

タイム部活動報告

～英字新聞が読める高校生ってかっこいいと思いませんか?!～

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タイム部の活動を
のぞいてみました。
どんな素材を使って
勉強しているのかな？



Eat, pray, bathe at mountaintop retreat

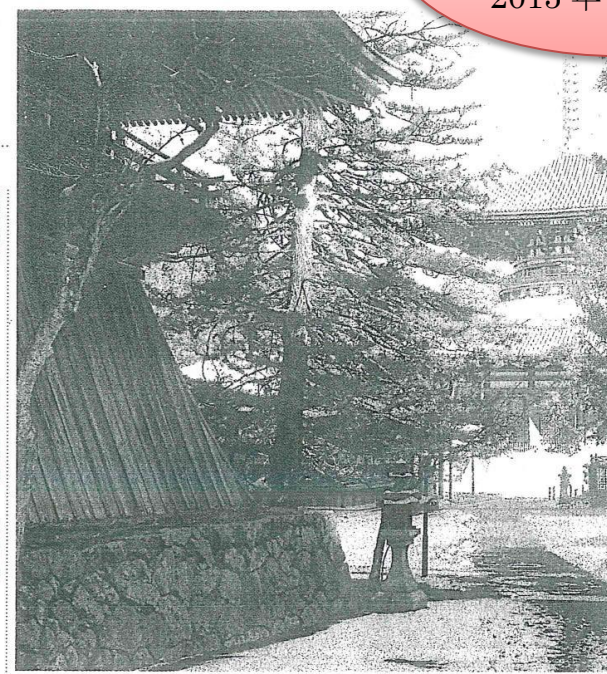
Mandy Bartok
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

I've only just arrived at Mount Koya and I already feel like I've cheated on my pilgrimage. Backpack-laden foreigners are mingling with Japanese pilgrims sporting walking sticks and conical hats in the town's snowy train station parking area. But my stalwart travel companion, Felicity, and I slowly roll by them in our comfortably heated car, having driven 90 minutes from Ikoma to Mount Koya, Wakayama Prefecture. I'm not entirely sad to be arriving "in style." The temperature outside is barely topping the freezing mark and the previous night's snow still lies thick on the temple roofs and sidewalks. While I've long wanted to make this trip — and even imagined the beauty of seeing Mount Koya in winter — my fingers are already losing circulation just at the chilly sight. These days, you don't have to be a believer to make the journey to this temple complex, which sits on the apex of a wooded mountain. Although pilgrims have been coming to this center of Shingon Buddhism since its foundation by famed monk Kobo Daishi (also known as Kukai) in 816, the 1,200th anniversary of the monastic settlement this year promises an increase in the number of curious tourists who have heard of Mount Koya's serenity and want to see it for themselves. Felicity and I begin our explorations at the large entrance gate that signals to pilgrims coming up the 24-km Choishi-Michi trail that their destination — and possible salvation — is in reach. A little way down, we meet Rie Sakai, a *henro* (pilgrim) hiking up the narrow lane with her sturdy stick and *wagesa* (a pilgrim's silk stole). We stop to chat and I query her on what could have motivated her visit to Mount Koya in such a season. "Well, I don't have to work at the



On a spiritual journey: Rie Sakai, a pilgrim to Mount Koya, shows off her stamp book. Right: The striking vermillion Konpon Daito pagoda, which is part of the Danjo Garan complex

moment, so the timing was good," she says, though admits we're lucky to have such a clear winter day. When pressed a bit more, Rie rifles through her pack and reveals a beautiful stamp book from the 88 Temple Pilgrimage on Shikoku Island. "I've come to Mount Koya to give thanks for a successful journey around Shikoku," she adds. With our adventure merely a weekend, it's easy to forget that, for some, Mount Koya is the culmination of something much bigger. A few meters further on, we pick our way carefully up the icy steps to Danjo Garan — the towering vermillion pagoda that has become a symbol of Mount Koya to the outside world and the first place in the area where we discover other foreign



travelers. Despite those gathered in the grounds around the pagoda, the surrounding sub-temples attract few visitors. Even at neighboring Kongobuji Temple, only a few other heavily bundled visitors are swishing along the polished corridors and admiring the sumptuously painted screens. A heavenly cup of chai warms our frozen fingers at Bon On Shya, an atmospheric cafe in the middle of Mount Koya's temple precinct. "It's very quiet here in the winter," says the owner, a transplant from Yokohama who wandered down here years ago and just stayed. In fact, they're closing up as soon as we finish, but we make a note of the hours for the following day so we can

return and examine the local pottery displayed in the cafe's gallery. With the sun going down, Felicity and I are happy to head for the warmth of Fukuchi-in, one of Mount Koya's more than 50 *shukubo* (temple lodgings). We've chosen carefully, as this is the only accommodation to offer an *onsen* (hot spring) and an outside *rotenburo* to boot. The hand-painted sliding doors, the raked stone gardens dusted with snow and the exquisite statuary are all pluses to the promise of a hot bath. Dinner is served in our sleeping quarters, and a variety of tofu dishes are placed on the trays set up before us. Mount Koya's *shukubo* specialize in *shojin ryori* (vegetarian food that subscribes

これを読むの?!
すごいな~!!





We listen to the sonorous drone of the monks' chanting for a few minutes, before hightailing it to the baths. On a bitterly cold morning, I prefer to commune with a higher power from the comfort of an outdoor hot spring.



each one clad in outdoor gear and winter accessories. We listen to the sonorous drone of the monks' chanting for a few minutes, before hightailing it to the baths. On a bitterly cold morning, I prefer to commune with a higher power from the comfort of a rotenburo.

Like all good pilgrims, we wrap up our time on Mount Koya with a wander through Okunoin. Regarded as the town's most sacred site, the sprawling cemetery houses monuments to people ranging from warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi to celebrated actor Koji Tsuruta — all of whom wanted to be buried near Kobo Daishi's mausoleum. Even in death (or his eternal medication, as the monastery says), the trailblazing monk is still attracting followers.

By chance, we stumble upon a purification ceremony in the small river that runs just a few meters from Daishi's tomb. A dozen penitents stand in waist-deep water, pale hands clasping prayer beads while their numb lips recite incantations. On the banks, a trio of octogenarians best claves together in time to the syllables.

"It's a ceremony held once a year, on the last Sunday of January," the older women kindly explain when the ritual has topped up. Pilgrims might participate for a number of reasons — asking for forgiveness, appealing for aid or seeking succor for one who is ill. The icy winter water means it's a difficult ordeal for those

braving the elements. A pilgrim prays in an annual key ritual near Kobo Daishi's mausoleum. Above left: Snow covers the snowy monuments in Okunoin cemetery on Mount Koya. MANTY BARTON

involved, but then again, that's rather the point.

We take our leave, and the oldest of the women smiles widely and invites us back next year. Felicity also encourages me to return in autumn and several staff at Fushuchi-in say an April visit is a must.

My experience at Mount Koya has not been that of a true pilgrim and I feel no deep religious calling to come back and sleep in a temple again. However, there is something in the snowy woods, in the icicles clinging to the temple roofs, in the snowflakes lying delicately on top of rock gardens that speaks to my soul.

For me, the dead of winter is always when Mount Koya will feel most alive.

Getting there: Mount Koya can be reached by car or by taking one of various train lines to Gokurakubashi Station, where a five-minute cable car ride ends at Koyasan Station. Most of Rikuu buses connect Koyasan Station with the town itself. A combination ticket (¥2,000) gains entry to most major sights at the Mount Koya temple complex. There are more than 50 shukubo to choose from for those wanting to stay overnight.

to strict edicts such as the avoidance of meat, fish and spices). Even soy sauce is conspicuously absent, though we're treated to a bit of green tea-flavored saht with our vegetable tempura. Despite the lack of "heavy" food, we're more than sated by the selection of sesame tofu, glass noodles and vegetables in a sweet soy milk, seaweed soup, various tofu salads and pickles.

I'd assumed our waiter was an apprentice monk, but with a good deal of ing on his part, we extract him.

"I used to be in the restaurant in Tokyo but wanted to work in a temple," says the old Hilaru Shibata, as he pours our first cups of tea. He left

sprawl of the capital a year ago for the peace of Fukuchi-in, where he serves breakfast and dinner to overnight guests (half foreigners and half Japanese, by his count). He's lucky to have a small tenant mat room to himself, and doesn't show any inclination to leave. "I'll probably stay another year or two," he estimates. Clearly, Mount Koya has woven its spell over yet another foreigner-in-dweller.

読むだけじゃなくて
討論するんやて。



めっちゃ難しそう…
でも、静先生と
ロビンソン先生が
サポートしてくれる
から大丈夫！



静先生



ロビンソン先生

We welcome students to join our club so that they may broaden their horizons.