Temples and Trails of Shikoku

The fourth-largest of Japan’s islands, Shikoku is home to the 88 Temple Pilgrimage Trail. Fascinating aspects of this deeply spiritual route include how little is known of its origins, and its mysterious connection with Kobo Daishi, founder of Shingon Buddhism. Pilgrims have walked the trails for 1200 years and even today we will see pilgrims in their distinctive attire and white cloaks throughout the island. The full pilgrimage route encircles Shikoku and connects 88 Buddhist temples, covering more than a thousand kilometers. Pilgrims, known in Japanese as Ohenro, traditionally did the journey from temple to temple on foot over many weeks. Our tour selects the best of the walking trails through lovely landscapes. We visit all four of Shikoku’s prefectures - Tokushima in the east, Kagawa in the north, Ehime in the west, and Kochi in the south.

Each region has its own distinctive character, foods and scenery. In addition to the pilgrimage trail, our journey includes the remote Iya Valley, deep in the heart of Shikoku.

We begin our journey with a stay on Mount Koya, the hilltop temple complex on Honshu established by Kobo Daishi, and an important location for Shikoku 88 Temple Pilgrimage devotees. Public transport in the rural areas of Shikoku is limited and we will travel mainly by private chartered vehicle, but we will still enjoy walking along the ancient route from temple to temple through countryside and forest. We will stay in traditional country inns enjoying regional cuisine prepared from local ingredients from the island, soak in natural hot springs, and enjoy the exceptional hospitality of our hosts.

DETAILS

DATES & PRICES
Please see website

TOUR LENGTH
13 days

TYPE AND LEVEL OF TRIP
Active - 7 days of walking and hiking from 1.5 to 5 hours per day on quiet town and country roads, and unpaved forest trails. This tour is suitable for those who are fit and can walk over rough ground for up to 5 hours. While on the trails you carry a small to medium daypack.

WHAT’S INCLUDED
Transport, accommodation, English-speaking tour guide, entrance fees, luggage forwarding, daily breakfast & 9 dinners.
The tour starts in Osaka and finishes in Kotohira Spa.
Not included are international flights, drinks with meals, lunches and airport transfers.
Follow in Kodo Daishi’s footsteps from Mount Koya to Shikoku - walk on the loveliest sections of the Shikoku 88 Temple Pilgrimage - bathe in thermal waters at historic hot spring towns - enjoy delicious traditional food - visit Kochi market with its mouthwatering local products - gaze down on Matsuyama from the castle precincts

HIGHLIGHTS

1 Iwaya-ji Temple where Kobo Daishi meditated in a cave
2 Making Sanuki Udon noodles, a Shikoku speciality
3 Temple Bell
4 O-henro pilgrims offer incense at a temple
5 Votive paper lantern at Ryozen-ji Temple
6 Sunset from Senyu-ji Temple
7 Jizo statue on the trail
DAY 1 ➤ Meet in Osaka
Meet your guide and other group members at the hotel in Osaka in the evening. There will be a Welcome Dinner at a local restaurant.

Accommodation: Hotel

DAY 2 ➤ Travel to Mount Koya and sightseeing
We travel by train along the scenic Nankai Railway Line to Mount Koya, a bowl-shaped valley filled with cedars high in the mountains of the Kii Peninsula. Mount Koya is the headquarters of the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism, founded in 9th century by the monk Kobo Daishi, father of the Shikoku pilgrimage. Pilgrims on the Shikoku 88 Temple route traditionally visit Mount Koya to pray and ask Kobo Daishi to bless their journey; we will follow the tradition. We stay in one of the elegant temples and dine on shojin-ryori (Buddhist vegetarian cuisine). We walk through the Okuno-in cemetery and see Kobo Daishi’s mausoleum.

Accommodation: Shukubo (Pilgrims lodging)

DAY 3 ➤ Travel to Tokushima and walk Ryozenji Temple to Kosenji Temple
We travel by private vehicle this morning to Wakayama port for the ferry to Tokushima Prefecture, the old Awa province, located in eastern Shikoku. We will walk through quiet suburban neighborhoods and visit the first three temples on the pilgrimage route - some of the prettiest on the whole island. The first temple, Ryozen-ji or Vulture Mountain Temple, was built in 8th century. Next comes Gokuraku-ji or Celestial Temple where Kobo Daishi completed 37 days of esoteric ritual at his age of 42. The atmospheric Konsen-ji, or Golden Fountain Temple, is home to a blood-red pagoda and bridge. After the walk, we will take a private vehicle to our Shukubo temple lodgings for the evening.

Walking distance: 6km / 3.7 miles
Elevation gain: negligible ascent and descent
Accommodation: Shukubo (Pilgrims lodging)

DAY 4 ➤ Walk from Fujiidera temple to Shosanji temple
Today we will travel by private vehicle to Temple 11 Fujiidera, Temple of the Wisteria Well, situated at the foot of Mount Shosan-ji and surrounded by three mountains. We will walk a challenging trail known as ‘henro-korogashi’ through forests and over three peaks, one of the finest walks on the whole pilgrimage. The route takes us to an elevation of 900 metre (almost 3,000 feet), the highest point on the whole of our tour. Completing the three ascents is highly rewarding, and our goal, Shosanji, is a dramatic temple with spectacular valley views. For those preferring a shorter walk, the vehicle will deliver you half way along the trail to meet the rest of the group. The accommodation tonight is a small and comfortable Japanese inn nearby serving lovely meals.

Walking distance: 11.9km / 7.4 miles
Elevation gain: 1230m / 4035 feet ascent; 560m / 1870 feet descent
Time required: 5 hours
Accommodation: Minshuku (Family-run guesthouse)

DAY 5 ➤ Walk from Kakurinji temple to Tairyuji temple
Our private vehicle journey this morning brings us to Temple 20 Kakurin-ji or Crane Forest Temple on the 550 metre summit of Washigao. The temple’s Sando or main approach is surrounded by tall pine and Hinoki cypress trees. Under an edict of Emperor Kanmu, Kobo Daishi founded Kakurin-ji in 799. From here we head up to Temple 21 Tairyu-ji temple of the Mystical Dragon, close to the mountain peak of the same name at 618 metres. Kobo Daishi practised ascetic training here at his age of 19 and founded the

Accommodation: Hotel
temple in 793. Our walk ends with a cable car ride offering breathtaking views over a cedar forest and out towards the sea. We continue by vehicle to the central mountains. Tonight’s accommodation is in the wonderful hot-spring location of Iya Onsen, deep in a hidden valley.

Walking distance: 7.1km / 4.4 miles
Elevation gain: 460m / 1510 feet ascent; 470m / 1540 feet descent
Time required: 2.5 hours
Accommodation: Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers Inn)

DAY 6 ➤ Walking Mount Tsurugi
After breakfast, we board our private vehicle to visit the valley’s unique kazura-bashi vine bridge stretching 45 meters across the Iya River and suspended 15 metres above the flowing water. It is said the bridge was made by refugees of Heike Clan hiding in the area after their war defeat. We head to Tsurugi-san, the second highest peak in Shikoku with a height of 1,955 metres, nearly 6,500 feet. The peak is a centre of Shugendo, a Japanese folk religion based on mountain worship. We will take a chairlift to the start of a walk which will bring us to within an hour of the summit. From there, wooden boardwalks will lead us to various viewpoints with panoramic views over the surrounding mountains. We will return to our inn at Iya Onsen in the late afternoon for another soak in the thermal waters and our dinner of delightful local cuisine.

Walking distance: 4km / 2.5 miles
Elevation gain: 330m / 1320 feet ascent; 330m / 1320 feet descent
Time required: 1.5 hours
Accommodation: Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers Inn)

DAY 7 ➤ Travel to Kochi-shi and sightseeing
Today we travel to Kochi city in Kochi Prefecture, formerly known as Tosa Province, the region of Shikoku most distant from Japan’s mainland. It is the largest of Shikoku’s prefectures but has the smallest population. We will visit Katsurahama Rocks, a unique formation beside the sea, then enjoy lunch at Hirome Ichiba Market in Kochi city center - a wonderful collection of over 60 shops with outstanding local produce. After lunch we will visit Temple 31 Chikurin-ji, the Bamboo Forest Temple, with its museum of temple treasures. The garden here was designed by the famous master monk of the Rinzai Sect called Muso Souseki and is famous throughout Japan for its beauty. We will stay overnight in a comfortable hotel in Kochi city.

Accommodation: Hotel

DAY 8 ➤ Half day sightseeing in Kochi-shi and travel to Matsuyama
This morning, we visit Kochi Castle and have a few hours free to stroll around the well-known Sunday market which has 300 years of history and 500 outdoor stalls. This amazing lively market stretches for over a kilometre (more than half a mile) from the entrance of Kochi Castle and offers local products at reasonable prices. After lunch we travel to Ehime Prefecture, previously known as Iyo Province, and stop en-route at the historic and beautiful town of Uchiko, which once flourished as a centre for traditional wax and paper. Our accommodation tonight is a hotel in appealing Matsuyama city, not far from Japan’s oldest hot spring Dogo Onsen, said to have 3,000 years history. We are based here for the next three nights. In the evening your tour guide will be on hand to offer suggestions for restaurants for dinner.

Accommodation: Hotel

DAY 9 ➤ Walk from Daijoji Temple to Iwayaji Temple
Our journey today starts with the journey by private vehicle to the Kumakogen Highlands in central Ehime, near the border of Kochi Prefecture. We start our hike from Temple 44 Daihoji, Great Treasure Temple, a fitting halfway point on the Shikoku 88 Pilgrimage. We enjoy a beautiful forest hike to Temple 45, Rock Cavern-Housed Temple, a fascinating location on the mountain with hundreds of Jizo statues. The temple was one of the main sites where Kobo Daishi meditated after founding the temple in 805. A unique feature is the ladder up to a secluded cave where the monk would spend countless hours chanting. The coins attached to the cave wall show Kobo Daishi’s enduring influence. After the walk, we return by private vehicle to Matsuyama city in the late afternoon.

Walking distance: 11.7km / 7.3 miles
Elevation gain: 650m / 2130 feet ascent; 580m / 1900 feet decent
Time required: 4 hours
Accommodation: Hotel

DAY 10 ➤ Sightseeing in Matsuyama
A relaxed day to explore Matsuyama city and Dogo
Onsen by public transport. We will take a short ride on the tram/streetcar and enjoy a pleasant walk up to the iconic Matsuyama Castle on the hilltop which dominates the city. In the afternoon, we will take the tram/streetcar again to visit Temple 51 Ishiteji, Stone Hand Temple, with its unique legend. There are seven fascinating buildings at the temple and many of the temple treasures are designated important cultural assets. Afterwards, we will visit the atmospheric town of Dogo visiting Isaniwa Shrine and strolling through the old-fashioned main shopping arcades. In the late afternoon, we will return to our hotel in Matsuyama city.

Accommodation: Hotel

Day 11 ➤ Walk from Kokubunji, to Shiromineji and then to Negoroji
We travel by private vehicle to Temple 80 Awa Kokubunji, Awa State Provincial Temple, in Kagawa Prefecture, also known as the old Sanuki Province. The well-preserved structures at the temple and its building exude age and atmosphere. We ascend to Temple 81 Shiromine-ji, White Peak Temple, situated at the summit of Mount Shiromine. We will then walk down to Temple 82 Negoro-ji, Fragrant Root Temple, with its beautiful lanterns tucked away deep inside the heart of the complex. We will then head to Kotohira Spa by private vehicle, a small town in Kagawa famous for Konpirasan, the large shinto shrine complex dedicated to sailors and seafaring. Our accommodation tonight is a delightful hot-spring Ryokan in the town.

Walking distance: 13.5 km / 8.4 miles
Elevation gain: 655m / 2150 feet ascent; 335m / 1100 feet decent
Time required: 4.5 hours
Accommodation: Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers inn)

Day 12 ➤ Walk from Nagaoji Temple to Okuboji Temple
After breakfast, we will set out for our final walk on the 88 Temple Pilgrimage from Temple 87 Nagao-ji, Long Slope Temple, to Temple 88 Okubo-ji, Great Hollow Temple - Completion of the Vow. A wish made here will be fulfilled! This temple is located on a hidden mountain summit. The walk passes through lovely rural scenery before ascending Nyotai-san Mountain to Okubo-ji. We will share a great sense of achievement together and then travel by private vehicle back to our accommodation for another soak in the onsen spa and a delightful kaiseki meal to celebrate our final evening.

Walking distance: 12.3 km / 7.6 miles
Elevation gain: 774m / 2539 feet ascent; 410m / 1345 feet decent
Time required: 4.5 hours
Accommodation: Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers inn)

Day 13 ➤ Tour ends
The tour ends today after breakfast. Your guide will be on hand to offer assistance and advice for travelling to the airport if you have homeward flights, or on onward travel in Japan if you are extending your stay.