid rain, the explanatory panel on the sculpture’s plinth is made of Arita-ware porcelain. Visitors are encouraged to pat the cow and make a wish.

As a result of the Kumamoto earthquakes in 2016 and the prolonged volcanic activity that followed, the Mt. Aso cable car was permanently closed, and this part of the mountain remained off limits for six years. While visitor numbers are still far below their former levels, the chief priest of Saigandenji has expressed hope that these recent initiatives will give more people a reason to visit.