

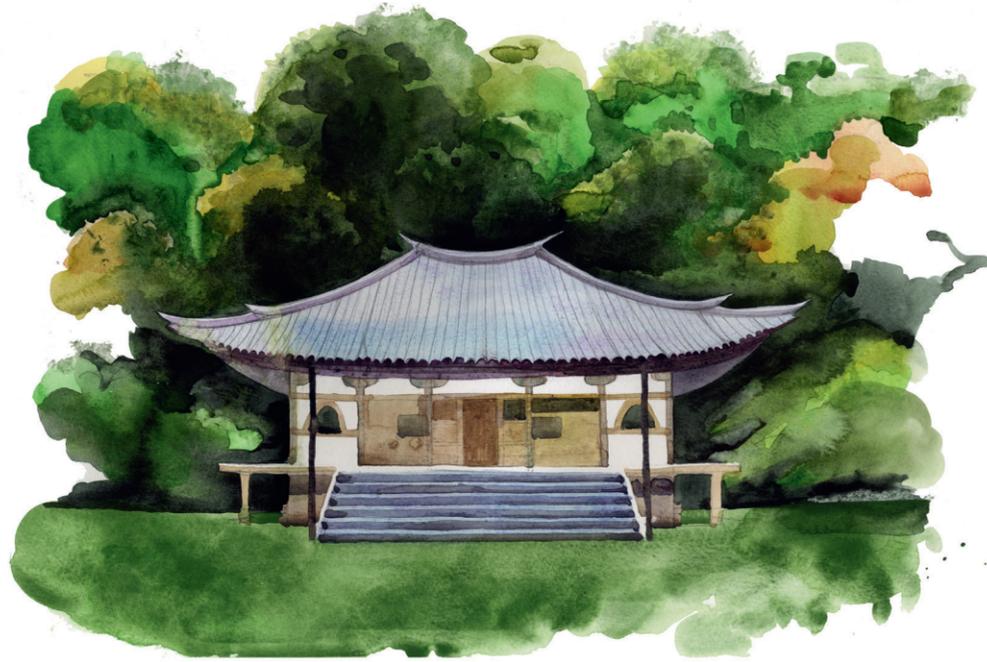
FOLLOW PILGRIMS & PAGODAS IN SHIKOKU, JAPAN

Buddhist history and spectacular temples shape a trip through Shikoku, finds Kimberly Hughes

Shikoku may be the smallest of Japan's four major islands, but it's primed for exploration. These begin with the Shikoku Henro, an 88-temple pilgrimage route dotting its circular coastline. Stretching along 1400 km, the route traces the sacred sites once visited by renowned monk Kukai, who founded Shingon (esoteric) Buddhism in Japan during the early 800s.

While some present-day pilgrims follow the entire route on foot, donning monk-like attire and carrying staffs, others take a more relaxed approach.

Travellers of any religion are welcome to join the trail, and while overseas visitors should learn some basic Japanese phrases to communicate with local residents, a spirit of openness and respect is by far the most important language.



↑ **EHIME**

Ehime's first temple is Kongofukuji, located along Cape Ashizuri at Shikoku's southernmost point. Kukai himself founded a medicinal onsen — a natural hot spring — here. It's an excellent place to bathe sore muscles while gazing upon crashing waves below. Another iconic local hot spring is Dogo Onsen, said to have inspired the bathhouse in Hayao Miyazaki's animated film *Spirited Away*.

→ **KAGAWA**

Kagawa is known to pilgrims as the place of Nirvana, and one of its temples, Zentsuji, was Kukai's birthplace. The temple offers overnight stays, which is an excellent chance to experience an early morning Buddhist ceremony. Shikoku literally means 'four provinces', and while its temples may be explored in any order, pilgrimage literature indicates that this should be the final stop on your spiritual journey. This route gradually deepens your spiritual connection to the islands, and your understanding of the origins and practices of esoteric Buddhism.

↑ **TOKUSHIMA**

The first 23 temples along the route are located in this northeasterly prefecture. While not on the pilgrimage route itself, Tokushima is also home to Jouman-ji, Shikoku's oldest Zen monastery, offering sessions in traditional zazen meditation. Consider a stay at B&B On y Va, a renovated 150-year-old former sake brewery. Here, you can enjoy the small farm and forested sauna onsite before stopping by the white sands of Ohama Beach, where sea turtles come ashore to nest in the summer.

← **KOCHI**

Continuing southward, pilgrims are invited to further strengthen their faith, in a place historically sought out for ascetic training. Kochi is famous for the striking *Niyodo* blue (named by locals) of the cerulean-hued river and its waterfall basin. These waters are also used, along with local mulberry tree fibres, to craft ultra-thin *Tosa washi* paper, which feature in traditional *shoji* screen doors. As the local temples are considerably spread out, visitors are encouraged to travel between them via bicycle.

→ **THE SETO INLAND SEA**

You can head to the islands of the Seto Inland Sea once you're prepared to re-enter the secular world. These art-centric islands dot the sea between Shikoku and Japan's main island of Honshu. Besides hosting year-round art installations, the islands also feature in the Setouchi Triennale, which finishes its 2022 run this autumn. Explore atmospheric cafés and art galleries in Kitahama Alley, located in Takamatsu and enjoy udon noodles from the nearby city of Sanuki.

ILLUSTRATIONS: LIS WATKINS

