Two hours south from Namba Station in Osaka is Koyasan, located in the northern part of Wakayama Prefecture. Consisting of mountains about a thousand meters high, Koyasan is an active monastic center established 1200 years ago by Kobo Daishi (Kukai), the founding priest of the Shingon sect of Buddhism in Japan, for the study and practice of Buddhism, and parts of Koyasan, such as Kongobuji and Danjogaran which belong to the Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range, were certified as UNESCO World Heritage sites in July, 2004.

Arriving at the mountaintop, the prevalent presence of temples and monks is instantly perceptible. Temples sandwich each road that runs through Koyasan, and monks wrapped in Buddhist vestments make their way along those streets. Koyasan, which boasts one hundred and seventeen temples, has an estimated population of about four thousand people. Of those, about a thousand are monks. Surrounded by mountains that soar regally and the vast skies that seem so close at a height of a thousand meters above sea level, Koyasan seems perfectly suited for religious training.

When standing in front of Sohonzan Kongobuji—the headquarters of Koyasan Shingon Buddhism—the sheer scale of the front gate is overpowering. Inside the head temple is a beautiful traditional stone garden that is over 2300 square meters in size—the largest in Japan—with its stones intricately arranged to represent a sea of clouds. From the grandness of the building to the artistic refinement of the stone garden, the wide-ranging Japanese devotion to aesthetics is sure to move anyone’s heart.
About a hundred meters away from Sohonzan Kongobuji is the Danjo Garan, the central temple complex. This is the area that Kobo Daishi first settled in Koyasan, and is an especially revered place. Within it, the Konpon Daito Pagoda in particular catches the eye—a vermilion-colored tower piercing the sky at forty-eight and a half meters tall.

If you walk straight down the main road to the other side of Koyasan from the Danjo Garan, you will encounter cedar trees that are several hundred years old. A small stone bridge in the front marks the entrance to the Okunoin, where the mausoleum of Kobo Daishi is located. Along the two-kilometer trail that leads to the mausoleum, toro (traditional Japanese lanterns) line both sides of the road. More than two hundred thousand graves and monuments are interspersed among the lanterns.

Of Koyasan’s one hundred and seventeen temples, fifty-two offer lodgings where visitors can stay, sample the vegetarian fare called shojin-ryori that monks eat, and even participate in religious services. One such temple lodging, known as Renge Join, has a fine reputation for its English-language services, and is popular among foreign tourists. According to Renge Join’s chief priest, Ryusho Soeda, the Japanese spirit that is accepting and magnanimous has a deep connection with Kobo Daishi’s teachings, which value generosity, tolerance and acceptance.

Located deep in the mountains far from the city, Koyasan exudes a tranquil, serene atmosphere. To those that want to experience the enlightened, worldly culture of Japan, there is much to be said for doing so here, in the heart of Japanese Buddhism.