



Fast-Food Pilgrimage

By Greg Lowan

As a JET, I spent one year living in the seaside fishing community of Muroto in Shikoku's Kochi Prefecture. Muroto is situated on the southeastern tip of crescent-shaped Shikoku, an island blanketed by mountains and surrounded by ocean on all sides. Until recently, this geographic isolation kept mainland influences to a minimum and fostered distinct regional cultures and dialects. The people and language of Kochi are called Tosa.

Due to low population density, one may still find solitude in Shikoku's deep mountain valleys or along its vast coastline. Centuries ago the promise of seclusion attracted Shinto-Buddhist monks to the area. Koubo Daishi was one such monk. Daishi traveled the circumference of Shikoku, founding 88 temples along the way and incorporating them into a new form of Shinto-Buddhism, the Shingon sect. Daishi's 1647 kilometre journey has been followed by pilgrims, or *ohenrou-san*, ever since and is known as 八十八ヶ所巡り (*hachiju hakkasho meguri*), the 88 Temple Pilgrimage. Ohenrou-san follow Koubo Daishi's path seeking solitude, spiritual cleansing, and reconnection with the traditions of Shinto-Buddhism.

Ohenrou-san traditionally followed the trail on foot over a period of sixty days. Approximately 1000 pilgrims still complete the journey in this way each year. They can be seen along Shikoku's roadsides and mountain paths, wearing traditional white clothing and carrying

staffs. Unfortunately, they are now joined annually by close to 100 000 camera-toting tourists. Several tour companies provide packages that include visiting a series of easily accessed temples, accommodation, an imitation ohenrou-san outfit, and bento lunches. A two-month long walking pilgrimage is essentially reduced to weekend or weeklong tour bus excursions.



Picture by Greg Lowan, Ohenrou-san heading south along the Tokushima-Kochi coastline.

In the past, pilgrims were assisted along their way by the charity of townsfolk and monks alike. They received simple room and board in the temples along the circuit and were often given small gifts of food or money along the way by empathetic Shikoku-jin. However, this spirit of welcoming generosity now seems over-exploited by profit-motivated tour companies. Even some of the temples now provide restaurants, gift shops, and rapid-fire stamping of pilgrimage passports by monks. This is the fast-food version of spiritual pilgrimage! As the tourists carry on to their next destination, resident monks are left to clean up the trash they have left behind. Ancient holy sites to which generations of monks have devoted their lives have been reduced to quaint tourist destinations.



This is in stark contrast to the remaining few traditional temples still found in the inner mountain valleys of Shikoku. I was fortunate to visit a few of these temples during day-hikes and was astounded by the friendliness and generosity of the resident monks. Upon arriving, they came out to greet us, offered us tea, and were eager to chat; we caught a glimpse of what it must have been like for earlier pilgrims along the 88 Temple circuit.

It seems to me that the whole point of spiritual pilgrimage is lost on whirlwind weekend tours. Koubo Daishi believed that a person could attain enlightenment in one lifetime through dedication and pilgrimage. Many ohenrou-san still follow his path in this hope. I doubt that the same can be attained on a weekend bus tour of Shikoku. I have spent many days on long backpacking trips and can attest that, no matter what your religious inclination, this type of slow-moving meditation is a highly valuable experience that can lead to profound revelations and an abiding sense of peace.

I never had the chance to engage a modern-day ohenrou-san in long conversation. However, if I had, I imagine that they would have been able to relate many stories from their adventures; tales of the small animals that they'd met along the way, long days of walking in the sun or rain, or humble and welcoming monks that they had met at the few remaining remote and relatively undisturbed temples. I would also be interested to hear their own stories of pilgrimage - why they had come, what they were seeking, and what they had

found along the way. I find it heartening that true ohenrou-san persist on Shikoku today despite the capitalistic frenzy surrounding them. Someday I would like to return to Shikoku and walk the pilgrimage myself.



Photograph by Greg Lowan
Sunrise on the pilgrim's path in Kochi prefecture.

For more information go to:

<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/japan/shikoku-88-temple-pilgrimage.htm>

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New JLPT Levels

By Miho Trudeau

A new level has been added to this year's Japanese Level Proficiency Test (JLPT). The first two levels, 1-kyu and 2-kyu, have stayed the same, but a new level has been added between 2-kyu and 3-kyu, bumping up the original four levels to five. Many people in the past have complained about the great difference between a fairly intermediate 3-kyu level requiring approximately 300 kanji to an