

## LEAVING MORE THAN FOOTPRINTS

Where human culture intersects with nature, the results can be strikingly beautiful

AMY S. ECKERT | HOLLAND, MICHIGAN

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 Tetsuo Nakahara, my guide through the dense forests of Japan's Kii Peninsula.

"Same as the others," Tetsuo calls out over his shoulder, maintaining his brisk pace as we hike past the religious monument. "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, a 1,000-year-old religious route akin to Spain's Way of St. James. Its presence was intended as a sort of spiritual



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

# JAPAN

punctuation mark in the woods. Now, the forest is once again staking its claim, if at a painstakingly slow pace. Nature and human culture have forged a lovely compromise.

The Kumano Kodo begins some 50 miles south of Osaka and has led the faithful across the triangular Kii Peninsula since the Japanese Emperor Uda first blazed the route in the year 907. Over rocky mountain pathways slick with moss and across ice-cold streams, beneath thick cypress forests, through bamboo stands and alongside rice fields and humble villages, the Kumano Kodo's network of trails fans out, linking three important Shinto shrines: Kumano Hongu Taisha, Kumano Hayatama Taisha and Kumano

Nachi Taisha.

The trails also link countless subsidiary oji shrines, from trailside Buddhas to tiny Shinto sanctuaries. But religious sites aren't the only traces of human culture left on these remote hillsides. The tumble-down walls of long-abandoned trailside inns and tea houses rise here and there out of the forest floor, as do the occasional red Torii gates that once symbolized a traveler's passage from the secular to the divine. Even cobbled roads make an appearance now and again. Many of these relics trace their roots to the 15th century, a time thought to be the Kumano Kodo's heyday.

"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.

Not so unlike today. Since 1992, Walk Japan has introduced a pedestrian's-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.

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.

Japan's 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.

Naturalists 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

leaving marks on the other, not necessarily fatal ones. The overlap of the two can become a thing of special beauty.

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

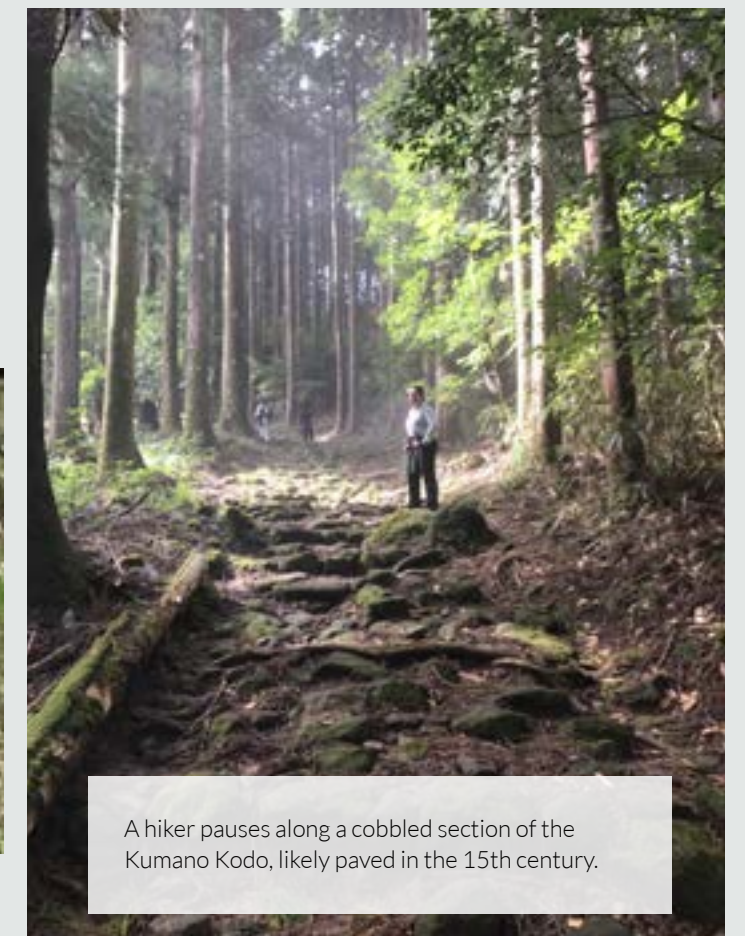


ABOVE: An ancient statue of the Buddha slowly melds with the cypress forest.

... humankind's impact on nature, and vice versa, is as old as civilization itself.



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



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