TRAVEL

A delicate layer of moss colors the Buddha's face green. His robe is similarly green, fringed with lichen, sparkling with moisture in the thick, humid air. “How old is this little shrine?” I ask, as Tetsuo Nakahara, my guide through the Kumano Kodo, points ahead at a crumbling stone altar, where a small Shinto shrine is perched on a hillock. “Probably 500 years.”

I lag behind to examine the little Buddha more closely. The shrine was meant to interrupt this stretch of the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trail, where travelers make an appearance now and again. The Kumano Kodo begins some 50 miles south of Osaka, and there out of the forest floor, as do the occasional red Torii gates that once marked the trail 600 years ago. “They were also in search of adventure. Maybe even in search of the opposite sex.” The Kumano Kodo offered a tonic for wanderlust.

But the natural beauty of rural Japan plays no small role in attracting travelers to this corner of the world, an estimated 10,000 annually pre-pandemic. Rocky promontories reveal sweeping vistas of the blue-gray Kii Mountains and glimpses of gushing waterfalls. In springtime, cherry blossoms dot the path. In autumn, maple trees blaze red and orange. Natureists and park rangers urge modern travelers to leave nothing but footprints as they make their way through the wilderness, and it’s good advice. Still, humankind’s impact on nature, and vice versa, is as old as civilization itself. Humans erect seawalls; tsunamis wash them away. Humans chop down trees; grass fires burn down their cities. Humans carve tunnels and fishing villages along coastlines; earthquakes splinter them into the sea.

But every once in a while, there are reminders that nature and human culture can coexist, and have for millennia, each playing no small role in attracting travelers to these remote hillsides. The Kumano Kodo trail in Osaka, Japan.

The Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trail ascends through an ancient Torii gate—Photos by Amy Eckert

ABOVE: Cypress roots claim an ancient Shinto shrine along the Kumano Kodo trail in Osaka, Japan.

Japanese ancient relics have become part of that landscape, altered by nature even as their creators once sought to alter it. Twisted tree roots wrap around a carefully-carved Shinto shrine. Centuries of rain and snow leave once-enlightened stone faces looking like teenagers with acne. Rock berms have eroded into wildflower terraces and the aforementioned little Buddha has grown fuzzy with moss and lichen.

The Kumano Kodo trail in Osaka, Japan.

ABOVE: An ancient statue of the Buddha slowly melts with the cypress forest.

A hiker pauses along a cobbled section of the Kumano Kodo, likely paved in the 15th century.

“Travelers 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 also in search of adventure. Maybe even in search of the opposite sex.” The Kumano Kodo offered a tonic for wanderlust.

But so unlike today. Since 1992, Walk Japan has introduced a pedestrian-eye view of Japan’s backroads to English-speaking travelers. The tour company guides groups of 12 or less along Japan’s significant rural trails, interpreting their spiritual, cultural, historical and even literary significance for contemporary travelers. The company also handles practical logistics like transporting luggage inn-to-inn, organizing meals and translating.

The Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trail ascends through an ancient Torii gate. Photos by Amy Eckert

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—Amy Eckert is an award-winning travel writer and author.

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