

Shomyoji Temple

This temple overlooking the Sea of Japan is best known for its connection to Ryokan (1758–1831), an unconventional priest celebrated as a poet and calligrapher. Temple treasures include a statue attributed to Kukai (774–835), who founded the Shingon school of Buddhism, and ceiling paintings of dragons and seasonal flowers. The Kannon-ko (“Kannon Sermons”) event hosted at this temple June 16–17 has been bringing the community together for food, celebration, and prayer for over 200 years.

History

The origins of Shomyoji began with a small figure of Sho Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, enshrined at Mt. Koya in Wakayama Prefecture. It is said that Kukai himself cast the image in 804.

In 1049, the priest Eishu was inspired by a dream to take the Kannon figure and travel the country spreading Buddhist teachings. Legend says the figure suddenly became heavy upon reaching Teradomari, and Eishu

followed Kannon's instructions from another dream to build a hermitage there.

Over the years, renowned warriors such as Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189) and Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578) are said to have made visits to Shomyoji to pray for success in battle. In 1695, a female relative of the fifth Tokugawa shogun was cured of an eye ailment after prayers were offered at Shomyoji, and the shogunate facilitated construction of a new Kannon Hall as an expression of gratitude.

At the height of its power, Shomyoji had six subtemples within its precincts, but they were lost to fires in 1758 and 1841, and only Mitsuzoin was rebuilt.

Kannon Hall

The main hall of the temple enshrines its principal image, the statue of Sho Kannon said to have been cast over a thousand years ago by Shingon school founder Kukai. The statue is shown to the public only once every 50 years; a more contemporary Sho Kannon statue is usually on display.

The coffered ceiling is decorated with an ink painting of a dragon that is surrounded by more than 200 paintings in sunken square panels. Most of the paintings depict seasonal flowers, but there are also Buddhist deities, dragons, temple pilgrimage poetry, and dharma wheels. Statues of Fujin and Raijin, deities of wind and thunder, flank the inner sanctuary, and to the right is a statue of the arhat Binzuru. Believers usually rub Binzuru statues where they have pain or ailments, but at Shomyoji the custom is to make a wish and carefully lift the entire statue. If it feels heavy, the wish will supposedly come true.

The hall was rebuilt in 1930 after a fire. Wood carvings on the exterior depict phoenixes, lions, dragons, and other creatures.

Mitsuzoin

The poet-priest Ryokan (1758–1831) never became a resident temple priest, choosing instead to spend his days wandering while relying on friends and charity. Ryokan's sister lived in Teradomari, and he resided at the Mitsuzoin subtemple of Shomyoji at three different times in his life:

when he was 45, 70, and 72.

The poem “Himemosu,” which Ryokan wrote in a temple registry for the deceased, describes his activities as a priest.

All day and all night

I devote myself to the path of the dharma

Chanting memorial prayers

For the people of this fleeting world

The poem “Enishi Araba,” which was written before Ryokan had to depart Teradomari, describes his feelings toward his temporary home.

If I am fortunate

I would like to live here once more

In the humble hut below the great hall’s grove

I entrust it to you in my absence

So do not let it go to ruin

Though the original subtemple Ryokan lived in was lost to fire in 1841, a school of tea practitioners helped rebuild Mitsuzoin in 1958 as a tea house-style hermitage. Inside are statues of Amida Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, and two attendant bodhisattvas said to have been venerated by Ryokan when he stayed there. A statue of Ryokan in his old age stands outside, wearing a soft smile and holding an alms bowl.

Temple Grounds

To the left of the temple stairs is a small hall for the bodhisattva Kosodate Jizo, where visitors pray for the health of children. To the right is a statue of Fudo Myo'o, the Immovable Wisdom King. Believers use the ladle and water basin beside it to pour water on Fudo Myo'o three times before touching the statue where they need healing. Five memorial stones displaying poems written by Ryokan during his stay are located throughout the grounds. In October and November, Japanese silverleaf (*tsuwabuki*)

bloom bright yellow, adding splashes of color to the landscape.