

# Walks trace footsteps of eighth-century monk

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dhism with the Japanese Shinto religion.

These days, priests usually drive to their temples and shrines, but Ninmon's tradition hasn't been forgotten. Every 10 years, monks gather for a multiday pilgrimage, walking his ancient trails in their white robes and straw sandals.

## Lost trails

Unfortunately, "65 percent of the trails have been lost," says our lead guide, Mario Anton, adding that "a local monk is going around looking for them." Yet over the course of 10 days we never walk the same trail twice. In fact, for such a small peninsula, just 18 miles across, the number of trails is astounding.

And each trail leads to treasures, whether it's a simple Shinto shrine, an ornate Buddhist temple or maybe Buddha's 16 smiling disciples sprouting from the forest floor. While interesting on their own, these man-made structures acquire an otherworldly quality in the potent landscape of the Kunisaki Peninsula.

In late November, entire mountainsides are splashed with crimson, orange and yellow foliage. Exposed ridges erupt from deep-cut valleys, challenging even the most intrepid hikers among us. Chains and knotted ropes help us climb up and down these tortuous paths, but it takes nerve — and maybe a bit of Buddhist mindfulness — to cross narrow stone bridges that span gaping chasms with nothing to hang on to.

Nearing the top we might find a lonely Buddha inserted in a slot in a rock, or a temple with sliding doors that open to reveal a purple interior with floral motifs on the ceiling. Strange to our minds, the doors are unlocked and nobody's around.

Each day holds new surprises, but perhaps none as enchanting as when we arrive at Monjusen-ji, a temple perched precariously on the side of a cliff, where we'll spend the night. Considered one of the best 100 scenes in Japan, the hillside is on fire with orange maple trees aglow in the late afternoon light. The next morning, we watch a Buddhist priest play with real fire in a riveting ceremony accompanied by chanting and drumming.

This tour takes in modern rural life as well and persuades me that walking is the best way

to see a place. Mario sets a good pace, but we're free to fall back and talk to the petite woman pulling an enormous daikon radish out of her garden, or detour to taste the sweet orange persimmons drying on a line like baubles on a Christmas tree. We also pause to peek behind fences where oak logs are giving birth to shiitake mushrooms.

At the end of every day we're famished, but unlike the legendary Ninmon — who probably survived on little more than white rice — we're treated to a feast.

"It should be called Eat Japan, not Walk Japan," jokes Marshall Dahl, a doctor from Vancouver who's here with his wife, Nancy, on their second walking tour with the company. "You're going to see a lot of food," Mario said the first evening.

And we do: steaming bowls of miso soup, bubbling hot pots of cooking meat, platters of raw fish and boiled octopus, soba noodles made from local buckwheat, sour plums, pickled radish and jugs of sake and beer to wash it all down.

## Hot springs

Of course, before eating, we need to clean up. In this part of Japan, thermal hot springs are common, and the simple act of washing becomes a luxurious, twice-daily ritual. First you soap up and rinse off with buckets of copious hot water or a hand shower, then it's into the chest-deep bath to relax and rejuvenate, all in your birthday suit.

But it's the walking we came for, and while I'm too soft for Ninmon's asceticism and too pragmatic to embrace Buddhism, I'm deeply appreciative of those monks who carved out paths in some of the most rugged terrain on the planet for their testing and — unwittingly — for our pleasure.

*Suzanne Morphet is a freelance writer from Victoria, British Columbia.*

## When you go

Walk Japan offers more than a dozen guided walking tours throughout Japan, some as short as two days (such as Tokyo Tour), others as long as 12 days (Shogun Trail). Tours are rated by level of difficulty, from one to six. The Kunisaki Trek is a level five tour that is mostly on forest trails but includes some scrambling over rocks and short, steep climbs. Price is \$3,478 per person and includes all accommodations and most meals. For more information go to [walkjapan.com](http://walkjapan.com)



Photos by Suzanne Morphet/Special Contributor



**A nervous hiker** extends her arms for balance as she crosses an arched stone bridge, high in the mountains of Japan's Kunisaki Peninsula. The bridge is part of an ancient pilgrimage route established by a monk in the eighth century.

**A visitor to Monjusen-ji temple** tries his hand at a prayer wheel. Buddhists believe that spinning a prayer wheel increases wisdom and accumulates good karma.



**Peeled persimmons** are hung to dry in the sun outside a farmhouse on the Kunisaki Peninsula. The trees were introduced to Japan from China many centuries ago.



**The grounds at Usa Jingu** are large and grandiose, with numerous torii gates signifying that visitors have entered the heavenly realm. Usa Jingu is one of the most important but least known of the major Shinto shrines in Japan.



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