

DESTINATION JAPAN



The accidental pilgrims

The Kii Peninsula south of Osaka is home to myriad sacred sites

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IF Australia is painted in broad brushstrokes, Japan is an elaborately stitched embroidery. Most travellers focus on the wonders of Kyoto and Nara and it is easy to overlook the nearby Kii Peninsula, a mountainous area threaded with ancient pilgrimage trails and dotted with temples.

Leaving Osaka's sprawling suburbs, our train rattles through a mosaic of tiny rice fields and laden persimmon orchards before winding its way into the hills. When the slopes become too steep we make the final ascent by cable car to the monastic centre of Koyasan, where a couple of nights in a Buddhist temple provide a perfect contrast to the metropolitan mayhem.

Koyasan was founded in 816 by a Japanese priest who, after studying in China, established the Shingon school of Buddhism in Japan and chose this site for meditating monks to leave worldly distractions far behind. In 835, Kobo Daishi is believed to have entered a state of eternal meditation and his mausoleum is surrounded by thousands of graves of those who wish to share his aura.

In the late afternoon we wander along cobbled paths winding through a misty forest of enormous, ancient cedar trees towering over weathered, mossy gravestones. Many are marked with carved five-tiered stupas representing the five elements: earth, water, fire, wind and space. Tucked into corners and tree roots, or piled up in pyramids, and clothed with red bibs, are little stone statues of Jizo, a bodhisattva who is believed to protect dead children. At the end of the cemetery a prayer chapel glows with the light of more than 10,000 donated lanterns, some said to have been burning for over 900 years.

For more than 1000 years pilgrims have followed a network of routes across the Kii Peninsula, all of which, including one from Koyasan, converge on the central ancient sacred site of Hongu. Known as the Kumano Kodo, in 2004 it was recognised as a historic pilgrimage route by UNESCO World Heritage.

Tanabe, a small town on the peninsula's west coast, is the starting point for the most popular branch of the pilgrimage, the Nakahechi route. Most pilgrims take a 40-minute bus ride from Tanabe to the shrine at Takijiri-oji to start the two-day walk to Hongu. Unfortunately we have not come equipped for overnight treks but an expat Canadian, Brad Towle, at the Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau, quickly organises us. We plan to hire a car, but we need not miss out on pilgrimage highlights.

Pointing our car at the hills, we follow a winding side



ALAMY



TANABE CITY KUMANO

road, just beyond Takijiri-oji, to Takahara, a mountain-top hamlet. We are lingering over the stunning view at Kiri-no-Sato Lodge when the first pilgrims of the day arrive, so we get to peep into the rooms and then we wish we could stay for days. The paper shoji screens of the traditional tatami-matted rooms slide open to reveal a perfectly framed mountain vista.

We press on by car to our booked accommodation at Yunomine Onsen. Volcanic activity is a mixed blessing but one great advantage is the abundant supply of naturally heated and mineralised water that feeds onsen hot springs across the country. Yunomine hosts the only World Heritage-listed onsen on the planet; it's a modest wooden shack perched on an island in the river that for centuries has functioned as a public bath. Farther downstream, a steaming tub serves as a community cooker where visitors boil eggs and sweet potatoes. Like most minshuku (homestays) and ryokan (inns) ours has its own onsen in which we wallow before donning yukata (cotton sleeping kimonos) and settling down to a table set with a multitude of little dishes of local fish, tofu, rice, mushrooms, tempura vegetables and pickles.

Next day it's our turn to be pilgrims. On Towle's advice we drive to Hongu and catch a bus to Hosshinmon-oji, a small shrine at one of the many spots along the pilgrimage route where it coincides with a road. The aim is to walk 7km back to Hongu.

It is a wonderful hike. At times the meticulously sign-posted route leads us through stretches of forest. At others it follows deserted country roads. Here, high in the hills, we find a lifestyle that could not contrast more

Clockwise from main picture, Kumano Hongu Taisha shrine; Nachi Taisha shrine pagoda; the Daimonzaka approach to Nachi; and, below, Kumano-gawa River



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starkly with that of urban Japan. The locals are virtually self-sufficient. Tiny rice fields sit next to patches of soy beans and neatly trimmed tea shrubs hedge well-tended vegetable plots under trees groaning with ripe persimmons next to bubbling fish ponds.

We ramble along, photographing wayside shrines and decorating our notebook with each shrine's unique stamp, reluctant to end our hike. Eventually, however, we reach Kumano Hongu Taisha. This particularly holy place is not just the focal point of the Kumano Kodo but the model for about 4000 branch shrines across Japan.

From here it is possible to continue on the ancient Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route by taking a traditional, wooden, flat-bottomed boat down the Kumano River as far as the coastal town of Shingu. We drivers do not miss out on the experience entirely, however, as the road follows the broad valley of this impressive river.

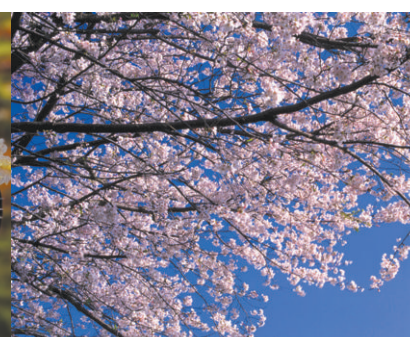
We spend the next couple of days exploring the scenic southern coast of the peninsula. At Nachi-Katsuura we take a side trip to visit Japan's tallest waterfall and associated shrine and temple complex, another important stop on the Kumano Kodo. It is easy to get templed-out in Japan, but this is a truly beautiful complex.

That is the last we see of the sacred sites. Just before we return our car to Tanabe we perform one last pilgrimage. When the original beach at the resort town of Shirahama was washed away it was replaced with sand imported from Australia. We dig our toes into the soft, white powder and for a moment focus on that broadbrush canvas.

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