

Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage

Historical Overview

The Chichibu pilgrimage route is one part of the 100 Kannon Pilgrimage, three connected paths that link 100 temples across the regions of Chichibu, Bando, and Saikoku. The 100 Kannon Pilgrimage route stretches some 1,200 kilometers, from Seiganto-ji Temple in Wakayama Prefecture to Suisen-ji Temple in the town of Minano, near Chichibu. Each of the temples along the route enshrine a statue of the bodhisattva Kannon, Goddess of Compassion. A stele discovered in the ruins of Iwao Castle, in Nagano, is inscribed with writing that indicates pilgrims have been traveling the route since at least 1525. However, the route may have existed even centuries earlier. A collection of folktales from the Heian period (794–1185) mentions a “man who cleansed himself and made at 100 shrines to Kannon on the eighteenth of each month.”

In the *Lotus Sutra*, a fundamental piece of scripture in many schools of Buddhism, Kannon is portrayed in 33 different forms. Before the 100 Kannon Pilgrimage was established, each of the three pilgrimage routes visited 33 statues of Kannon. Sometime around the early sixteenth century, a thirty-fourth temple (Shinpuku-ji, No.2) was added to the Chichibu pilgrimage to create a single, unbroken route of 100 temples.



Although the Bando and Saikoku pilgrimages can take weeks to complete, the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage is popular for being less strenuous. The Chichibu pilgrimage is tightly grouped within the Chichibu Basin and can be completed in just a few days. The route is about 100 kilometers long, and some portions can even be traveled by car.

Particularly during Japan's medieval period (twelfth to sixteenth centuries), travel between regions was tightly controlled. The Chichibu route, being so compact, did not require travelers to pass through any checkpoints, and it was very popular with pilgrims. Even after the start of the Edo period (1603–1867), when travel restrictions were relaxed, the Chichibu pilgrimage remained popular.



Beginning in the late seventeenth century, worship of Kannon became fashionable, and the 34 Kannon Pilgrimage Route experienced a boom in popularity. Several times during the eighteenth century, the 34 Kannon statues were publicly displayed in Edo (now Tokyo), and the interest generated by these exhibitions led to an explosion in the number of pilgrims who traveled to Chichibu. Every day between 1804 and 1830, some 20,000 to 30,000 pilgrims were recorded on the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage. This popularity has remained strong even to the present day: Over 180,000 people were recorded on the Chichibu pilgrimage route between April and June of 1996, when all 34 temples were opened up to display the Kannon statues inside.

Although any aspects of pilgrimage culture, such as the clothing and other accoutrements, have become codified by tradition, the routes themselves do not need to be completed in any prescribed order. Pilgrims can follow the order of the temple numbers (*jun-uchi*), start at the final temple and work backward (*gyaku-uchi*), or travel in any other order. Along the way, it is customary to collect a record of your visit to each temple, most often in the form of a stamp (*goshuin*) in a special notebook. Temples also commonly sell small protective charms (*omamori*) that bestow a variety of boons and benefits.



Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage Temple Stamps (*Goshuin*)

At temples along the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage, travelers can receive an ornate stamp called a *goshuin*. When the temples along a pilgrimage route, it is customary to recite a Buddhist sutra, offer a copy of a sutra to the temple, or make a donation to have a sutra copied on your behalf. As a record of the offering, pilgrims can then receive a *goshuin* with information such as the date, the name of the temple, and the principal image enshrined there. After the pilgrimage was finished, the full set of stamps could be displayed as proof of the journey. Collecting *goshuin* is still popular today.

In order to receive *goshuin*, it is necessary to have a special notebook called a *goshuin-cho*. These small notebooks are sold at many temples and are generally decorated with images and patterns that relate to the temple they came from. There are two main types of *goshuin-cho*: the first has an accordion-style binding called *jabara*, meaning "snake's belly." The *jabara* type is especially convenient for displaying a full set of *goshuin*. The second type, *watoji* (traditional stab binding), is sewn together with thread and opens like a book. *Goshuin-cho* are available for ¥1,500 at 22 of the 34 temples along the pilgrimage route and come with that temple's stamp already included.



Receiving a *Goshuin* (Temple Stamp)

- 1) Before entering the temple, stop just outside the main gate. Remove your hat (if you are wearing one) and bow. When stepping through the gate, take care to step over the threshold rather than onto it.
- 2) Just inside the gate, there may be a *temizuya*, a small pavilion with a fountain. The fountain waters are used for a preparatory self-purification ritual. Using the ladle, rinse each of your hands, then pour a small amount of water into your left hand and rinse the inside of your mouth.
- 3) Approach the main hall (*hondo*) where the statue of Kannon is enshrined, and make a small donation by tossing money into the slatted offertory box in front. According to tradition, offerings of ¥25, ¥41, or ¥45 are considered especially lucky, as are ¥5 and ¥50 coins.

- 4) Place your palms together, fingers upward, and bow your head.
- 5) Proceed to the building where *goshuin* are offered, called the *nokyajo*, and hand your *goshuin-cho* to the attendant. If you do not have a *goshuin-cho*, you can purchase one with the temple stamp already included. Otherwise, you can request either a piece of paper with the temple's stamp on it for ¥200 or have the monks write a more elaborate message (*osho-ire*) directly into your notebook for ¥300. If you are wearing a traditional sleeveless white jacket (*oizuru*) or carrying a pilgrim's staff (*kongozue*), you can have the *goshuin* stamped on either of those as well. The attendant will not be able to offer change, so be sure to pay the exact price. Many pilgrims bring dozens of ¥100 coins for buying *goshuin* along the route.

Goshuin are available year-round from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., but during the winter months (November to February), the *nokyajo* closes an hour early, and Jigen-ji (No.13) and Joraku-ji (No.11) close at 3:00 and 4:00 p.m., respectively.

History and Origin of *Goshuin* (Temple Stamps)

The practice of collecting temple stamps is believed to date back to the early thirteenth century with the creation of the "66 Places" (*rokujurokubu*) pilgrimage. This pilgrimage was completed by offering a copy of the Lotus Sutra to a particular temple in each of the 66 provinces that made up Japan at the time. By the Edo period (1603–1867), when a pilgrimage boom began and tens of thousands of travelers came to Chichibu each year, the custom of dedicating copies of sutras had largely fallen out of fashion. The temple stamps, however, were wildly popular.

Until 1868, when the Meiji government ordered the separation of all Buddhist and Shinto institutions, the two religions were integrated, and most forms of worship could be practiced at both Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. For example, it was not uncommon for Buddhist deities and Shinto kami to be enshrined together or viewed as manifestations of each other. *Goshuin* are often available at both temples and shrines, but in recognition of the official separation, some purists prefer to separate *goshuin* into different notebooks. Likewise, certain temples and shrines outside Chichibu may refuse a *goshuin-cho* that contains a stamp from a different religious tradition. The stamps often include small depictions of Buddhist or Shinto deities that should not be "enshrined" together in the notebook. Ultimately, whether to keep *goshuin* separate or not is a matter of personal preference.

Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage Traditional Attire

The set of rental attire for the Chichibu pilgrimage consists of five items that are traditionally worn by pilgrims. The full set can be borrowed for one to three days, or in 30-minute sessions for visitors who just want to try walking around in the traditional clothing. The set can be both picked up and dropped off at either of two locations: the Chichibu Tourist Information Center (just south of Seibu-Chichibu Station, near the police box) and the Chichibu Local Product Center (within Chichibu Station). The items in the set are also available for purchase.



Hat (*Sugegasa*)

The *sugegasa* is woven from sedge and has a broad brim for protection from the sun and rain. Sedge hats have been worn by pilgrims, travelers, and laborers in Japan for at least a millennium, and they come in a variety of shapes and types. When going on a pilgrimage, it is customary to write certain phrases on the sides of the *sugegasa*. The hats worn by Chichibu pilgrims typically bear the following four phrases:

- 1) 迷故三界城 (*meiko sangaijo*) "All the world is a fortress in which I am lost."
- 2) 悟故十方空 (*goko jippoku*) "In my pursuit of Buddhist teaching I am freed."
- 3) 本来無東西 (*honrai mutōzai*) "In reality, there is neither east nor west."
- 4) 何処有南北 (*gasho nanboku*) "Just as there is neither north nor south."

The last two phrases refer to the idea that worldly concepts like "north" and "south" are only human ideas. Without the existence of a self, there can be no directionality.

In addition to these four phrases, it is also common to write a fifth phrase: *dogyo ni nin*, (同行二人) which literally means “Two people going together.” This is a reference to the constant presence of Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who is said to accompany pilgrims on the Chichibu route just as in all other paths of life. For other routes, the phrase may instead refer to Kukai (774–835), the founder of Esoteric Buddhism.

Sleeveless Jacket (*Oizuru*)

Pilgrims traditionally dress entirely in white robes, a style referred to as *byakue*. White clothing is associated with purity, and the outfit is similar to the white funereal robes (*shiroshozoku*) used to dress a deceased person. Wearing *byakue* is said to reflect each pilgrim’s recognition that they are risking life and limb by journeying for many days into unknown regions. If a pilgrim perished along the way, they were already prepared for burial.

Though most modern pilgrims do not wear full white robes, many wear a white, sleeveless jacket called an *oizuru*. It was once common for pilgrims to carry a portable wooden cabinet called an *oi* that contained sutras, incense, or a Buddhist image such as a statue. The name *oizuru* literally means, “garment that the *oi* rubs against.” Similar to the sedge hats, it is very common for pilgrims to write the phrase “Praise Kannon, Bodhisattva of Compassion” (*namu kanzeon bosatsu*) on their *oizuru*. Some pilgrims also choose to have the official stamp (*goshuin*) of each temple written on their *oizuru* rather than in a notebook.

Stole (*Obi* or *Wagesa*)

The stole worn by pilgrims developed as a simplified version of a “five-panel robe” (*gojo*), a traditional monk’s stole that is sewn together from many smaller pieces of cloth. The stole is the outermost garment of the “three robes” (*san’e*) that monks traditionally wear. The Sanskrit name for this garment (*kaṣaya*), which means “ochre,” refers to the traditional robes worn by monks in India, which were patched together from pieces of discarded cloth and dyed with ochre.

Bag (*Osamefuda-ire*)

In the past, pilgrims left a mark of their visit by posting slips of paper called *senjafuda* on the walls and rafters of each temple. Pasting these slips of paper was believed to bring good luck or aid in the fulfillment of a wish, but the practice was stopped after countless temples became plastered with them. Now, it is considered equally beneficial to deposit votive slips of paper (*osamefuda*), which pilgrims carry in this special bag. Many pilgrims also bring a

second carryall bag, called a *zudabukuro*, or “monk’s bag,” after the bags carried by mendicant Buddhist monks (*zuda*).

Pilgrim’s Staff (*Kongozue*)

The *kongozue* is the only item that is considered absolutely essential for any pilgrim. Aside from its obvious utility as a walking stick, the traditional pilgrim’s staff has tremendous symbolic meaning as well. The name, which means “diamond staff,” is a reference to Esoteric Buddhism and its founder, Kukai, who is said to accompany all pilgrims. In fact, the pilgrim’s staff is said to physically embody Kukai himself. For this reason, it is customary to clean the base of the staff at the end of each day and set it in the decorative alcove (*tokonoma*) of the room at night.

The *kongozue* has a secondary practical use as well. The cover at the top protects a carving of a stupa marked with Sanskrit letters that refer to the five Buddhist elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and void. In much the same way that pilgrims dress in funerary clothes for easy burial, the stupa carving allows the *kongozue* to be used as a grave marker. As with the *oizuru*, it is possible to have the temple stamp written on the *kongozue*.

