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FINDING PEACE OF MIND IN KOYASAN

New Year Travel Trends in Solitude

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12 JAN 2015: The Baku is a mythological beast with the trunk and tusks of an elephant, the eyes of a rhinoceros, the paws of a tiger and the tail of an ox. You can find Bakus in Japanese temples amongst carvings of fierce looking dog-lions

(known as Shishi) and angry Dragons. It's a frightful trilogy to behold, however the beasts are actually symbolic of good luck in the New Year.



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Japanese children place the image of a Baku under their pillow before they go to sleep on January 1st with assurances that the creature will devour their nightmares and bring good luck and pleasant thoughts to start the New Year. Shishi, making ferocious snarls, ward off evil spirits and frowning, intimidating dragons bring wealth and good fortune. These horrific creatures also bring peace of mind to travellers seeking silence and rejuvenation.

Japan is a destination high on the list of those seeking quiet, reflection and contemplation along their global journeys. I wrote about this trend a few years ago ([The Sounds of Silence](#)) after sitting on the highway in a huge traffic jam, turning on the radio, and enveloping my thoughts in the calm and comforting voices of Simon and Garfunkel singing the song.

Silence can be appreciated in many aspects of travel. It can be a natural setting, such as the mist rolling off fields or rising up mountains, as I witnessed during a recent train journey west in Japan's Hokuriku region. It can be personified in the faces of statues, such as the serene gaze of the Great Buddha statues in Takaoka and Kamakura, or reflected in the sympathetic countenance of Jizo, who protect children in this world and the next, and are often found standing guard in cemeteries, shrines and temples.



Silence comes alive in Japanese gardens where the symmetry of trees, rocks, bridges, lakes, streams, tea houses and lanterns evoke the spirit of 'calm' and has inspired writers, poets and thinkers for centuries.

There are countless temples and shrines throughout the country. A 'torii' or red gate might announce the separation of the 'holy' world from the 'profane', or a simple alter offers some respite from the hectic world of schedules and routines, while a dangling white rope allows the pilgrim to ring a gong or bell to summon the local Kami, or spirit.

And then there is Koyasan.



Koyasan has long been a legendary “must see” for back packers as well as over one million pilgrims each year. The name is an honorific and refers to Mount Koya in Wakayama prefecture where Kobo Daishi (Saint Kukai) established a monastic retreat in 815 (2015 is the 1200th anniversary). Today, there are 123 temples; many offer lodgings...all offer encounters with serenity.

Travellers arrive on the 90 minute train from Osaka and then transfer to a cable car for the ascent to the 3000 foot level. Local buses depart regularly for the 10 minute drive into town.

It was a bit of a daunting task to find the ‘right’ temple lodging. Using both English and Japanese traveller-reports and reviews, we chose the Jimyo-in, very close to the centre of town, and we were more than pleased with the decision. On arrival one of the monks greeted us, showed us where to leave our shoes, explained about the meals and the 6:00 am prayer service, and then led us down a long, twisting corridor to our room. It was filled with antiques and drawings, and overlooked our very own private Zen garden.

The two main streets and most of the side streets in Koyasan lead to temples. Some offer lodgings, others are strictly for worship. And under the roofs amongst the intricate designs you can find Baku and Shishi and Dragons. Many temples also display the two Nio guardian statues: tall, scary scowling

gods, one with mouth open (Angyo) symbolizing birth and the beginning of all things, and the other, with mouth closed (Ungyo) signifying death and the end of all things. Their chilling expressions are meant to ward off evil and protect all who enter the temple grounds.

We visited the cemetery (Okuno-in) and entered a world of simple tombstones, elaborate corporate memorials (including one rocket ship) and hundreds of statues of Jizo, dressed in traditional red hats and capes. As this was autumn, brilliant red, orange and yellow leaves graced the pathways that led to The Great Forest of Japanese Cedar, a collection of towering trees, some 600 years old and 165 feet high, standing guard over the green moss-covered Japanese lanterns and headstones below. And just beyond, lay the memorial to Kobo Daishi, the founder of Koyasan.

Several hundred photos and innumerable introspections later, we departed for Kongobuji, the main temple complex and the site of Kobo Daishi's original Retreat. The calming, but dramatic rock garden (Banryutei) is one of the largest in Japan and represents, through the raked sand and strategic rock placements, a male and female dragon emerging from a sea of clouds to protect Daishi on his ascent to 'eternal meditation'.



Other major attractions in Koyasan include the elaborately ornate mausoleums commemorating the great Shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa (the founder of the dynasty that lasted from 1608 to 1863) and his son, Hidetada. Nearby, the Reihokan Museum contains a priceless collection of religious treasures, many of which are designated as cultural assets.

Back at our lodging, we enjoyed an incredibly delectable vegetarian meal. Dishes included grilled tofu with miso, bamboo shoots and shitake mushroom with dry tofu, grilled fresh mountain vegetables, delicately battered vegetable tempura, velvety smooth sesame tofu (one of the specialties of Koyasan), along with tasty miso soup and fresh steamed rice. When we were asked about beverages we joked about ordering sake. And with a sincere glint in his eye our server explained that Sake (the alcoholic drink) was not allowed in the

temple, but Hanya-to (a.k.a sake (the alcoholic drink)) was allowed. 'Hanya-to' literally refers to "attaining the supreme wisdom of Buddhism". In this case the Hanya-to certainly contributed to the success of our reflective, meditative journey to Koyasan.

The Niche of Solitude



Embracing the trend of 'silent travel' can fulfill our individual needs for escapism and regeneration of the mind and spirit. The New Year is a perfect 'excuse' to evaluate, and then resolve those travel dreams and wishes. Imagine yourself in a world of fantasy with mythical benevolent creatures, eye-catching scenery and free reign to spend as much time as you want, just gazing, contemplating, daydreaming, hiking, sporting, experiencing, and spending time with loved ones. Travel makes it all possible.

Happy (Silent) Trails to you in the New Year!

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Koyasan





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A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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