Rules of the Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range

The World Heritage property “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range” symbolizes the spiritual heritage of Japan rooted in the respect and awe of the natural environment. In this unique cultural landscape, diverse belief systems exist in harmony.

To preserve this area for future generations, we ask your cooperation to follow these rules:

1. Preserve the area as “heritage of all humankind”.
2. Respect the faith of past and present worshippers.
3. Greet others with a smile and warm heart.
4. Protect the local flora and fauna. Do not remove or introduce animals or vegetation.
5. Be prepared. Plan your trip and equip yourself properly.
6. Keep the routes clean. Carry out all waste.
7. Be careful with fire. Prevent forest fires.
8. Stay on the routes.

Where the spiritual culture of Japan lives on.
Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range

The Kii Mountain Range refers to a large mountain range projecting into the Pacific Ocean. The mountain chain ranges from 1,000 to 2,000 meters east-west as well as south-north and is a mountainous zone where deep woods and forests are nurtured by abundant precipitation of more than 3,000 millimeters a year. Since old times of lore, the Kii Mountain Ranges have always been thought of as a special region inhabited by the gods. For Buddhism’s esoteric school of Shingon, imported from China, the Kii Mountain Ranges were also a place to practice mountain asceticism. Moreover, along with the rising of the influence of Buddhism, the spreading of notions peculiar to Japan such as the “Tsunagi of Shinto and Buddhism” and of the Buddhist concept of the “eventual demise of Buddhism and a time of no enlightenment leading to chaos in the world” led to the thought of the Kii Mountain Range as a “pure land.” It became the area for ascetic practices such as Shugendo mountain asceticism, through which the practitioner could acquire supernatural strength. As a result, the three sacred mountainous regions in the Kii Mountain Ranges of Yoshino/Omine, Kumano Sanzan, and Koyasan, and the pilgrimage routes leading to them such as Omiki Okugakemichi, Kuma Sankeimichi, Koya Sankeimichi, and others came to life. The people from the capital, and also from around the country began visiting, and these sites came to exert a big influence upon the developments and exchanges of Japanese culture and religion.

The “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range” spreading over the three prefectures of Wakayama, Mie, and Nara with its “sacred mountainous regions”, “pilgrimage routes” and “sacred mountainous regions” and “sacred pilgrimage routes” would not have been possible but for the nature of the Kii Mountain Ranges. Its surrounding mountains, forests, rivers, waterfalls, onsen, and rural areas - in short, its “Cultural Landscape,” plays an essential role. It is an asset of the kind of which the world has no other example.

Cultural Landscape

“Cultural Landscape”, as landscape manifesting the interaction between human activity and its natural environment over a long period of time. There are “intangible cultural properties”, which have been worshiped as the object of prayer, as well as “forests”, “vineyards”, “gardens”, and “parks” on the World Heritage List. Mountains and trees can be considered “Cultural Landscapes” when they assume special value as “sacred mountains” or “sacred fire sites.”

The World Heritage sites, “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range” is not simply a group of shrines, temples, and forests, but is nothing less than “sacred sites of mountain worship and routes of mountain practices of religious ascetic Buddhism”, which would not exist if it were not for the nature of the Kii Mountain Range. In order to safeguard the “Cultural Landscape” of these sacred sites and pilgrimage routes, it is not enough to preserve only the shrines and temples that are designated as Cultural Properties, it is also necessary to maintain the surrounding nature in a good condition of preservation and to conserve the “Cultural Landscape”, which has been inherited and nurtured from generation to generation, as part of our proud heritage to be presented to the world.

Seasonal Colors in Kumano

Spring: Vivid Ginkgo

Summertime: Fire Festival

Autumn: Monumental Ginkgo trees

Winter: Snow on Miedo Hall

Seasonal Colors in Koya

Spring: Vivid Ginkgo

Summertime: Candles Festival

Autumn: Asen leaves

Winter: Snow on Miedo Hall

* Kumano Sankeimichi (熊野観音参詣道) means Kumano Pilgrimage Routes and is locally known as the Kumano Kodo (熊野古道).
Kumano

This sacred site consists of three shrines (Kumano Hongu Taisha, Kumano Hayatama Taisha, and Kumano Nachi Taisha), and two temples (Nachisan Seiganto-ji and Fudarakusan-ji). Originally, each of the three Shinto shrines had its own distinctive form of nature worship, but each embraced the main deities of the other two and enshrined all three deities, designating them as Japanese incarnations of Buddha. With the growth of the Shinto-Buddhism fusion, the beliefs of these shrines became prevalent.

Nachisan Seiganto-ji is known as the first temple of 33 temples in the Saigoku Pilgrimage, and Fudarakusan-ji is a temple known as having sent priests off on boats who sought the Buddhist Pure Land, Fudaraku, in the southern seas.

Fudarakusan-ji

Fudarakusan-ji is a temple known for its priests setting sail to the southern seas searching for the Buddhist Pure Land – Fudaraku. Besides the twelve deities of Kumanou which it enshrines, the shrine is dedicated to the deified Nachi no Otaki, called Hoin Gongen.

Nachisan Seiganto-ji

Before the Shitennoji and Buddhist Separation Deed, this temple had been known as Nyoirin and established itself as an integral part of Kumano Nachi Taisha. It is also known as the first destination for the Shikoku Pilgrimage.

Kumano Hongu Taisha

Since the time of its foundation, Kumano Hongu Taisha was situated on the Kumanogawa River’s sandbank known as Oyunohara. However, after the river flooded in 1889, the surviving shrine buildings including the three major shrines were relocated to the present grounds at every turn of the river.

Kumano Nachi Taisha

Kumano Nachi Taisha originates from the ancient nature worship of the large waterfall as its deity called Nachi no Otaki. With the growth of the Shinto-Buddhism fusion, the beliefs of these shrines became prevalent.

Kumano Hayatama Taisha

Kumano Hayatama Taisha is situated near the mouth of the Kumanogawa River. A natural monument, the deified podocarpus Nagi tree, spreads its majestic trunk and boughs in the shrine precinct.

Kamikura-jinja

Kamikura-jinja is an auxiliary shrine standing on the detached grounds of Kumano Nachi Taisha. The shrine’s sacred moorok is referred to as “Gotobikiwa,” which means toad in the local dialect.

There are four routes leading to Kumano Sanzan. Following the west coast of the Kii Peninsula was the route most frequented for the visits to Kumano. From Tanabe, one could choose the Nakakechi Route, which was a mountainous route, the Ohechi Route, which goes south along the coast, or the Kohechi Route, which unites Koyasan to Kumano. Another option was the Iseji Route on the east coast of the Kii Peninsula.

The visits to Kumano Sanzan Shrines started during the 10th century and became very popular until the 14th century. Because a multitude of pilgrims walked in long lines, it was described as “a pilgrimage of ants to Kumano.” In recent years, it has become the route of the Saigoku Pilgrimage (pilgrimage to the west of the country) which includes the visits to Kumano Sanzan.

Up to 1889, Kumano Hongu Taisha was situated on the Kumanogawa River. Between Kumano Hongu Taisha and Kumano Hayatama Taisha, the journey was made by boat on the Kumanogawa River.

Koyasan to Kumano. Another option was the Iseji Route on the east coast of the Kii Peninsula.

Examples of the few hot springs and rivers which are registered as pilgrimage routes on the World Heritage List.

Nakakechi

Drifted along the Nakakechi route are “aji” shrines or their remains. These were dedicated to child deities, offspring of the deities of Kumano. Between Kumano Hongu Taisha and Kumano Hayatama Taisha, the journey was made by boat on the Kumanogawa River.

Koyosakamichi Fudozaka, Kurokomichi, and Nyoninmichi were additionally registered in 2016.

Ohechi

The road along which you can enjoy scenery of beach and cove. This route was used for both pilgrimage and sightseeing from the 19th century.

Kumano Sankeimichi, and there are three known as an important site in the legend of Ohechi. It was the core of the faith that no disease was incurable for the deities of Kumano, and it is also considered an important site at the legend of Ohechi.
The Koya sacred sites are made up of Kongobu-ji which Kobo Daishi (Kukai) founded in 816 to serve as a dojo (exercise hall) to learn the teachings of the Shingon esoteric school. Together with Kongobu-ji (at Danjo garan) and Koyasan-jinja which enshrines the tutelary god of Kanshofuso.

With History of 1,200 years of mountain worship at the secluded mountain top religious complex, Koya constitutes a Cultural landscape pertaining to the worship of temples and natural environment which have been merged into one single entity.

Kongobu-ji (at Danjo garan) 

The great pagoda of the Danjo Garan was built to serve as a dojo (exercise hall) for Shingon easties Buddhas. The principal deities consist of Dainichi Nyorai (the Great Buddha) in the World of the mean and end of the year. Buddhas of the Diamond Realm, with 10 great Bodhisattvas depicted on 10 pillars.

Niutsuhime-jinja

Though this shrine was known as the tutelary god of Koya, its old temple buildings were destroyed by a decree in 1688 in order to separate Shinto and Buddhism into its present state.

Jison-in

This temple built on the south bank of the Kinosaki River holds the national treasure of a seated figure of Mirokubutsu enshrined in its main hall (Amida Hall).

Niukanshofu-jinja

This is the sacred place where Kobo Daishi (Kukai) has entrusted a "transcendent meditative state. This place comprises an invaluable historical, cultural and natural heritage of each country in the world.

World Heritage

Based on the "treaty concerning the preservation of the world's cultural and natural heritage", or "the World Heritage Treaty" adopted in 1972 at the general meeting of the UNESCO, it sets forth the duty to protect and conserve "on an international basis" assets such as "monuments", "structures" and "nature" which are irreplaceable to mankind as a whole.

To be registered as World Heritage, several conditions must be fulfilled: the assets must first be protected by national law on unconditional terms; the nature of the assets must appear unique and characteristic to the UNESCO "World Heritage committee"; its "remarkable and universal value" must be submitted to comparison with criteria selected internationally.

Another necessary condition is that the assets must be subjected to a fully efficient preservation management program in an amount commensurate with their value. At the present date of March 2017, there are 1062 sites listed in the world, 20 of which in Japan. As the number of assets registered continues to grow, and as it is a founding principle that similarly redundant assets cannot be listed, the actual list represents the historical, cultural and natural heritage of each country in the world.

Japan's World Heritage

Kumano Sanzan

Kumano Nachi Taisha

Nachi no Otaki

Nachi Primeval Forest

Fudarakusin-ji

Niutsuhime-jinja

Kongobu-ji

Jison-in

Niukanshofu-jinja

Okinoum-ji

Pilgrimage Routes

Koya Sankeimichi

Omune Okugakemichi

Pilgrimage Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range* List of registered cultural assets

Name of the cultural asset Type of the cultural asset Date of declaration Description

Kumano Hongu Taisha site 1991 One of the three shrines constituting Kumano Sanzan.

Kumano Hayatama Taisha site (prehistory) One of the three shrines constituting Kumano Sanzan, originating from stone worship.

Nachisan Sargent-ji site Early 9th century Temple dedicated to Kannon, who legend tells made its appearance on the watered field.

Nachi no Otaki site Early 9th century Sacred site in association with nature worship and the Shugen sect.

Nachi Primeval Forest site Early 9th century Sacred site in association with nature worship and the Shugen sect.

Fudarakusin-ji site Temple dedicated to the guardian deity of Kongobu-ji at the mountain foot.

Niutsuhime-jinja site (prehistory) Temple dedicated to the tutelary god of Koya, its old temple buildings were destroyed by a decree in 1688 in order to separate Shinto and Buddhism into its present state.

Kongobu-ji site (prehistory) Temple dedicated to the tutelary god of Koya, its old temple buildings were destroyed by a decree in 1688 in order to separate Shinto and Buddhism into its present state.

Jison-in site Early 9th century Temple dedicated to the tutelary deity of the administrative office of Kongobu-ji at the mountain foot.

Niukanshofu-jinja site Early 9th century Temple dedicated to the tutelary deity of the administrative office of Kongobu-ji at the mountain foot.

Yoshino-Myko-jinja site Sacred site in association with nature worship and the Shugen sect.

Yoshino-Mikumari-jinja site Temple dedicated to the tutelary deity of Yoshino.

Kimpukyoin-ji site Temple dedicated to the tutelary deity of Yoshino.

Kimpoun-ji site Temple dedicated to the tutelary deity of the Shugen sect and its support facilities.

Yoshimizu-ji Temple dedicated to the tutelary deity of the Shugen sect and its support facilities.

Omurenji Temple dedicated to the tutelary deity of the Shugen sect and its support facilities.

Kumano Sankeimichi

Omune Okugakemichi

Pilgrimage Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range

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