

PULL OF THE POWER

Thousands of torii gates form a spectacular passage to the inner shrine of Fushimi Inari-taisha shrine.

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Since ancient times, Japan has been the site of such passages as pilgrimages to Ise-jingu shrine in Mie Prefecture and ascents of Mt. Fuji, which was

worshipped as a sacred site. In modern times, places referred to as “power spots,” out of the belief that some people have in the ability of these



locales to invigorate and revitalize people emotionally and spiritually, have been attracting interest from young and old alike. We visit two such

“sacred places” in Japan.

Fushimi Inari-taisha

Over the three days from January 1 to 3, Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples across Japan will be visited by great numbers of people who come to pray for good fortune in the coming year, in a ritual known as *hatsumode*. Fushimi Inari-taisha shrine in Kyoto receives a particularly large number of such *hatsumode* petitioners: more than 2.5 million people from all over Japan will visit this shrine over this three-day period every year.

It is said that the history of Fushimi Inari-taisha begins in 711, when the god Inari, to whom the shrine is dedicated, was first enshrined on Inari-yama mountain. The year 2011 will mark the 1,300th anniversary of that event. The god Inari is widely worshipped by those who wish abundant crops, success in business, and safe households. It is estimated that there are some 30,000 shrines dedicated to Inari across Japan, of which the Fushimi Inari-taisha is the original and preeminent shrine.

The grounds and facilities of Fushimi Inari-taisha encompass some 870,000 square meters, extending over the entire Western foot of Inari-yama, which has an altitude of 233 meters above sea level. The main, or inner, shrine, which represents the heart of the shrine proper, was rebuilt in 1499, and has been designated an important national cultural asset.

Of particular note at Fushimi Inari-taisha shrine is the long series of red torii, the distinctive archways that mark the entrances to Shinto shrines. It became customary in the Edo period (1603–1867) for persons whose wishes came true to erect these torii, such that there are some 10,000 torii at the shrine as of this writing.



Map of the Kii Peninsula showing the Kumano Kodo route and location of numerous spiritual sites





Kumano Nachi-taisha, one of the three sacred Kumano Sanzan shrines, and the revered Nachi no taki falls

Kumano Kodo

The Kii Peninsula protrudes from central Honshu into the Pacific Ocean. The Kii Highlands, comprising the southern part of the Kii Peninsula, is a range of mountains rising between 1,000 and 2,000 meters above sea level. Forests grow in profusion in this region, which receives large amounts of rainfall.

There are three holy sites in the region: Kumano, Yoshino/Omine and Koya-san. Since ancient times,



The Eighty-eight Holy Sites of Shikoku are eighty-eight temples built on sites chosen by Kukai (774–835), one of the great founders of Japanese Buddhism, when he visited Shikoku. Originally, Buddhist monks made a pilgrimage to all of these temples, a practice that spread among the laity as well during the Edo period (1603–1867). Traversing the entire course is a trip of more than 1,200 km. It is now possible to make this pilgrimage by bus or car, as well as on foot.

pilgrims have visited these sites in great numbers. Known as Kumano Sanzan, these sites had a particular heyday in the middle centuries of the Heian period (794–1192), when pilgrims traveled the road in such endless numbers that they were referred to as “the Kumano Pilgrimage of the Ants.” The Kumano Kodo was the road traveled by these pilgrims to reach Kumano Sanzan.

Even now, many people walk the Kumano Kodo. Travelers have a number of courses to choose from, including the mountain course, more than 1,000 meters above sea level (recommended for advanced mountain trekkers), the road paved with stones said to have been laid down more than 700 years ago, and the course that affords a view of the Pacific Ocean as one walks along. These walks afford the opportunity to experience nearly a millennium of history and culture in beautiful natural surroundings.