

The Three Sacred Mountains

Mt. Hando, Mt. Koshin, and Mt. Iwao are collectively known as the three sacred mountains of Koka. It is said that ninja practiced their skills here, where secluded areas and diverse terrain offered an ideal environment for training.

The mountains are revered for their spiritual significance and their connection with *yamabushi*—practitioners of Shugendo mountain asceticism. This form of asceticism blends elements of various religious traditions, including Shinto, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, while emphasizing a reverence for mountains and nature.

Several hiking trails run through the mountains and offer opportunities to appreciate the beauty of the area. Directions to the trailheads and detailed maps can be obtained at the Tourism Information Center at the Kokaryu Real Ninjakan.

Mt. Hando rises to a height of 664 meters and is the highest of the three

sacred mountains in Koka. Hando Shrine, situated near the summit, was first built in the Nara Period (710–784). It later burned down, and the current building dates from 1650. The main hall has a thatched roof and is a designated Important Cultural Property. Rhododendrons cover the shrine's grounds and bloom in April and May.

The story goes that the powerful warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) climbed Mt. Hando and surveyed the surrounding countryside during his time in Koka.

Mt. Koshin is connected to the southeastern ridge of Mt. Hando and is home to Kotoku Temple. According to legend, the revered Buddhist priest Saicho (767–822) founded the temple here more than 1,200 years ago. The main hall was completely destroyed in a 2013 wildfire and has been rebuilt. The viewing platform near the summit allows visitors to appreciate the mountain's beauty, which is especially striking when the foliage turns a vibrant red in autumn.

Mt. Iwao features sheer cliffs and is dotted with Buddhist carvings and unusually shaped rock formations, such as O-uma Rock, which is named for its resemblance to a horse (*uma*). The peak is also known for its magnificent cherry trees and is a popular location for picnics in April. At the foot of the mountain is Iwao Pond, with an ancient cedar tree growing near the edge. According to legend, when the Buddhist priest Saicho planted his chopsticks in the ground here, they magically grew into the majestic tree.

Tips for Trekking: Inquire with the Tourism Information Center about the conditions of the routes, and dress appropriately for the weather. Seasoned trekkers in Japan typically wear long sleeves and trousers year-round for protection against insects. It is always wise to make sure someone is aware of your destination. When out on the trails, it is customary to greet people coming from the opposite direction with a friendly “Konnichi wa!” (Hello!). Please help to protect the environment by leaving nothing behind.