



PATH TO THE SPIRITS

Japan's Kumano Kodo trail has been walked by pilgrims seeking enlightenment for hundreds of years.

WORDS AND PHOTOS **EWEN LEVICK**

The Kumano Kodo takes travellers deep into Japan's Land of the Gods.







“THE TRAILHEAD ITSELF IS HIDDEN BEHIND THE SHRINE ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE ROAD”



THE mountains of Japan's Kii Peninsula rise abruptly out of the Pacific Ocean. Fishing towns and orange groves sit between a rocky shoreline and a dense range of mist-shrouded valleys and dark forests. The train I'm on winds its way along this coast in no particular hurry. It stops long enough at each station for passengers to get a drink from a vending machine and hop back on again. Meanwhile, I flick through a local guidebook. There is a whole page dedicated to the etiquette of using a bus ('It is good practice to tell the driver where you want to get off') and another on proper hiking etiquette ('Greet others with a smile and warm heart').

Some call the Kii Peninsula the land of the gods. According to Japanese legend, this is where Jimmu, the descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu, travelled on his way to becoming Japan's first emperor. Around the 10th century, the Imperial Family began undertaking pilgrimages to three main shrines here, which practice a unique blend of Buddhism and Shinto. Others followed over the next 1000 years – samurai, aristocrats and eventually the general populace – and a network of pilgrimage trails grew through the mountains. These trails are collectively known as the Kumano Kodo.

Although the popularity of the routes waxed and waned over time, a revival in the 1990s led to a UNESCO World Heritage listing in 2004 under the name 'Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range'. An official partnership was launched with the Camino de Santiago - the only other pilgrimage on UNESCO's list - and soon the Kii Peninsula became busy once again with walkers who are unfamiliar with best bus practice and good hiking etiquette.

Which route?

Organising the Kumano Kodo can be a little daunting. There are four main routes: the Nakahechi, the route that was used by the emperors; the Kohechi, the highest and most challenging; the Ohechi, a coastal route; and the Iseji eastern route. We opted for the Nakahechi on the basis that if the emperors went that way, it must be pretty good.

Accommodation on the Kumano Kodo can be arranged through a travel agent, but all bookings are ultimately handled by Kumano Travel, a community reservation system. We booked guesthouses directly through their web page, which only took a few cups of coffee and a bit of patience as we navigated village names, dates, and the intricacies of arranging a daily luggage transfer.

But once we got off the train in Tanabe City it all worked seamlessly. A representative from the Tourism Bureau (located next to the station) found us, took our bags and lined us up for the bus to the trailhead, though upon

boarding I forgot to tell the driver where we intended to disembark. Very poor practice.

The Nakahechi route starts at Takijiri-oji shrine, a fair way out of Tanabe. If you've already done (or want to do) the Camino de Santiago, the information centre here is the last spot to pick up the booklet that you stamp along both pilgrimages to officially become a Dual Pilgrim. The trailhead itself is hidden behind the shrine on the opposite side of the road. It climbs quickly into a forest of cedar trees that is largely unbroken until the end of the Nakahechi, five days from here.

The first milestone is the Tanai Meguri, a narrow cave. A nearby plaque says: "Superstition has it that women who make the journey through the cave will have smooth delivery." From there we pass the remains of a shrine and a Buddhist sutra mound before we arrive at the hilltop village of Takahara, also known as Kiri-no-Sato, the Village in the Mist. An ancient shrine hides in the shade of huge camphor trees; an old waterwheel slowly spins and squeaks in a rice paddy; insects wander between rows of tea leaves; a rainbow hangs over the sun-touched peaks of the Kii range, which stretch into the distance.



Above: Cedar forests descend into lush valleys.

Opposite Page Top: Columns of trees line the trail.

Bottom: The way is lined with small shrines to local spirits.

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Left: Sunrise on day two.

Bottom left: These stairs have been climbed for centuries.



Our first guesthouse is a neat cabin overlooking the valley. The owner brings us dinner – an amazing bento box and hotpot – then we head up to the viewpoint to watch the sun go down. A few other hikers join us, mostly Australians: two brothers, Simon and Dan; a mother and daughter, Jo and Abby; and another mother and daughter, Michelle and Gabriela, from the US.

Bentos and bushwalks

The next day we start late, collect our lunch bento box and start hiking. The first half of the day is a 300m ascent. We pass a statue dedicated to a traveller who made it here a few hundred years ago, put a gold coin in his mouth and died on the spot. We also pass the ruins of an old teahouse and a rest point first

recorded in 1201 by the poet Teika, whose 800-year-old record of the pilgrimage mostly contains complaints about the rain. So far it seems that ancient Japanese people generally did not enjoy hiking. I put this down to insufficiently warm hearts.

Around midday the trail starts gradually dropping towards Chikatsuyu village, our stop for the day. Sections are paved in ancient cobblestones, which have been worn smooth over hundreds of years and are now extremely slippery. After one fall we take these sections slowly, then walk through a lush, fern-filled forest. There's the earthy smell of pine; cool damp air; the calls of crows.

In Chikatsuyu we find Simon and Dan having a drink by the river. They tell us there's nothing to do in this little village, but they did find one vending machine dispensing beer. We check in to our guesthouse and use complimentary bicycles to have a look around. Tell you what, they were right: there's not a lot going on in Chikatsuyu at 2pm on a Wednesday. We spend a while browsing a small supermarket (there's a whole aisle dedicated to dried fish). We cycle around some more and occasionally spot the brothers drinking beer and lying down in a range of places, like a real-life game of Where's Waldo: there's Simon and Dan lying on the riverbank; in the actual river; on a bench; perched on a statue. They raise their heads and wave at us cheerfully each time we cycle past.

WALKNOTES | NAKAHECHI ROUTE, KUMANO KODO, JAPAN

Distance: 68km | **Time:** 5 days | **Grade:** moderate



The Nakahechi pilgrimage route starts from Tanabe City on the western coast of the Kii Peninsula and traverses east into the mountains towards the Kumano grand shrines. It is the most popular route for pilgrims from western Japan. Starting in the 10th century, the Nakahechi route was extensively used by the imperial family on pilgrimage from Kyoto. This trail has traditional lodgings in isolated villages along the way and is excellent for multi-day walks.

GUIDED OPTION

If you fancy doing the Kumano Kodo guided, one option is a pack-free guided walk with Big Heart Adventures. Their preferred route is the mountainous Kohechi Route from Koyassan to Hongu. Your tour starts in Koyasan, the birthplace of Shingon Buddhism and where founder Kōbō Daishi (Kūkai) is believed to be in eternal meditation. You will experience daily life of the monks, stay in temple lodgings, and immerse yourself in its 1200 year history.

Then you will be guided along the spectacular and challenging Kohechi trail. Following in the footsteps of the first pilgrims on their quest for enlightenment. This trail can be technical and isolated, so the trekking group is small and includes two experienced guides (one local and one Australian based). Their next tour is in October 2023.

bigheartadventures.com.au



Maple trees next along the river in Chikatsuyu.

The highs and lows

The next day we wake early (our guesthouse hosts a mandatory breakfast at precisely 7am). This is our longest day; 25km, about 1000m of total elevation gain and the same elevation lost. The road is paved for the first few hours until we arrive at the Waraji-toge pass, where the trail plunges 200m down slippery cobblestone slopes. There is a detour here that has been in place since a typhoon in 2011. We cross a small, trickling stream and climb the detour route on the other side of the valley – an equally steep 200m ascent – and the trail eventually levels off into a colonnade of cedar trees.

At times the cedars seem to shrink back a little. We pass crumbling, moss-covered stone retaining walls, subtle relics of a time gone by, when these hillsides were terraced rice paddies and villages. As Japan urbanised, the population of these remote villages gradually shrank until the last residents were forcibly moved and the land rezoned for forestry. Around the same time, a building boom in Japan's cities led the government to incentivise the replacement of natural forests with fast-growing Japanese cedar, which today covers these ruins and lines most of the Kumano Kodo. Incidentally, I've since learned that the mass planting of these cedars - which release huge amounts of pollen - has also caused up to a quarter of the entire Japanese population to suffer from hay fever. Rough.

After a long day and another bento box lunch, at last we descend to Kumano Hongu

Taisha, one of the three main shrines of the Kumano Kodo. Many walkers choose to end their journey here (it qualifies as completing the pilgrimage), but we're doing the full route to Kumano Nachi Taisha, one of Japan's most iconic pagodas. So we spend the evening searching for vegetarian food – no luck - then eat a few cans of Pringles in our guesthouse to the sound of music coming through communal loudspeakers. Other hikers stayed at the historic Yunomine Onsen nearby, which in hindsight would've been better, although they later tell us they were served raw horse meat for dinner – so then again, maybe not.

Forest bathing

The fourth day starts with a few kilometres along a main road, then climbs to a beautiful ridgeline of natural forest. We walk through ambient, sun-streaked mist, there are little statues adorned with cloth and fresh flowers, fern-lined cobblestones and views over fog-blanketed mountains. After 11km the trail drops into a quiet, remote river valley, where we find our accommodation in a converted schoolhouse and join the others for beer and dinner before we settle into tatami rooms for the night.

At exactly 6am I'm woken with a jolt of adrenalin when the school loudspeaker blares robotically: "Good-morning-breakfast-is-ready."

I sit up and rub my eyes. The loudspeaker shouts again: "Good-morning-breakfast-is-ready."

We eat silently with other bleary-eyed hikers, then lace up for the final day of the walk.

Today starts with a gruelling 800m ascent. This is the hardest part of the route, and even has an ominous name – the Dogiri-zaka, or 'body breaking slope'. One exhausted ancient poet wrote only: "It is impossible to describe how tough it is." I would amend that to say, "It is impossible to describe how tough it is [in words not fit to publish]."

But at last, after a few more hours following ridgelines, we get our first glimpse of the Pacific on the other side of the Kii Peninsula. Soon we leave the forest for the final time and arrive at Kumano Nachi Taisha, whose tiered pagoda frames Japan's highest waterfall. It is a spectacular and iconic place to end the journey.

The Kumano Kodo does not sell itself on a single magnificent view, remoteness, or the satisfaction of sheer physical challenge. Instead it promises pilgrims something more subtle: the slow realisation – which might eventually arrive somewhere deep in a mist-shrouded forest, in the silence of a sacred shrine, or in a guesthouse chatting with people you'll never meet again – that true contentment can be found in the simple act of walking itself. Provided, of course, you come with a sufficiently warm heart. 🌀

NEED TO KNOW

tb-kumano.jp/en/kumano-kodo/