

## FEATURES

The symbolic landmark of Koya-san, Konpon Daito, is a large pagoda about 50 meters high.



Photo: PIXTA

# Experience the Mystique of Koya-san

Koya-san, an area nestled in the mountains near the border between Wakayama and Nara prefectures, is a sacred place for esoteric Buddhism<sup>1</sup> that attracts many believers and tourists. We asked about the various initiatives that have been undertaken here in the last few years, including the newly built Digital Museum. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)



Photo: Koya-san Kongobu-ji



Photo: PIXTA



Left: Inside Konpon Daito, which is often described as a three-dimensional mandala, there are 16 columns inscribed with images of 16 Buddhas, creating a representation of the esoteric world that Kobo Daishi preached.

Above right: The entrance to Kongobu-ji Temple's Kondo, the main hall of Koya-san. The central area of Koya-san, where major religious events are held, is the temple complex called Danjo Garan. It includes numerous buildings such as the Kondo and Konpon Daito.

Below right: At 2,340 square meters, Banryu-tei ("Garden of the Guardian Dragons") is one of the largest rock gardens in Japan.

Above left: Ajikan meditation is taught at the Ajikan Dojo, which is located in the Banryu-tei rock garden. It is a precious experience to receive direct guidance from a Buddhist monk.

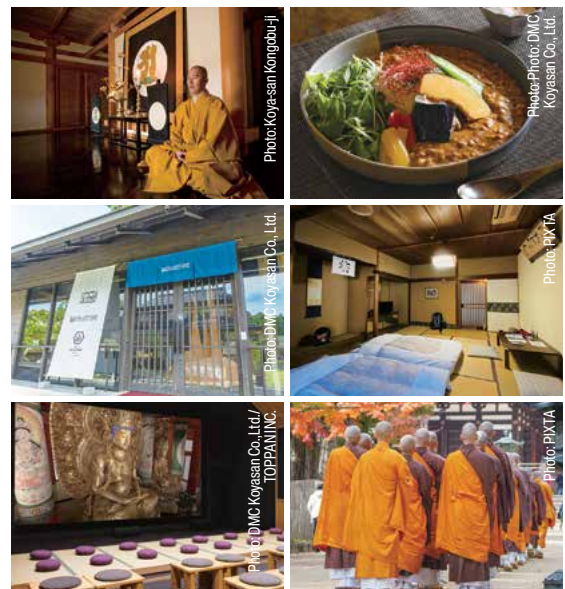
Middle left: The Koyasan Digital Museum is a cultural complex that allows visitors to experience the appeal and significance of Koya-san in a more profound way.

Below left: The VR Theater allows visitors to enjoy valuable cultural properties as they move freely through the virtual space. (VR content “Koyasan Danjo Garan Monastic Complex: The Land of Mandala” produced in cooperation with Koyasan Shingon Sect Main Temple Kongobu-ji. ©TOPPAN INC.)

Above right: Vegetarian curry served at the Koyasan Digital Museum cafe. It is made with ingredients selected in line with the teachings on the traditional *shojin ryori* cuisine of Koyasan, which does not use meat, fish, or the so-called “five pungent roots” (chives, garlic, shallots, onions, and leeks).

Middle right: *Shukubo* is a lodging facility that provides visitors with a chance to immerse themselves in the simple lifestyle of Buddhist monks. There are about 50 such lodgings facilities in the Koya-san temple complex.

Below right: Visitors who spend the night in one of the temple lodgings will have the opportunity to observe the monks as they perform their early morning rituals.



**K**oya-san is located in the central part of the Kii Peninsula in northern Wakayama Prefecture. The name refers to the entire Yamagami Basin, which is about 900 meters above sea level, four kilometers from east to west and two kilometers from north to south, and is surrounded by mountains. It is called Koya-san (“Mount Koya”) because of its historical and cultural significance, but there is actually no mountain of that name. The entire area of Koya-san is actually the grounds of Kongobu-ji Temple, the main temple of the Koyasan Shingon sect, founded in 816 by the priest Kobo Daishi (Kukai). One of its distinctive features is that it includes 117 large and small temples. We interviewed Yamagami Jo from DMC Koyasan Co., Ltd., the company that promotes cultural tourism on Koya-san.

“Koya-san” attracts many worshippers and tourists, about half of whom are now from outside Japan. It is also known abroad as a sacred place for esoteric Buddhism. The number of visitors from Europe, in particular, has been on the rise. In addition to religious institutions such as Kongobu-ji Temple, about 50 of the 117 other temples on Koya-san have *shukubo*—traditional accommodation facilities in a temple for visitors. I think the fact that we provide lodging for so many visitors to Koya-san is also a unique feature that is not found in other areas.”

In 2004, Koya-san was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as part of the “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range.” Since then, the number of visitors has increased. In 2022, the Koyasan Digital Museum, which displays mostly digitized images, was established to provide visitors with a better understanding of the many cultural assets spread across the vast site and to assist them in their worship and sightseeing. Using high-resolution digital archiving technology a company with proven performance in the production of virtual reality (VR) content for numerous World Heritage sites photographed the interiors of the

Konpon Daito and Saito (the West Tower, a pagoda normally closed to the public) and created the VR content in order to preserve and present detailed information about the entire Danjo Garan, the central area of Koyasan. Visitors can enjoy the many valuable cultural properties in visual experiences that make the most of VR technology, such as getting a close-up view of the ceilings from a high vantage point.

“I think visitors will have a better understanding of the Konpon Daito as a three-dimensional mandala<sup>2</sup> if they experience it in VR first and then go see the real thing,” says Yamagami. After enjoying the visual experience of Koya-san in digital form, visitors can take a tour of the actual sites and explore them with deeper sensitivity.

In addition, visitors who stay overnight at one of the temple lodgings on Koya-san can also observe night and early morning events, and savor aspects of the monks’ culinary culture and lifestyle. Koya-san also offers a variety of experience-type programs. Visitors can try the forest therapy, which involves meditation in a hut and a therapeutic walk in the forest, as well as Ajikan, a form of breathing exercise and meditation technique unique to Shingon Buddhism. Meditating under the guidance of a Buddhist monk in the Ajikan Dojo (training center), which is not open to the public, is a precious experience.

Koya-san, one of Japan’s sacred sites, is a unique place that offers visitors a rare opportunity to immerse themselves in the Buddhist worldview in the mountains, far from the city. **7**

1. Esoteric Buddhism is said to have originated in India around the 7th century BC. While inheriting the Indian philosophy of Buddhism, it developed in a unique way with the addition of earthly and magical elements. The Japanese name for esoteric Buddhism, “*mikkyo*,” is an abbreviation of the words “*himitsu bukkyo*” (secret Buddhism) or “*himitsu kyo*” (secret religion). In Japan, Kobo Daishi (Kukai), the founder of Shingon esoteric Buddhism in the early 9th century, is famous.
2. A mandala is a type of painting that depicts a world view in accordance with esoteric Buddhist teachings. There are various ways to express mandalas, not just two-dimensional paintings.