

A photograph of two pilgrims walking on a paved path. They are wearing traditional white robes and conical sedge hats. The pilgrim on the left is carrying a wooden staff with a bell on top and a black bag. The pilgrim on the right is also carrying a staff and a bag. In the background, other pilgrims are visible, and the path is bordered by a wooden fence and greenery.

Walking with Kobo Daishi

The island of Shikoku's historic 88-temple pilgrimage is one of the great long-distance hikes of modern times.

ALEX HENDY

THE euphonious chirping of bush warblers rings out from the surrounding forest as we admire the weathered carpentry of Dainichi-ji, temple No. 4 on Shikoku's 88-temple *henro* pilgrimage. Before long the birdsong is joined by the jangle of bells as a group of four pilgrims approaches along the cobbled path. Clad in the traditional costume of white tunic and conical sedge hat, the pilgrims all carry a wooden staff, on top of which hangs a sonorous little bell. The staff is considered to embody the soul of Kukai, known posthumously as Kobo Daishi (774-835), the Shikoku-born monk who introduced Shingon Buddhism to Japan. The bell is designed to prevent the pilgrim's mind from wandering as he or she follows the route Kukai took when establishing the faith on this island.

Although the majority of those making the

pilgrimage today are sightseers rather than devotees of Shingon Buddhism, all pilgrims nevertheless adhere to the rituals particular to the *henro*, including the recital of sutras and the depositing of *osame-fuda* paper name slips. After a brief tour of the temple grounds, the pilgrims head back down the path and rejoin the *henro* trail leading to temple No. 5, Jizo-ji. When they arrive at temple No. 6, Anraku-ji, at the end of the day, they will have walked 16 kilometers from their starting point at temple No. 1, Ryozen-ji.

Anraku-ji staff member Eishin Sasaki has welcomed thousands of weary *o-henro-san* to the temple's overnight lodgings. Most are senior citizens, he says, and to accelerate the completion of the 1,500-kilometer route, which takes roughly fifty days on foot, the majority now travel in tour groups that make use of a microbus. Sasaki adds that the number of non-Japanese walkers on the trail has increased significantly in recent years.

Pieter Groen (75) is a member of the sixty-strong Dutch *Henro* Club, most of whose members have completed one or more circuits of the route. Groen completed his first *henro* in 2012 over four separate visits of twelve to eighteen days and is now close to



finishing a second circuit that will also take in the twenty *bangai* temples and Mount Koya. Groen walks the pilgrimage in honour of his mother and his late wife, who was born in Shikoku.

“I usually book a hotel for four or five days near a train station and go from there,” he says. “I walk between 15 and 25 kilometers each day, then head back to the hotel on the train. Nothing is more relaxing after visiting several temples than sitting on the train for an hour or so while drinking a can of *chuhai* and reflecting on the day.”

Groen often receives gifts while walking such as candy, fruit or cookies. Sometimes, he says, he is even invited into people’s homes for a cup of tea. This custom, called *o-settai*, dates back centuries and is still observed despite the ubiquity of convenience stores and vending machines.

After a healing hot spring bath, the twenty or so pilgrims staying the night at Anraku-ji are called to the dining room at 6:00 p.m. sharp and enjoy a simple but delicious evening meal. Takeji Okamoto (74) sips on a beer and looks back on the day’s journey, which began in Nara on the island of Honshu that morning. Okamoto is embarking on his second *henro*, this time alone. This experienced

All photos: Satoshi Tanaka

- 1 A small group of traditionally attired pilgrims presses on between temples on the island of Shikoku’s 88-temple *henro* trail.
- 2 A stone marker on the *henro* trail thought to have been laid some 300 years ago by the monk Shinen, who formalized the pilgrimage route as we know it today
- 3 Pilgrims head up the cobbled path to Dainichi-ji
- 4 A large statue of Kobo Daishi on the grounds of Jizo-ji
- 5 At Kosen-ji, a temple officer stamps and signs a pilgrim’s scroll.
- 6 At Anraku-ji, pilgrims gather for the recital of sutras and some wise words from temple master Shuho Hatakeda.

pilgrim carries little more than a change of underwear, he says, and walks simply because he enjoys doing so.

After dinner we head to the main hall, where the softly spoken temple master Shuho Hatakeda leads us in selected readings and shares two allegorical tales before inviting us into a space that is completely unexpected: a narrow cave, candlelit, cut through with a shallow and mysteriously luminous blue river. In this cave, filled with Buddhist sculptures and artwork, we complete our final rituals of the day.

The temple master calls my attention to a mandala depicted on a huge hanging rug and explains its basic meanings.

“You’ll notice the pattern is circular,” he whispers in closing, “just like the Shikoku pilgrimage route.”