

80

Kii-Tanabe

Takijiri-ji

KUMANO
Hongu Taisha



JAPAN
Osaka

Kii-Katsuura

A sacred journey

Follow the World Heritage Kumano Kodo trail through ancient Japan and discover your inner pilgrim »

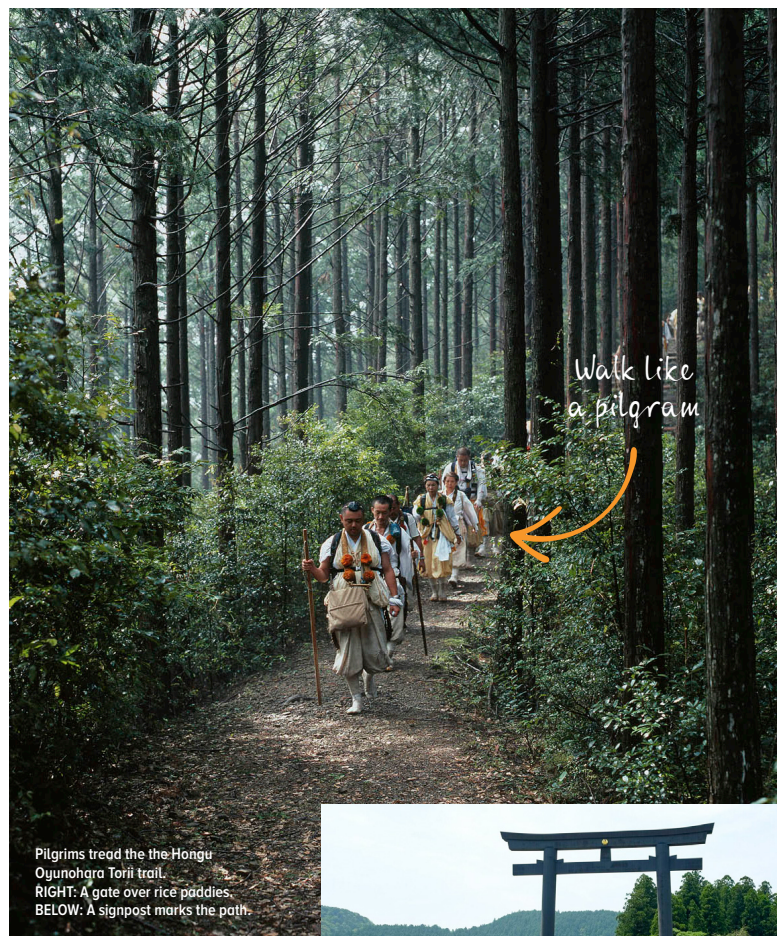
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The pre-departure pack for my forthcoming hike sat on the kitchen table, unopened, for a week. I'd signed up excitedly to Raw Travel's seven-day Kumano Kodo Trail, but I couldn't bring myself to rip open the bulky envelope.

Would its contents suggest I wasn't fit enough? Or that I needed to buy more equipment? Or that this trek through Japan's forests would require high-level map-reading skills? I braced myself. Out of the pack slipped a glossy book, *Hiking Ancient Trails in Traditional Japan*; an itinerary; a Japanese phrasebook; a bright blue branded buff (a multi-purpose looped scarf), and a terrifyingly complicated collection of highlighted timetables.

Weeks later, my hiking buddy and I were using one of the timetables to get from Osaka to the starting point of our adventure, Kii-Tanabe. Our path would take us along the most popular route of the Kumano Kodo network, the Nakahechi trail from Takijiri-oho to the Grand Shrine at Nachi Taisha. We spent the train journey eating everything in our bento boxes while speculating about what was ahead.



Obedying the relevant timetable, the next morning we found ourselves among other walkers waiting for the bus to the starting point. There were glammed-up hiking types from Spain, some young who-needs-to-book-ahead backpacking folk, some mature done-this-before-and-using-walking-poles couples and the two of us, 40-something give-us-a-break-from-our-families types.

The bus ejected us in Takijiri-oji, the start of the trail. We pottered around the Kumano »





Pilgrims in Heian period costumes climbing steps in the forest
BELOW: Tiny moss covered statues adorn the forest floor.

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Kodo Kan Pilgrimage Centre looking at the bamboo walking sticks and rain jackets for sale. Then, following the signs, we found our first shrine.

Next to the shrine was a miniature house on a pole. We opened the door to the house and stamped our pilgrimage books with an intricate red marker in the image of the shrine. My buddy and I looked at each other, then started walking. We had 80 kilometres ahead of us with only five days (plus a rest day) to manage it.

Taking the first step

Each morning we filled our daypacks with bottles of water, snacks and lunch – often bento

My photos couldn't capture how intricate and meaningful these strange little objects were



boxes holding tasty and beautifully presented morsels provided by our homestay hosts. While we walked, our luggage would magically make its way to our destination.

The path – rocky and uphill for the first part – was marked with signs saying either, “Kumano Kodo” or, helpfully, “Not Kumano Kodo”. We had several varieties of trek notes between us, from the glossy Raw Travel guide to the itinerary and information from the tourist centre. We would only get lost if we really set our minds to it.

On our first day we covered 18 kilometres. We walked up ancient

pathways, seeing the sun spike through cedar and cypress plantations, passing little moss-covered stone statues of people on the side of the trail. My photos couldn't capture how intricate and meaningful these strange little objects were. At each shrine we passed, we added to our collection of stamps.

The Kumano Kodo network of trails was first recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Pilgrimage Route in 2014 and visitors to Japan are increasingly adding it to their list of must-dos. Each day of walking offered opportunity for reflection and the »



“sacred pilgrimage” theme that had begun to resonate. We solved the world’s and our own problems as we walked.

Rest stops

Our *ryokan* or *minshuku* (homestay accommodation) often had an *onsen* (hot spring bath) and after bathing, we donned *yukatas* (like a dressing gown) and *obis* (belts) and ate, sitting on the floor. We devoured raw fish, tender marinated meat, tempura everything, sweet potato, miso, rice (of course), sweet puddings and even salted plums.

Our first Japanese hosts taught us the local ways with smiles on their faces, but my struggle with the footwear rules endured. I’d accidentally leave the ‘house’ slippers on in the bathroom, instead of using the ‘bathroom’ slippers, or traipse around the house with ‘bathroom’ slippers on.

We spent a rest day at Yunomine Onsen, bathing in 1800-year-old hot springs. Although we had accepted the need for

canned, hot coffee from vending machines, we sighed with relief at the “hot-spring coffee” on offer. Even rain, drizzling on us for an entire 20-kilometre day, didn’t detract from the journey.

Spiritual ways

During the trek my thoughts turned frequently to the pilgrims and emperors who had walked the Kumano Kodo over the past thousand years. They considered these mountains full of

gods. I wondered who would be walking it over the next millennium.

My friend and I exchanged glances as the last waymarker appeared. The numbered poles noting every 500m had been signs of our progress. But we weren’t ready for the last one, despite all the walking and talking.

We finished the journey at the spectacular 133-metre Nachi no Taki Falls. This cascading waterfall, tumbling before our eyes, was the perfect punctuation mark to our pilgrimage. ✈

World Heritage beauty



The hot springs at Yunomine Onsen. ABOVE: Seiganto-ji Pagoda and Nachi no Taki waterfall in the Kii Peninsula



Kumano Kodo

The Kumano Kodo is one of two World Heritage Pilgrimage Routes – the other is Spain’s Camino De Santiago.

The trail network criss-crossing the Kii Mountains was created in the early 10th century by pilgrims journeying to three Grand Shrines – Yoshino and Omine, Kumano Sanzan and Koyasan.

The sacred sites on the Kumano Kodo represent a fusion of Shinto and Buddhist beliefs. The pilgrim route was walked by all stratas of society.

WHEN TO GO:

The walking season is from April until November.

HOW TO GET THERE:

Kii-Tanabe is 2.5 hours by train from Osaka.

BOOKING:

Raw Travel’s seven-day Kumano Kodo walk starts from \$1850, twin share. rawtravel.com

Find out more about the trail through the Tanabe Information Centre. tb-kumano.jp/en

Travel info

Jetstar has direct flights to Osaka from Cairns and connections via Tokyo from Gold Coast.

To book, visit JETSTAR.COM