

ITINERARY

Day 1: Arrive in Kii-Tanabe

The best way to reach Kii-Tanabe is by train (tickets not included and purchased locally). There are frequent trains from Kansai Airport, Osaka and Kyoto travelling southwards to Kii-Tanabe. Here the railway line parallels the coast and avoids the steep mountainous interior. The nearest major International Airport is Kansai (Osaka), from where you can take a 2-hour train journey to Kii-Tanabe. Train travel from Osaka to Kii-Tanabe takes just over 2 hours and from Kyoto approximately 2.5-3 hours.

Kii-Tanabe is the gateway town to the Imperial Route of the Kumano Kodo and a city surrounded by the Pacific Ocean on one side and mountains on the other. The town is also home to the Tanabe Tourist Information Center – your tour orientation will be scheduled with the staff here. This evening is free for you to explore the town – enjoy great atmosphere at the Ajikoji Restaurant and Entertainment District, and perhaps stroll down to the Ogigahama Beach for sunset views.

Day 2: Walk Takijiri-oji to Tsugizakura-oji (17km)

It is an early morning start today and after checking out and picking up your lunch box, you will take a 40-minute bus ride to Takijiri (paid locally), start of the walk. The first section of today's walk will be a climb up from Takijiri-oji to Takahara, a rural hamlet on a ridge, noted for its ancient shrine surrounded by giant kusu-noki, or camphor trees, and a spectacular view over the surrounding Hatenashi Mountain Ranges. Reminders of the past, including Buddhist statues and oji shrines, line the route along the ancient highway as you climb upwards.

Leaving Takahara behind, you head further into the mountains along the old trail, past bamboo forest and then into the pencil pine. You continue to pass by reminders of the old highway, including an ichirizuka distance marker and the sites of old former tea houses, which provided rest and shelter to pilgrims up until the early 20th century. Continuing on you crest the Hashiori-Toge pass after a short climb. The trail then descends past the Three-Fold Moon viewing area, from where it is a short climb to the small but famous Gyuba-doji statue. This ancient statue shows Kazan, one of the first

abdicated emperors to pilgrimage to Kumano, sitting astride both a horse and a cow. Your descent takes you along a cobbled path and staircase to Chikatsuyu, a small village and one of the few places where you can get limited supplies or drinks.

Your final stretch of the day takes you on a climb to Tsugizakura-oji and your accommodation for the evening. Nearby is a grove of giant cedar trees, some of which are reputed to be 800 years old! Accommodation tonight is in a small local minshuku guesthouse. If Tsugizakura accommodation is full on your chosen dates or if you are travelling with a larger group, you may stay in Chikatsuyu instead on this night.

6-8 hours walking

Meals: L D

Day 3: Walk Tsugizakura-oji to Kumano Hongu Taisha (21.5km)

Today's walk will bring you along many forest paths and eventually some mountain top villages before descending to Hongu. The walk starts with climbs over a number of passes and there is a permanent detour in place due to landslides on the main path. There are few facilities on the first part of today's route which is through the forest before eventually leading you to the shrine at Hosshinmon-oji. At this point you also have the option to take a local bus (paid locally) as the road intersects here, or carry on down into the valley to Hongu. You will continue through small settlements and get your first glimpse of the great Kumano Hongu Taisha Shrine and the giant torii gate called Oyunohara in the valley below.

Kumano Hongu Taisha is the main shrine in the area, to which all roads in the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage lead. A long stone staircase leads to the sacred grounds of the shrine, located on a ridge and surrounded by giant cedar and cypress trees. After looking around the impressive shrine you will jump on a local bus (paid locally) to our evening destination at nearby Yunomine Onsen or Kawayu Onsen, charming little hot spring villages.

Arriving at your overnight location is a treat for tired walkers as the steam billows from the thermal rivers and there is the promise of a relaxing onsen after your exertions. The

onsen thermal hot spring baths are an important part of the Kumano Kodo traditions with pilgrims performing hot water purification rituals in preparation for visiting the shrine. For us it will be more a preparation for a delicious Japanese meal in your accommodation.

9 hours walking

Meals: B L D

Day 4: Rest Day in Hongu Area

Today you can either completely relax and take in the local onsens or perhaps return to Hongu village for further explorations. If you wish to stretch your legs a little then walk back to Hongu on the Dainichi-goe route from Yunomine Onsen – this is a steep but delightful walk, passing some remarkable old carved statues at Hanakake Jizo, overgrown by tree roots.

Hongu village is home to the Kumano Hongu Taisha, one of the Kumano Sanzan, three grand shrines of Kumano, and head shrine of over 3,000 Kumano shrines across Japan. Kumano was said to be the entrance gateway to the land of Yomi, the ‘other world’, which spirits travelled to in Japanese mythology. Across the Kumano Hongu Shrine is the Kumano Hongu Heritage Centre, featuring a diversity of exhibitions on the Kumano Kodo – all permanent exhibitions and videos include English translations. Just nearby the centre you will find Oyunohara, the largest torii shrine gate in the world at 34 meters tall, signifying the division of the secular and the spiritual worlds.

Be sure to also visit the tiny Tsuboyu onsen in a wooden cabin at the centre of town in Yunomine Onsen, which is the only UNESCO world heritage listed spa and the oldest in Japan at 1200 years old! The bath can be booked for a 30-minute private bathing and works on a first come first serve basis.

Meals: B D

Day 5: Walk Hongu Area to Koguchi (13km)

This morning you will take a short bus ride (paid locally) to Ukegawa to begin your walk. The Kogumotori-goe section is a fairly gentle trek with a climb and descent over a pass, and is mostly in the forested mountains with some nice ridge-walking sections.

The highlight of today's walk is the Hyakken-gura pass, where a beautifully positioned Buddhist statue on a hilltop has a backdrop of the most spectacular views of the trip. The impressive Hyakken-gura look out surprises walkers with a lovely panoramic view of the 3600 peaks of Kumano. Take a moment to enjoy this stunning view, as pilgrims have been doing for over 1000 years.

The trail continues to rise and fall, sometimes gradual and the off time steeper when you continue towards the Sakura-jaya teahouse remains. The views from the Sakura-jaya teahouse remains down to the valley and across the mountains are impressive. It is said that when the owners of teahouses saw pilgrims approaching from far off in the distance, they would start to cook mochi rice cakes and boil water for tea, to have things ready to serve just as the pilgrims would arrive at the teahouse. From here the trail continues on a forest track and eventually descends into Koguchi, a small and isolated village surrounded by mountains and rivers.

6 hours walking

Meals: B L D

Day 6: Walk Koguchi to Kumano Nachi Taisha (14km)

The Ogumotori-goe is the second day of a two-day trek from the Hongu area to Kumano Nachi Taisha. It is one of the toughest sections of the Nakahechi section and a big day's walk so we recommend an early start as you begin with a 2.5-hour uphill climb up the Dogiri-zaka slope. Dogiri-zaka can be directly translated as "Body Breaking Slope", and is an appropriate name for this 5km uphill section that rises 800 metres to the Echizen-toge Pass.

Afterwards, you pass the Jizo-jaya teahouse remains to the Moja-no-Deai, 'Abode of the Dead'. It is believed that the souls of the dead gravitate to these higher mountains, where spirits inhabit this section of the trail. The walk continues through forest and

along ridges, the path ascending and descending, until at Funami Toge pass the Pacific Ocean spreads out before you.

From here the trail descends to the Nachisan sanctuary and the brightly colored Kumano Nachi Taisha shrine, another of the three grand shrines of Kumano. Also nearby is the wonderful wooden Seiganto-ji temple and the spectacular Nachi-no-Otaki waterfall, which is the highest in Japan and can be seen from far out on the Pacific Ocean. Tonight you will either overnight in Nachisan near the Kumano Nachi shrine or Kii Katsuura, a small fishing village approximately 20-minute bus ride from Nachisan. Relax and enjoy the completion of your extraordinary Kumano Kodo walk!

7 hours walking

Meals: B L D

Day 7: Depart Kii-Katsuura

Today enjoy a leisurely breakfast and then transfer by train to your onwards destination. Train tickets are not included and can be purchased locally at the Kii-Katsuura train station.

Meals: B

Important Note: The Kumano Kodo is a popular walk at certain times of year and guesthouses/hotels sometimes get fully booked. This itinerary is a guide to a possible route. Details may change and the actual accommodations booked may vary from what is written here, dependent on client numbers, wishes and availability. This adjustment with accommodations may alter the exact distance walked in a day so the above itinerary should be used as an indication only to overnight stops/distances.