

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. Each of the temples along the route enshrine a statue of the bodhisattva Kannon, Goddess of Compassion.

Before the 100 Kannon Pilgrimage was established, each of the three pilgrimage routes visited 33 statues of Kannon. Some time 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.



Seated Zen Meditation (Zazen)

Several temples on the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage provide guided experiences of zazen, and Hoshō-ji (No.32) offers instruction in English and Mandarin. After a brief explanation of how meditation is performed, visitors seat themselves on small cushions called zafu. Eyes are kept half-open, to block out external distractions while remaining awake, and one's gaze should be fixed about 1 meter ahead on the wall or floor. The back should be held straight, but not rigid, and breathing should be light. Focusing on one's breathing can help to clear the mind, but the ideal way is sitting in quiet self-awareness without focusing on any specific thing.

During the session, the priest leading the meditation may circulate with a flat wooden stick called a kyosaku. Traditionally, this stick is used to strike meditators on the shoulders to call attention to poor posture, bring a wandering mind into the present, or even provide a flash of awareness that can aid in reaching enlightenment (satori). Reservations for zazen can be made by emailing or calling the temple. Same-day bookings are often possible, but visitors should confirm in advance. A ¥2,000 donation is requested for each participant, and visitors should wear clothing that will allow them to sit comfortably and modestly.

Sutra Copying (Shakyo)

Two temples along the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage offer the opportunity for visitors to try copying a Buddhist sutra: Saiko-ji (No.16) and Hoshō-ji (No.32). Those who prefer instruction in English or Mandarin should go to Hoshō-ji. No reservation is required, but there is a requested donation of ¥1,000 per participant. Hoshō-ji offers three sutras for copying. One of them, Phrase Kannon Sutra, is ideal for beginners, and completing a copy usually takes between 30 and 60 minutes.

Visitors are led to a tatami room with the desk and materials prepared. The chosen sutra text is overlaid with a translucent sheet of copying paper. To copy the sutra, trace the characters beneath from top-to-bottom, right-to-left. While it is important to proceed slowly and carefully as a sign of reverence, the copyist's sincerity outweighs the quality of the handwriting.

Traditionally, upon completion, the copyist reads the sutra aloud, repeating after the priest, who pronounces it a few sounds at a time. Visitors can choose to take their copied sutra home or to dedicate it to the temple. If they choose to dedicate it, the sutra will be placed on the altar with other offerings and ritually burned.



Chichibu Onsen Town

Since the Edo period (1603-1867), visitors have come to bathe in to the "Seven Waters of Chichibu" (Chichibu no Nanato), said to fully rejuvenate weary travelers on the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage. The springs in the area contain minerals that are beneficial to the skin, ease stiff shoulders and joints, or help to warm the body. Chichibu's springs are different from hot springs in many other regions of Japan in that they do not naturally bubble up from the ground. The water is lukewarm when drawn from the ground, but it is heated to around 45°C (84°F) before being pumped to the baths. Notice: People who have any tattoos on their body are not allowed to get in Onsen in general.



Chichibu's All-Star Snack Miso-Potato



Miso-potato is a humble food with simple goals. Its ingredients—steamed potatoes, tempura batter, and miso sauce—are common in Japanese cooking, but in Chichibu they have been combined into a delicious, prize-winning local specialty with an engaging history. In the mid-twentieth century, local farmers would eat a small meal known as kojuhan ("small lunch") during mid-morning or mid-afternoon breaks. Kojuhan typically consisted of foods like miso-potato, which

were easy to prepare, satisfying, and unpretentious. While the taste can vary slightly depending on where it is prepared, miso-potato typically consists of soft, flaky bites of potato coated in crisp tempura batter and covered with a salty-sweet miso sauce. Miso-potato is particularly popular in local izakaya, Japanese-style bars that serve small dishes to share over drinks.



Chichibu's Local Alcohol

The history of alcohol production in Chichibu dates back over 250 years, when the first sake breweries in the city were founded. Water quality is essential to brewing and is referred to as the "life" (inochi) of the alcohol. Chichibu's water contains an ideal ratio of mineral content for alcohol production, and a wide variety of different alcohols are made there. The city proudly embraces its identity as a sakedokoro, or "brewing town." As of 2019, Chichibu has four sake breweries, two wineries, one beer brewery, and one whisky distillery.



Sake and Shochu

Chichibu's four breweries—Yao Honten, Nagatorogura, Buko, and Chichibu Kikusui—were each built during the Edo period (1603-1867) and supplied sake to the miners and silkworm farmers that lived in the region. The subterranean rivers flowing within Mt. Buko were included in the list of "100 Famous Waters" (Meisui Hyakusen) compiled in 2008. This same water is used at Buko, makers of Masamune sake, considered to be the preeminent sake of Chichibu. The pure water used in their brewing can be freely taken from a spigot in front of the Buko brewery, and they also offer free tours. In 2004, the brewery and storefront were designated a national Tangible Cultural Property.

Another beloved local sake, Chichibu Nishiki. The name "Nishiki" is a reference to the fact that the sake is made with both Yamada Nishiki rice and Miyama Nishiki rice. These two varieties of rice are considered top-class within the sake world. Like Buko, Yao Honten offers regular tours of their brewing facility, which produces approximately 18,000 bottles of sake each year. The brewery's second floor is the Sakezukurri no Mori, a museum of the brewery's history that displays sake-making implements. At an attached storefront and tasting bar, visitors can sample Yao's brands of sake and Danbe shochu, traditional distilled alcohol.

Whisky

In recent years, Chichibu's sole whisky distillery, Venture Whisky Ltd., has gained worldwide acclaim. Founded in 2004 by Akuto Ichiro (b. 1965), the distillery has captured both domestic and international praise for its unique take on Japanese whisky. Since its founding, Venture Whisky has taken numerous titles at the World Whiskies Awards, including multiple awards for "Japanese Whisky of the Year" and "World's Best Blended Limited Release."