# Japan on Foot

**On a new REI adventure, hike two ancient trails for a cultural immersion**

*BY HANNAH LOTT-SCHWARTZ*

It's 10:23 A.M., and I don't know whether I'm drunk on sake or high on a week's worth of well-fed Buddhas and geisha smiles. I'm just past the midpoint of my journey, a trek by boot, bus, boat, and train from Japan's ancient capital, to its modern one, Kyoto to Tokyo. Two of the country's most historically and culturally significant trails – the UNESCO-designated Kumano Kodō pilgrimage, now behind me, and the samurai-trodden Nakasendō Way, currently underfoot – serve as my compass, centuries of Japan's evolving makeup preserved along the paths. This is history detailed beyond the capacity of language, recorded in the land itself.

But even as I hustle up the street of this small post town on the Nakasend–o, reluctantly leaving the local sake brewery's mellow libations, it's the Kumano Kod–o that still sticks to my clothes, its path so gnarled at times it forced me to look down as I hiked. It was as though the kami, or Shinto deities, paved it this way on purpose – not to trip me up but to focus my attention on the present, bullying intentionality out of each step as I climbed the mountain path, flanked by the ghost spirits of Japan's ancient travelers who toed the trail a millennium before.

Along with seven other travelers, I've embarked on the first departure of REI Adventures' "Japan Hiking – Kumano Kodō & Nakasendō"trip, an 11-day trek that marks the tour organizer's return to the country after a 20-year absence. As though making up for lost time, REI has designed an itinerary

that includes portions of these two important trails, each of which stands as a hallmark expedition on its own. It's an easy-active adventure, a newly introduced category that, while still physically demanding, is doable for most anyone who's in good physical condition and can hike up to 7 miles in one go with moderate elevation changes — and, in the case of Japan, eat lots and lots of raw fish.

Leading this time travel is a living encyclopedia of Japanese history and culture, also known as Fumiko, our local guide. She fields our every curious question and schools us on her country's labyrinth of etiquettes, from chopstick use and a meal's order of operations to bus boarding and even communal bathing. There's no routine in Japan, only ritual. Graceful practices comprise the country's very cultural fabric, every surface immaculate and orderly without feeling rigid. After all, Fumiko tells us, if you keep a messy space, be it mental or physical, the deities won't hang around for long.

**CAPTION** Main shrine of Hongu Taisha, blessing,writer enjoying breathtaking lanterns, a cute offering. Bamboo forest statuaryUlparum aliquam as doluptat intis del excerepre ilit, quunti atem. Edis reped qui comnimus eum rerspe voluptu ribusantur, qui cum, ut

The trip begins in Kyoto's thick bamboo forest and carries us toward the coast to catch the start of the Nakahechi trail, the most popular of the Kumano's thousand-year-old network of routes, for both modern and ancient pilgrims. Many roads on the Kumano lead to a triad of grand shrines collectively known as Kumano Sanzan, the main artery of Japan's sacred heart. Visit all three, it's believed, and you'll attain spiritual purification — necessary in particular for emperors nearing the end of their reign.

"Deities in the Kumano area are very compassionate," Fumiko explains with a wry smile. They welcome anyone from anywhere, regardless of gender, creed, or class — even religion. Japan itself is syncretistic, where its native Shintoism is practiced in tandem with Buddhism, which arrived under Chinese influence in the sixth century. It was believed that the Kumano area, a sacred site since prehistoric times, housed Shinto incarnations of Buddhist deities. As a result, Buddhist monks adopted it by the eighth century and used it as a training ground to gain spiritual powers. Three hundred years later, emperors took to the pilgrimage as well.

The 400-mile round-trip journey took as long as a month to complete, crew members creating an ant trail more than a mile long behind the emperor. Though I reach Kumano Sanzan after only three days on the Nakahechi, the retired emperors' traditions quickly become my daily practice. I learn to bow before the red Torii gates that mark the entrance to shrines, but only after rinsing my hands and mouth at the always-adjacent *temizuya*, a ground-fed fountain sometimes with a dragon spout. These — the mouth and hands — cause the most harm, Fumiko explains, and so we must cleanse them before entering a sacred space.

Cleanliness is paramount to both Shintoism and Buddhism, neither assumed nor taken for granted. As we snake the Kumano through the Kii Mountain Range, my fellow trail-worn travelers and I are easily indoctrinated, thirsting for stone baths of hot onsen water that welcome our practiced muscles at each inn. Night after night, I sit alongside other women on a low stool in front of a shower head, together washing the day away. Once clean, I wade into the natural hot spring, body melting into the lightly sulphured bath, gaze softening on the exposed horizon as the sun shares one last wink of light.

After we spend days of traveling by foot, the speed of a train railing toward the Central Alps toward the Nakasendō Way jars me, my body unaccustomed to moving so fast and my mind unable to keep up. We're approaching modernity, and it's palpable. Each day's hike no longer leads to a guest house snuggled somewhere between the Kii Mountains' peaky shoulder blades. Now we chase the sun's last rays down narrow roads that unfold into small "post towns" populated by two-story wooden buildings housing family-run inns and shops.

We've moved into the Edo period, Japan's final era of traditional life before ports opened to foreign trade and, in effect, influence. Ieyasu Tokugawa, the Edo period's first shogun, developed the Nakasendō in the 17th century as one of five Gokaidō routes used to govern the country's 270 provinces. In the early Edo years, only samurai and feudal lords were allowed access, stopping in post towns to change horses, though eventually the Gokaidō opened to trade merchants as well.

**CAPTION SED** provincial fare, temple, matsumoto castle, boat ride with song, waterfalls

The Nakasendō feels at the same time foreign and familiar, ritualized in ways that now comfort. By day I move, sweat burning puddles across my arms and face, knees greased against the weight of a daypack. By night, I fold into curative onsens, don a traditional yukata robe, and dine on wild spreads of unfamiliar provincial fare, sharing cheers of "Kanpai!" with new friends.

That's why I can't tell where my buzz stems from as I float down a street somewhere between Kyoto and Tokyo, feeling dumb but happy — buoyant even. Because I've imbibed on Japan's seductive cocktail of wide-eyed wonderment and midmorning sake tastings, of samurai stories and matcha ice cream cones, of mountain myths and holy waterfalls. Because I've seen where tiny moments and small joys meet the sublime. How I'm so lucky to be here — in this moment, with these people, feasting on our collective experience — I don't know.

As always, Fumiko has the answer, and again, it comes from those ever-compassionate deities. "You are here," she says, "because you were chosen to be here."

**DETAILS:** From $6,899. 800-622-2236; rei.com/adventures ■