

While my friends were here, of course I took them to a lot of typical tourist destinations in Kyoto. We spent several days there, hiking all over the place, seeing all the sights (luckily, the weather was still cool!). But I knew that they would feel guilty making me show them around to places I had already been, so I arranged a trip to Koya-san, a place that I had been wanting to visit for a long time.

As I only had a few days off for work, I made my reservation for a night in the middle of the week. As it turned out, it was just two days before the big celebration of Kukai's birthday. I was a little disappointed that I had made reservations so close to, but not on, the date of the festival, but there was nothing I could do as I had to get back to school for classes. It turned out for the best! Whereas many "peaceful" and historic places are often crowded with tour buses and school trips, making them hardly peaceful at all, Koya-san was the pinnacle of peace and tranquility. Most people who were thinking of visiting Koya-san that week probably would have booked for the festival. We could enjoy the temples, the mausoleum and the beautiful scenery in peace. It was worth it just for that!

I was a little bit embarrassed that I didn't know more about Buddhism before our trip. Of course I know some general details, but nothing specific, so I think it was harder for me to really appreciate everything that we saw. But still, it was such an impressive place, and staying in a temple was very unique! Of course, my friends had a lot of questions, which made me feel bad that I couldn't answer them. But there were some very kind monks at our temple who were patient and kind to listen to and answer all of our questions. The whole time, we felt a little bit guilty, that we were tourists staying in such a holy place, observing morning prayers and other ceremonies when we couldn't fully grasp the importance or the significance of what was going on.

While we were there, we also had the chance to learn a little bit about zazen meditation. Unfortunately, the monks at our temple didn't speak English, so I was given the task of translator. While I can understand conversational Japanese, I was unsure about all of the specific vocabulary, but we decided to give it a try anyways. The monk was really kind, and as it was just me and my two friends, he was patient while I translated for them. I could get the general idea of what he was saying most of the time, but a few times I had to tell my friends, "Don't laugh, but I have no idea what he just said, and I am going to pretend to translate for you now so that we can continue." It was hard, but we got the idea. The funniest part was when the monk was lecturing us about meditation and his cell phone started to ring in his pocket. I guess that's temple life in the 21st century!

I think that Koya-san was a unique location to bring my friends—somewhere many people don't get to visit on a short, 10-day trip to Japan. Aside from the food (delicious vegetarian cuisine that I devoured!), they told me it was the best part of their trip. We could experience Koya-san in peace and quiet, with hardly any other people around, and really imagine what it must have been like to live there 1200 years ago. It was a very meaningful trip.