

#MTKOYA

Monks, mantras and meditation

On Mt Koya, Japan's holiest mountain, outsiders seek wisdom as Buddhist devotees pray for enlightenment.

Words and Photography by Lynn Gail

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HE LOFTY AROMA OF INCENSE swirls around Ho-join temple's softly lit lanterns, creating wavy clouds in the chilly mountain air. At precisely 6.30am the monastery's head monk enters in flowing black robes and kneels seiza-style (sitting on his heels) on a large padded cushion where he brushes a gong three times. Calming vibrations chime through the ornate temple, marking the beginning of prayer. He stays statue-still for 20 minutes, muttering

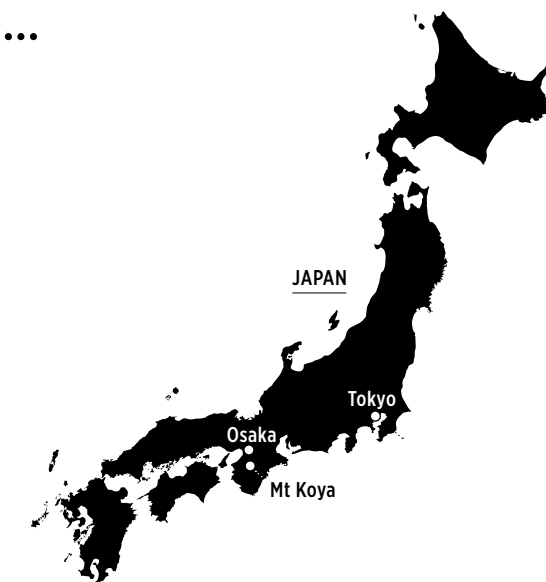
soothing meditative mantras. Again he dusts the gongs three times to signify the morning ritual is over.

I'm staying in Ho-join Temple, located in one of 52 monasteries on Japan's holiest mountain, Mt Koya. The mountain, at 800 metres, sits in a basin surrounded by eight peaks reaching 1000 metres. Worshippers believe the mountain is sacred because its peaks mirror the eight petal blooms of the lotus flower, signifying purity and rebirth.



Calming vibrations chime through the ornate temple...

OPENING PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Morning worshippers at prayer wheel; sunset over Mt Koya; head monk Kosi at monastery entrance in Mt Koya. OPPOSITE: Monks carrying the daily food offering to Buddhist saint Kobo Daishi Kukai's mausoleum in Okunoin Temple. ABOVE: Danjo Garan's sacred temple.



Keen to explore a sacred mountain enfolded in spirituality, I wander into Koyasan Village. There's no background noise and no cars, only distant dulcet chimes. I pass monasteries where monks draw back temple doors and strike resounding bells. Young children, holding hands, head to school as bakers prepare dough behind glass windows in the town's bakeries. An occasional monk strides past, clearly at peace in an environment where small temples and Buddhist statues are nestled in between stores advertising their wares in neatly scribed Japanese calligraphy.

Shingon Buddhism is the order of the day here – where devoted monks and nuns follow daily practices in the hope of reaching nirvana, the state of enlightenment. The teachings were introduced to Mt Koya in 816, by Buddhist saint Kobo Daishi Kukai, after he discovered Shingong Buddhism during a visit to China

from 804-806. Revered as a scholar and Buddhist leader, Kukai, who passed away during meditation in 835, is thought to still be alive. Every day at 6.30am and 10.30am, dedicated monks prepare a vegan meal of rice and vegetables known as Shojingu (live body offering) to serve to Kukai.

The town measures only three kilometres. At the end I find myself at the entrance to Okunoin Cemetery. Housing more than 200,000 tombstones it is the largest cemetery in Japan. As the resting place of Kukai, devotees plan their burial here in the hope of receiving salvation. I stroll past elaborate tombstones adorned with tall Buddhist statues, some corporate graves advertise companies; one is graced with a five-metre-high Apollo rocket ship. The walk is as long as the town and I soon reach Okunoin Temple to witness the morning ritual honouring Kukai. Three saffron robed monks carry a large wooden box containing the saint's morning meal. I watch, affected by the spiritual pull, as they glide effortlessly up several steps to reach the eternal resting place of Japan's most revered monk. ☯

RIGHT: Softly lit lanterns hang from the ceiling in Ho-join's Monastery.
 FOLLOWING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Temple entrance in Kyosan Village; worshippers pour holy water over statues; moss-covered tombstones in Okunoin Cemetery; raked rock garden and entrance Ho-join Monastery.





As a travel photographer/writer I keep my gear to a minimal weight to meet carry-on requirements. My kit consists of two Fuji bodies, the X-Pro 2 and XT10 used with Fuji lenses: 50-140mm f/2.8 zoom, a prime wide-angle 14mm f/2.8, and the 16-55mm f/2.8 zoom.



TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

Various routes are available to reach Mt Koya from Kansai International Airport and from Osaka itself.

osakastation.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

Wendy Wu Tours runs an immersive 14-day, Trails of Japan Tour starting from A\$9,640 where guests can experience an authentic night in Ho-join Monastery, Mt Koya.

wendywutours.com.au/japan/tours/trails-of-japan.htm