

## Koyasan – a Village in a Lotus

Steve Milne reveals a legendary journey of Japanese traditions, cuisine and architecture in one of Japan's best kept treasures.

Perched between eight peaks deep in the Kii Mountains of Wakayama Prefecture, Japan, the village of Koyasan (Koya Mountain) appears as if resting inside a lotus flower. This unique feature may be a significant factor in its being chosen as the centre for Shingon Buddhism in Japan.

Founded in 816 by Kukai, usually referred to as Kobodaishi, Koyasan is a treasure trove of ancient esoteric culture. Imagine all the ancient spiritual and cultural grandeur of Nara and Kyoto in one, easily traversed location. Throw in the surrounding peaks with their draping mists and you're in for an atmospheric experience.

It was 804, during the Tang Dynasty, when Kukai, as part of an imperial mission, crossed the sea to China. There the accomplished monk received the teachings of the Shingon tradition under the guidance of the national teacher Hui Kuo of the Ching Lung Temple. Two years later, Kukai returned to Japan and, with imperial consent, began propagating the Shingon faith there.

It is quite remarkable that master Hui Kuo chose this young Japanese monk as his successor over hundreds of Chinese disciples and, hence, Kukai is recognised as being the eighth patriarch in the Shingon lineage.

He passed on the teachings in both Nara and Kyoto, but Kukai's heart inclined towards untouched mountains, far removed from the distractions of the city. He had a deep ambition to construct a monastic community where practitioners of Buddhism could dedicate their lives to prayer for the peace of the land and salvation of its people.

There is an old legend about how Kukai discovered Koyasan. When about to leave China for the return trip to Japan, on completion of his two years of study, he prayed that the place where he should establish a religious community would somehow be revealed to him. As the story goes, while praying, he threw a three-pronged vajra (a religious instrument) into the air and it landed in the very spot where the Garan in Koyasan now stands. Upon arriving back in Japan, Kukai searched for the implement. When he entered what is now Uchi County in Yamamoto, he came across an unusual character of nearly seven feet tall with a bright red face. He was a hunter, bearing a bow and arrows and holding a two-headed dog on a leash. The hunter said: "I am a hunter from the southern mountain and I know the place where the vajra that you threw landed. The dog will lead you there." He then disappeared and the dog led Kukai across the Kii River into steep mountains, where they encountered a woman. "I am the keeper of this mountain," she said, "and the hunter you met is my son." The dog then led Kukai further into the mountains and, after reaching a broad, flat and serene area, he saw it hanging in a tree; the vajra he had hurled into the sky in China. Immediately he knew that he had found the perfect site to construct his monastic centre.

There are scores of "must sees" in Koyasan, but if you arrive early enough and don't mind walking briskly, a day is enough to get to most of them. If you're not much of a walker, there's a regular bus that runs the length of the town, making regular stops.

For those who wish to take it more slowly, there are fifty-three historical temples to accommodate visitors and prices generally range from 7000 to 10,000 Yen (approx. A\$70-\$100) per person, per night - dinner and breakfast inclusive. Each temple lodging, called Shukubo, has a Japanese garden, traditional rooms with tatami mats and shoji doors (you know, the ones made from timber and rice paper) and if you're an early riser, don't miss a meditation session with the resident monks.

Perhaps after that, and a superb vegetarian breakfast possibly served by the same monks, you'll be walking on air and won't need to take that bus after all.

The vegetarian cuisine of Koyasan is truly unique to this area, having been developed by Kukai himself and passed down from monk to monk. Whether or not you're vegetarian, savour these delights and experience why the monks of Koyasan really aren't missing out with their non-meat diet.

Apart from the Garan complex, made up of several spectacular temples, pagodas and shrines, the path to Okunoin and temples at its end is a rarity and I can't recall coming across anything similar anywhere else in Japan.

Beginning at Ichi-no-hashii (the bridge at the start), the 1.9km path leading to the holy precinct of Kobo Daishi's Shrine in Okunoin is lined with majestic, towering cryptomeria trees, beneath which lie over 200,000 tombstones of people from various periods of Japanese history. They include emperors, shoguns, feudal lords, monks, nuns and even ordinary citizens, all of whom had faith in Kobo Daishi and wanted to be near him.

There are two more bridges to cross before reaching the end of the path, the last of which is Gobyō-no-hashii. People bow in prayer position and summon their purest thoughts before crossing it and stepping onto the sacred ground surrounding Kobo Daishi's Shrine. No photography is allowed in this inner sanctum.

Proceeding straight ahead, one arrives at the Hall of Lamps (Torodo). First built in 1023 by Kobo Daishi's disciple Shinzen, it contains thousands of lamps offered by the faithful from all over Japan. There is a story of a devout woman who, not being able to afford a lamp to offer, sold her hair to buy one. This is known as "The Single Lamp of a Poor Woman".

It is behind the Torodo that Kobo Daishi's Shrine is located. It is here that he entered into eternal repose in 835, aged 62, after having predicted the day of his death and informing his disciples seven days earlier. With thousand-year-old cedars surrounding it, the clear water of the Tamagawa, or Tama Stream, flowing nearby, along with its air of sacredness, this site possesses a truly sublime atmosphere.

The atmosphere of Koyasan in general is further heightened in Spring, when sakura (cherry blossoms) abound, and Autumn, when rusty maple leaves grace the mountainous terrain. If you'd like to time your visit to coincide with sakura time, just remember that with the high altitude, and hence colder air, they bloom about a month later than at the foot of the mountain. Prime viewing atop the mountain is from the end of April to early May.

Though it's a lovely drive along the mountain road to Koyasan, I figure most people, as I did, will be taking the train there. From Namba Station in

Osaka, take the Nankai-Koya Line through Hashimoto to Gokurakubashi Station. There, a cable car awaits and you're up on the mountain in no time. Finally, it's a 10-minute bus ride into town. I suggest getting off at the Central Information Centre in order to plan your day.

Whether you're heading to Japan to experience the food, traditional customs, architecture or a combination of all, I can't think of a better place and within spectacular natural surroundings to boot. Although a bit off the beaten track, I still find it astonishing that Koyasan isn't more widely known among Westerners and I couldn't help but reveal one of Japan's best kept secrets.

## About the Author

From [en.epochtimes.com](http://en.epochtimes.com):

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This 7 day eating plan can be used as often as you like. If correctly followed, it will clean out your system of impurities and give you a feeling.

How to Follow the Sacred Heart Diet. The Sacred Heart Soup diet is a diet that proposes a strict diet for you for a period of seven days with a net result.

And this is where the Sacred Heart soup diet comes in. The Sacred Heart Soup Diet is a diet that has actually been going around.

Sacred Heart Diet. This 7 day eating plan can be used as often as you like. If correctly followed, you should lose 10 to 17 pounds by the end of the 7th day.

A comparison study has tested that Sacred Heart Diet is actually has the most delicious soup compared to other fad diet such as the cabbage.

The sacred heart diet is a special way of eating that can be undertaken at anytime. The sacred heart diet is designed so that we eat more and more happy.

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