

Walking Routes in Japan with a Sense of History and Nature

One of the most visually distinct sporting events held during the Summer Olympic Games is Race Walking, which is where athletes complete 20-or-50-kilometer-long courses as fast as possible without breaking into a run. It is a strenuous sport that challenges athletes and tests their mental discipline.

For most people however, walking is an activity that does not elicit such urgency. Rather, it is a method of conveyance from Point A to Point B. And for many of those people, walking is also an activity associated with pleasure and exploration.



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Walking in the Nature

In Great Britain, rambling and hillwalking are some of the country's most-popular recreational activities. There are countless paths and trails that crisscross rural areas and mountains, all easily accessible and public rights of way. While there are no formal figures, it's estimated that 35 million Britons go rambling in their country's national parks at least once a year, with ten million being regular ramblers who go out at least once a month.

Dozens of charities and clubs promote rambling and walking by contributing to the maintenance of Great Britain's path network and organize regular outings for their members. The largest of these, the Ramblers, has around 135,000 members.

Stretching Across Nature and Through History

For Britons considering organizing a trip to Japan someday, they should not forget to make sure to pack their boots in their luggage, as Japan is home to some very fine walking trails, ranging from casual day paths through cities and villages to challenging multi-day treks across mountainous terrain. Many are marked by checkpoints where people can collect official stamps in hiking passports or pilgrimage certificates as a symbol of completion and to show as proof to collect special gifts to commemorate their achievements.

One such trail is the [Michinoku Coastal Trail](#), located at the northernmost tip of Honshu, a three-and-a-half-hour rail journey away from Tokyo. It connects Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture, to Soma City, Fukushima Prefecture and stretches around 1,000 kilometers in total. Ramblers do not have to attempt the entire trail at once, however. It is broken into 28 distinct sections, each offering plenty of fresh air and beautiful coastal and mountain views with various opportunities for sightseeing and dining along the way.

Ramblers looking to journey through Japanese history can head to the Kiso area in Nagano Prefecture, a three-hour rail journey from Tokyo, to attempt the [Nakasendo](#) and Kisoji Trails. These were originally established as major roads to connect Kyoto to Tokyo during the Edo Period. 69 “post towns” were built along these routes to provide food and shelter who journeyed on these roads. Today, many of these post towns still exist and retain their traditional appearances, providing visitors with a glimpse at how Japan would have looked centuries in the past as well as a look at the stunning scenery of the Japanese Alps and Kiso Valley.

Among the surviving post towns, [Tsumago](#) was the first to try and preserve its Edo-Period appearance. No motor vehicles are permitted on its narrow streets, which are lit at night by lanterns that replicate the warm glow of lamp light. The town also features [Wakihonjin Okuya](#), a building originally used to shelter visiting daimyos. Today, it houses a museum that showcases the town’s history and materials used in traditional Japanese construction.

Tsumago is neighbored by [Magome](#), the southernmost Kiso post town. Although partly destroyed by a fire, the town has been reconstructed with new structures built to resemble the originals as closely as possible. It is a popular destination for tourists as motor vehicles are banned from its stone paths, allowing people to wander and shop freely. Magome is also home to Eishoji, a historic 16th-century temple. Those who book in advance may eat a special vegetarian meal at the temple.

Embarking on Spiritual Quests

Japan’s trail network also includes ancient paths traditionally followed by pilgrims heading toward important spiritual sites. These include [Kumano Kodo](#), approximately six hours away from Tokyo by rail. It is a cross hatch of trails and roads taken by the pious on the Kii Peninsula. Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kumano Kodo is still followed by those heading to the Three Grand Shrines of Kumano on spiritual journeys.

The most-popular route being walked on Kumano Kodo is the [Nakahechi Trail](#), which used to be followed by emperors and nobility. The 40-kilometer path leads through forests and mountains to the [Hongu Taisha shrine](#). Visitors who wish to carry on from here can head toward the two other Grand Shrines of Kumano or visit nearby hot springs.

Kumano Kodo also maintains a partnership with Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage route from France to Spain. Those who complete designated sections of both paths are eligible to receive a special Dual Pilgrim badge.

Another spiritual journey available to ramblers visiting Japan is the [Shikoku Henro](#), or the Shikoku 88 Pilgrimage Route, a seven-to-eight-hour rail journey from Tokyo. One of the world's few circular pilgrimages, those who take this path walk around the island of Shikoku, just off the coasts of Honshu and Kyushu. The 1,200-kilometer route is marked with 88 temples and other sacred sites where Kukai, a Buddhist monk and the founder of Shingon Buddhism, is believed to have trained or visited in the 9th century.

Attempting the entire pilgrimage, which is broken down into eight separate courses, on foot while visiting each of the 88 temples will take several weeks. However, visiting ramblers may attempt shorter sections and visit the more easily accessible temples to get a taste of what the Shikoku Henro entails.

A Trail for Every Type of Rambler

From quick, jaunty explorations to long searches for the intangible, rambling is an incredibly diverse activity that caters to both casual walkers and serious trekkers. Regardless of persuasion, however, Japan offers ramblers extensive opportunities to make their future holiday an excursion and an adventure. Those who wish to step away from the cities and explore Japan's natural scenery and smaller communities can find easily accessible paths and trails all around the country. All they need to do is make sure they have the equipment they need and set aside a few days for rambling before hitting the trail.

