Walking the Kumano pilgrimage route

Dr Peter Armstrong is a lecturer in architecture at the University of Sydney who has a long connection to Japan, having first gone there in the early 1970s to study. As a Waseda University student, he joined the mountaineering club, and the appeal of hiking still seems to be strong. In September 2015, he took on the challenge of walking the Nakahechi Route.

The Nakahechi Route is a part of the Kumano-kodo, centuries old pilgrimage routes through beautiful mountains and valleys. Today Kumano-kodo is formally twinned with

Spain's pilgrimage routes of Santiago and more foreign visitors are discovering this wonderful corner of Japan.

Peter shares his experiences of walking Kumano-kodo in words and images. The sketches are taken from his shuincho. Shuincho are concertinaed folding booklets used by pilgrims to collect seals (ink stamps) from the temples they visit. While Peter has the odd temple stamp, most pages of his shuincho are filled with evocative sketches.

The origins of the Kumano-kodo lie in the ancient past of pre-history when the Shinto gods dwelt unchallenged among the Three Peaks and valleys of the Wakayama Peninsula. Washed by the warm currents of the Pacific, the Kuroshio, the area is high in rainfall and rich in vegetation, with steep ridges and deep gorges covered densely with cryptomeria sugi and cypress pine hinoki forests susceptible to landslide. The Kumano Sanzan have long been revered as holy places in the Shinto pantheon and as places of importance in the syncretic Buddhist pantheon, particularly in the late Heian Period. It continues today as a place of pilgrimage for ascetics and particularly for practitioners of Shugendo.

Its historic importance as a pilgrimage route is due to its role as the principal access route from the former capitals of Kyoto and Nara to the Ise Shrines facing Ise Bay. The Shrines had an important relationship to the Imperial Family from the 4th century and the cult of Amaterasu Omikami. The sea route was limited by the shipping technology of the time and the land routes, the Kii Route and Ise Route, began variously at Yoshino, Koyasan and



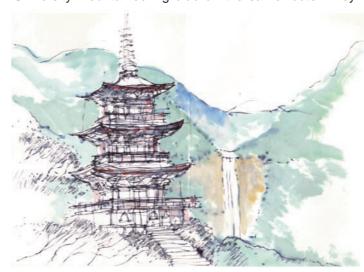
Kii Tanabe. Even today these principal routes follow the mountain ridges interspersed by settled valleys with hot springs, with a wealth of lodgings and food from local produce. There are long stretches of walking through dense forests with occasional breathtaking views and waterfalls for misogi for those of ascetic inclination. Fujiwara Kozei records that Emperor Kazan decided to take the Ise Route due to the difficulty of the Kii Route.

The main contemporary walk is the Nakahechi Route. Entering from Kii Tanabe, the route is punctuated with the great shrines of the Takahara Kumano Jinja, the Kumano Daisha and the Grand Shrine at Nachi. At regular intervals the route is dotted with hundreds of shrines, monuments, jizo and stele. Among the stele are records of the great personages, famous poets and literati, and the many ordinary pilgrims who walked the route in the company of retired emperors, emperors and imperial courtiers. The great poet Fujiwara no Teika kept a diary when he accompanied the retired emperor Go-Toba. The second night on the Nakahechi route is spent at the oddly named village of Chikatsuyu. The origins of this name are recorded by Fujiwara Tamefusa in his account of the travels of the Emperor Kazan. In the absence of chopsticks, reeds were cut for the Emperor's breakfast. On seeing droplets of reddish liquid on the cut reeds, he is said to have asked, Kore wa chi ka tsuyu ka "Is this dew or blood?"

As in Heian times, there are co-incidences and unexpected meetings along the track as it winds between peaks ridges and valleys. The route itself is arduous and steep, leaving one with a healthy respect for Heian period aristocrats whose physical resources evidently far exceeded the effeminate portrayal of their lifestyles by their attendant women novelists. Despite the dense vegetation the mountains are prone to landslip and there are alternative routes where landslides have occurred.

Our third day had a recommended detour to avoid one such area. After discussion with our host we decided to risk the original route and set out, accidentally leaving behind our walking poles. Two hours later, realising our error, we resigned ourselves to doing without until we reached the fork between the two routes, and there beneath the sign warning of the dangers of the route were our poles, waiting for us. The gods were beneficent that day.

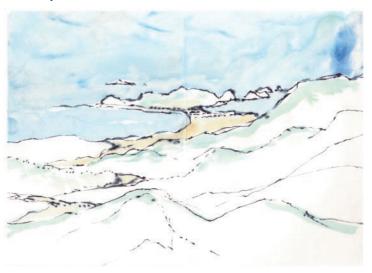
Another such encounter occurred while enjoying a hot spring in solitude at Chikatsuyu, only to be suddenly surrounded in a small tub by members of a Keio University Mountaineering club on the same route. They



were polite even when finding out that the odd foreigner was a member of the rival Waseda Mountaineering Association. Further on, while visiting a dilapidated local shrine in a small village at the end of a long day we came across a monument to those local men who died in the Pacific War. There were ninety-six names; when

enquiring of the landlord of our minshuku, he replied simply that the population was greater in pre-war times.

The climax of the six days comes at the end of a long deeply forested ridge with a sudden and spectacular vista over the port of Kii Katsuura far below, which spreads out towards Ise Bay below the great waterfall at Nachi. The spectacular natural grandeur of the setting of the falls is enhanced by the mystical associations of religious tradition and the associated shrines and temples which cluster around its base. The area as a whole is not demeaned by its popularity as a tourist destination and rises fully to expectations as the final destination of the six day walk.



For the uncertain, it is not necessary to walk the full routes. The valleys of the southern coastline and the deep mountain areas are accessible by road, offering possibilities of short cuts and reduced itineraries with bus connections to entrance and exit points of the route proper.

Main text and images by Peter Armstrong

IMAGES Facing page: top - in a forest along the Nakahechi route; bottom - looking down a valley; This page: left - the great waterfall at Nachi; right - the view over the port of Kii Katsuura

GLOSSARY

Amaterasu Omikami – A Shinto deity, she is associated with the sun, and the Imperial Family is said to descend from her. She is worshipped in the Inner Shrine of Ise Shrine, the most important Shinto shrine in Japan.

Fujiwara no Teika - (1162-1241) One of the greatest poets of his time whose influence had a profound impact on Japanese literature through to modern times. Commonly known as Fujiwara (no) Sadaie.

Go-Toba – (lived 1180-1239, reigned 1183-1198) 82nd Emperor of

Jizo – (stone statues of) the guardian known as Jizo, today mainly considered the guardian of the souls of deceased children but once also the protector of people such as travellers [see Japan Reports Vol.49-3 November 2014 for more detail]

Kazan – (lived 968-1008, reigned 984-986) 65th Emperor of Japan

Keio - Waseda and Keio Universities are both private universities in Tokyo and they are traditional rivals.

Kumano Sanzan - the Three Peaks of Kumano

minshuku - traditional Japanese inns, simpler than the better known ryokan

misogi – purification ritual under waterfalls

Shugendo – Briefly, Shugendo is a sect of Buddhism in which the main ritual is 'entering the mountain', nyūbu or mineiri. This involves walking pilgrimage routes into the mountains. In Japan, certain mountains have long been considered holy ground. Climbing the mountain is said to be a progression from the profane or worldly state to a sacred state. There are a number of holy mountains throughout Japan where these practices are performed. Among them are the Kumano Sanzan.

stele - (also stela) stone pillars with writing on them

syncretic Buddhism - Buddhism which merges various strains of religious practice

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