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PILGRIMS PROGRESS

Soaking in Kotohira

Steve Gillick

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13 AUG 2012: Pilgrims have been journeying to the town of Kotohira in the Shikoku Region of Japan for over 1000 years. Originally it was the site of a Buddhist Temple, and then a Shinto Shrine dedicated to the spiritual guardian of seafarers, and nicknamed Kompira-san (after the alligator

demon of the Ganges River). Today, four million pilgrims descend upon the town on an annual basis to explore the Shrine, participate in the seasonal festivals, soak in the hot springs and absorb the ambiance of this unique destination.



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A pilgrim is a participant on a pilgrimage, which can be defined as a journey of spiritual significance, whether it be for religious, moral or personal beliefs. The actual word comes from the Latin *per*, meaning ‘through’ and *agr*, meaning ‘land’, and refers to someone who has travelled from abroad; a foreigner. When we travel, we are all foreigners, despite our zeal to blend in (usually wearing a back pack and with a camera or two slung around our neck) but it is not so important (or appealing) to physically blend in to a destination, as it is to mentally and empathetically blend in, and Kotohira provides the perfect opportunity to do this.

We arrived in Kotohira by train, after flying from Tokyo’s Haneda Airport to Matsuyama, the capital

city of Ehime Prefecture.

The town is small enough to walk, and about 10 minutes from the JR Train Station we arrived at our hotel. Now when I was told we would be staying at a Ryokan, I envisioned a large bed and breakfast-type inn and therefore was surprised to find a very large hotel complex. But once inside, the Kotosankaku Hotel took on a whole new feel and to jump to my final pronouncement on the property, it is now on my top ten list of hotels around the world. It is a Ryokan, offering dinner and breakfast, with very simple Japanese style rooms.

A low table with two legless chairs is the main furniture in the room. In the evening, an attendant rolls out futons on the fresh tatami (straw) mats. For those just waiting to ask ♦ yes there is a separate washroom as well as closets to put your clothes, a window overlooking the nearby mountains, and even a television. It's a very comfortable atmosphere and the friendly, helpful staff made our stay even more enjoyable.

Once checked in, we embarked on our exploration of the town.

The main attraction is the Kampira-san Shrine, and hundreds of people, mostly in groups, were setting a fairly brisk walking pace toward the beginning of the 785 stone steps that ascend the slope of Mt. Zozu-san (meaning, elephant head, due to the shape of the mountain).

Some groups were dressed all in white, indicating their participation in the pilgrimage route to the 88 shrines on Shikoku Island. Other groups were in 'regular' clothes, wearing hats to help ward off the

sunny 30C heat, and carrying walking sticks to assist in the climb. (And by the way, you can hire a palanquin if you choose to be carried up the steps).

Other groups were notable for the number of 'mature' participants, eager to ascend the steps and at the same time, pass the huffing and puffing Canadian guy who was trying to keep pace. Truth be told, it is only a 30-45 minute climb, through sun and shade, with shops, snacks, trees, lanterns, small shrines and beautiful photo opportunities along the way.

When you reach the Main Shrine, you are lured through curiosity to continue to the Shiramine Shrine (more steps) and then you can opt to visit the Okusha (many more steps), or just take in the breathtaking scenery; the calm, the peace and the elaborate wooden carvings, wooden roofs and gold decorations on the shrines. As the site pays homage to the guardian spirit of seafarers, mementoes with a journeying theme, donated by individuals and corporations, include a giant propeller from a prominent ship builder, posters invoking good wishes for sea travel and fishing, a real mini-submarine, and a tablet donated by the Tokyo Broadcasting Company to thank the gods for the successful space voyage of Japanese astronaut Akiyama Toyokiro.

After descending the steps and with wobbly legs, we explored some of the shops selling souvenirs and masks. Hannya masks recall the legend of a woman scorned, and based on her unrequited love for a priest, she turned into a monster. Today the masks, resembling devils, are used to dissuade evil spirits from entering the home. Tengu, or heavenly dog masks, have fierce faces and exaggerated long noses and are also used to protect homes and

businesses and attract good luck.

After a lunch of soba (buck wheat noodles) and tempura shrimp at the 100 year old Honke Toraya Restaurant at the foot of the shrine steps, we wandered through the town. Near the train station we found the Takadoro Lantern, a 28 metre-tall wooden tower that was used as a warning beacon in times of trouble. From there it was a short walk to take photos of the Saya-bashi, an arched wooden bridge over the Kanakura River that is only open to pedestrians once a year during the autumn harvest festival. A crane, entranced by the rushing water, waited for a meal to swim by, and thereby converted this almost idyllic scene into a meditational vision.

With the sun setting, it was time to explore our Ryokan hotel. In the basement are the Yu-no-sato baths, traditional Japanese hot springs, where a soak in the outdoor garden (one for men; one for women) is one of the most relaxing things you can do after a day of climbing steps. The routine in the baths is quite traditional: first you sit on a very low stool and wash yourself by dumping basins of water all over. You then enter a series of pools of varying degrees of heat. You can go to the outside pools for the fresh air and scenery, then back inside for more intense heat, then outside again to make sure you didn't miss anything, then back inside to wash and get dressed. And boy, do you feel clean, refreshed and rejuvenated!

Dinner was, in a word, spectacular. Sitting in our own private compartment with a large picture window showcasing gently swaying trees fronting a tranquil rock garden, our personal server brought us appetizers of fish, vegetables, pickles and udon soup, followed by melt-in-your-mouth

sushi and sashimi. Tender fish cooked in a delicate sauce with tofu followed, and then steak, 'grilled' in a parchment paper bowl over a candle oven. All complemented, of course, with cooled, fresh, local Narutotai Sake.

Another soak after dinner was followed by a very restful sleep on our tatami mats, and then a 5:00 am visit to the baths again (we were very clean!). After a tasty breakfast in a dining room filled with pilgrims eager to start their own climb to the shrine, we sadly headed to the train station to explore other Shikoku treats including the cities of Takamatsu, Tokushima and Kochi.

Soaking in Kotohira (get it?) was an absolute pleasure. It's one of those no pressure, do what you want-when you want, experiences and from a sensory, pampering point of view, it was so enjoyable and rewarding.

In North America the idea of a pilgrimage is often considered in the realm of religious travel, but in the broad sense of the word, religion (an expression of our beliefs) can range from the traditional concept, to our own quest to find ourselves, discover our abilities and limitations, and come away with a new (or renewed) sense of awe, mystery and discovery of the world around us. In a true sense, we are all pilgrims; travelling the globe to seek understanding.

As a travel professional you take on the role of grand facilitator of these life changing journeys. Do your Japan-bound clients a favour; suggest that they take a more intense pilgrim-persona for a day or so, and soak in Kotohira's temptations.





Steve Gillick

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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