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Tokyo is on which of Japan's four main islands? [GeoQuiz answer, Page 3](#)

Chicago Tribune TRAVEL

WALK THIS WAY

Following footsteps of the faithful on a mystical pilgrimage in Japan

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY AMY S. ECKERT
Chicago Tribune

OSAKA, Japan — A thin layer of moss coated Buddha's face with green, and time had worn his little head into a featureless globe.

"How old is this little shrine?" I asked Tetsuo Nakahara, my guide through the dense forests of the Kii Peninsula.

"Same as the others," Tetsuo answered, barely slowing his pace as we hiked past the small religious monument. "Probably 500 years."

The sheer age of Japan's rural monuments is breathtaking. Yet this 500-year-old Buddha ranks as a mere adolescent compared with the Kumano Kodo itself, a religious pilgrimage route akin to Spain's Way of St. James. The Kumano Kodo traverses the Kii Peninsula, a triangular landmass some 50 miles south of Osaka, and has led the faithful through Japan's hinterland for more than 1,000 years.

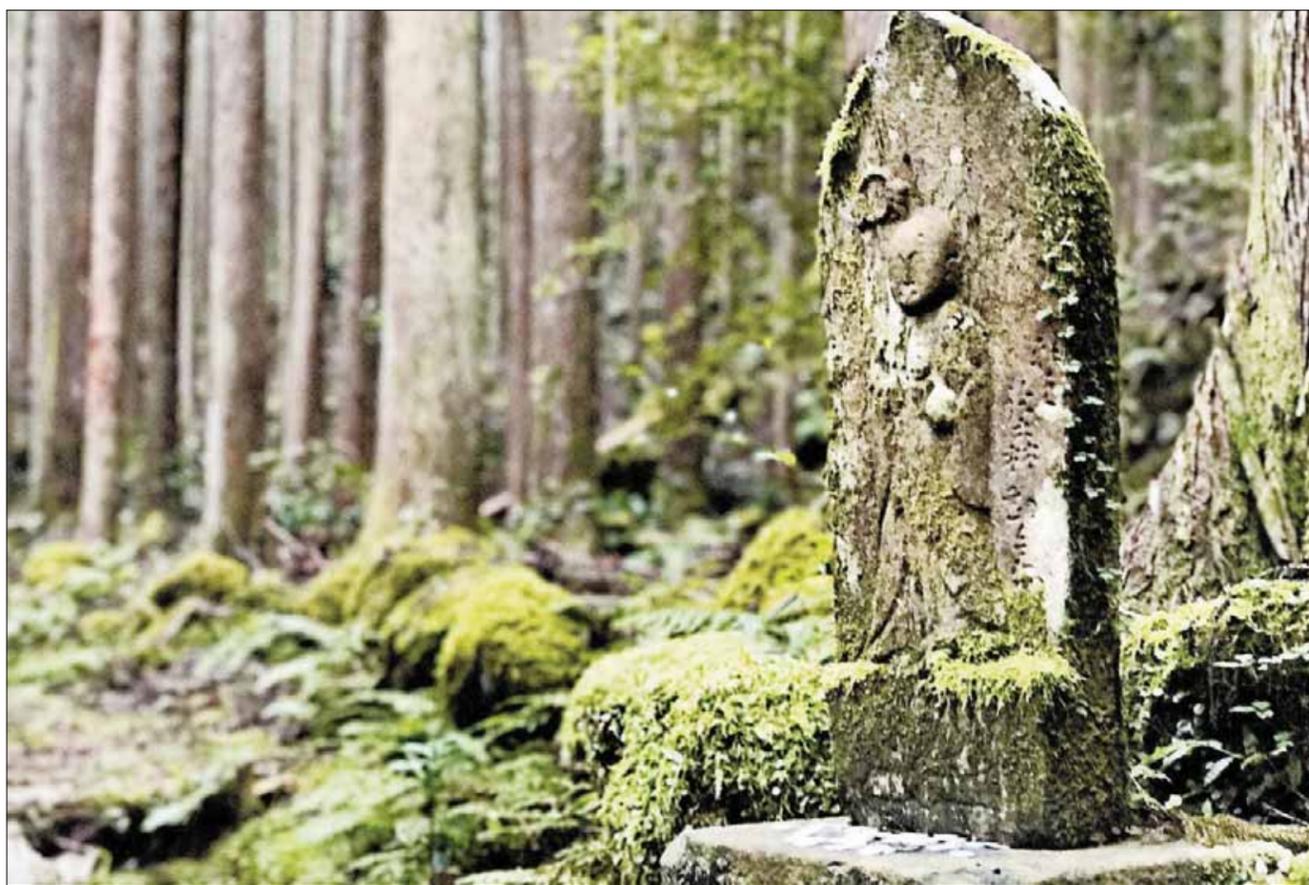
Over rocky mountain pathways slick with moss and across ice-cold streams, beneath thick cypress forests and through humble villages, Kumano's trail network fans out, linking three important Shinto shrines: Kumano Hongu Taisha, Kumano Hayatama Taisha and Kumano Nachi Taisha. Taken together, they're known as the Kumano Sanzan.

The Kumano trails also connect countless subsidiary shrines, places of worship and rest called *oji*, from trailside Buddhas to tiny Shinto sanctuaries. Centuries ago they snaked northward to the ancient capital cities of Nara and Kyoto.

Since 1992, Walk Japan has introduced a pedestrian's-eye view of Japan's back roads to English-speaking travelers. Guiding small groups of no more than 12, the tour company explains Japanese history and sheds light on local culture. Practical necessities are taken care of, too, including prearranging travelers' accommodations, organizing meals and transporting hikers' luggage from inn to inn.

Walk Japan offers guided treks along such historic routes as the Nakasendo Way, an ancient highway running between Kyoto and Tokyo, and the Narrow Road to the North, made famous by 17th-century Japanese poet Basho. But among the company's most popular tours is the Kumano Kodo, the ancient Shinto and Buddhist pilgrimage route.

The Japanese Emperor Uda is believed to have been the first to blaze the Kumano Kodo in the year 907. Drawn to a land considered sacred by both



A shrine greets travelers on the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trail. Hundreds of these minor shrines, or *oji*, have lined the path for more than 500 years.



The faithful pay their respects at small shrines during their journey.

Shinto and Buddhist practitioners, Emperor Uda set out in search of seclusion, physical exertion, spiritual enlightenment and the promise of a favorable rebirth.

Over the centuries, the emperor's pilgrimage was replicated, first by noblemen and samurai. Trails were carved out of rocky hillsides, the more arduous the better, under the assumption that nothing worthwhile ever comes easily. By the 1400s, ordinary folk had begun following the Kumano Kodo. In a time when people didn't have many opportunities to travel, a pilgrimage became an acceptable way for young people to escape home.

"They strapped tatami mats on their backs for bedding and set off in search of blessing," says Tetsuo, explaining life on

the trail 600 years ago. "They were in search of adventure. Maybe even in search of the opposite sex. The Kumano Kodo offered a rare chance to see the world."

Think of it as the 15th-century answer to the modern-day gap year.

The trail made famous by Emperor Uda is the Nakahechi, or Imperial Route, and it remains the most popular of the Kumano trails. UNESCO's decision in 2004 to award the Kumano Kodo a spot alongside the Way of St. James as the only registered World Heritage List pilgrimage routes brought the trail to the attention of non-Asians for the first time.

Hike the Kumano Kodo today and you'll see remnants of Kumano's 15th-century glory days: the tumbledown walls of long-

abandoned trailside inns and teahouses; the still-brilliant red torii gates symbolizing a traveler's passage from the secular to the sublime; and small subsidiary shrines like that moss-covered Buddha.

But this pilgrimage route merits a visit for more than spiritual reasons. The Kumano Kodo also ranks as one of the world's loveliest nature hikes. Rocky promontories reveal sweeping vistas of the blue-gray Kii Mountains and glimpses of gushing waterfalls, including Japan's tallest, the 436-foot Nachi-no-Otaki. In springtime, delicate cherry blossoms dot the path. In autumn, maple trees blaze red and orange. Even Emperor Uda must have relished the natural spectacle of this corner of Japan.

Today's hikers — an estimated 10,000 annually — relish this off-the-beat-

If you go

Walk Japan offers English-guided, small-group tours of the Nakahechi, or Imperial Route, of the Kumano Kodo, with extensions that lead to the ancient Koyasan and Ise shrines. Total walking distance is 47 miles over nine days, across uneven and sometimes mountainous terrain. Tours include most meals, daily luggage transfer and lodging at traditional ryokan accommodations and temples. Tours depart from Osaka and are priced in Japanese yen, equating to about \$3,500 a person at the time of this writing. Guided walks along the Kumano Kodo take place in spring and autumn, avoiding the uncomfortable temperature extremes of summer and winter. Cherry and plum blossoms typically appear in April, and peak fall color is in November.

en-path Japan all the more for its disparity with the country's more familiar haunts. Bamboo forests and the occasional rice field stand in stark contrast to the glass-and-steel skyscrapers and multistory video screens visitors have come to expect in cities like Tokyo.

And then there's the cultural insight. Along the Kumano Kodo, modest but comfortable Buddhist temples and traditional family-run ryokan inns offer accommodation as it used to be across all of Japan. Dinner trays arrive crowded with small bowls, each containing morsels of the day's local cuisine: dried and grilled fish; pickled plums; crisp seaweed salads and slippery noodles; tofu served up a dozen different ways.

Of universal interest are the Kii Peninsula's ubiquitous natural hot springs, or *onsen*, typically available at lodging along the Kumano Kodo. Once used by ancient travelers for ritual religious purification, the springs provide for mod-

ern travelers a pre-dinner bath and long, therapeutic soak, a welcome balm for weary legs and aching muscles.

Along the route, the Kumano Sanzan, the three grand shrines of the Kumano Kodo, draw a quiet respect from visitors. Built of giant cypress beams taken from the surrounding forest, the shrines often give the appearance of having simply sprung from their environment. Deeply curved rooflines measure 2 feet thick. The Kumano Kodo's symbol of a three-legged crow adorns paper screens and souvenir amulets. And the smell of incense fills the air.

Visitors of all backgrounds, devout religious adherents and culture-loving hikers approach, one by one. After ringing a brass bell and clapping, they bow deeply to pay their respects and ask for a blessing.

After 1,000 years, the prayers seem likely to continue.

Amy S. Eckert is a freelance writer.

Glamping off the southern tip of Manhattan

BY DEEPTI HAJELA
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Just imagine it: a luxurious room on an island, with chef-prepared meals and a view of the Statue of Liberty and the Manhattan skyline.

Hotel? Not exactly. It's actually a campground of high-end tents on New York City's Governors Island, the latest outpost for glamping, or glamorous camping. Rates that can run more than \$700 provide such creature comforts as full

beds, high thread-count sheets, bathrooms, plush towels, electrical outlets and an on-site restaurant offering prime cuts of meat.

There isn't a leaky tent, musty sleeping bag or can of baked beans in sight.

"We've tried to create an experience where people can put all those concerns aside and connect to the place that they're in, the people that they're with and themselves," said Peter Mack, CEO and founder of Collective Retreats, which has developed simi-

lar camps in Colorado, Montana and Texas.

Visitors staying in the 27 smaller journey tents share bathroom facilities; those staying in the 10 larger summit tents have their own private, en suite bathrooms and spa robes.

The location, Governors Island, is a 172-acre plot of land that sits just off the southern tip of Manhattan. Formerly used by the Army and Coast Guard, a portion of it is home to a national monument. It's accessible only by ferry and currently

open to the public for six months of the year, which means visitors to Collective Governors Island (www.collectiveretreats.com) have specific windows both to plan their stays as well as how they get to and from their tents during a visit. At night, once the ferries have stopped running, people staying there have to remain within the campgrounds, but in the mornings they have the run of the island to themselves until the boats start operating again.



RICHARD DREW/AP

The Statue of Liberty is visible between two of Collective Retreats' summit tents on Governors Island in New York.