

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”). Before the modern road was built, the Shakyogabashi was the main route up to the crater. Only monks and priests were allowed to go all the way up to the top; ordinary people were stopped by a barrier after some 150 meters. As a pre-marriage tradition, many young couples would visit the place in a practice known as *ondakesan-mairi*.

Ondakesan-mairi pilgrims came to the temple on the spring and autumn equinoxes. Until the late 1860s, the mountain ascetics who lived in great numbers on the open ground to the west of the temple would guide the pilgrims up the mountain. But even after the ascetics had been evicted and Saigandenji closed in 1871 by government edict, the pilgrims continued to come. Reports from the Taisho era (1912–1926) describe long lines of women in red kimonos making their way up the mountain, looking from a distance like a row of red spider lilies.

Marriage and romantic ties (*enmusubi*) have long been a key theme of Saigandenji. In a modern take on the same idea, the temple was designated an official “Lovers’ Sanctuary” (meaning a romantic spot perfect for proposing marriage) in 2011. The statue of a seated cow was installed in November 2022. Visitors are encouraged to make a wish as they pat it.