

Monk Food

After six train changes from Tokyo followed by a steep cable car ride, I step out into a cloud of mist. I can see nothing; thick pearly moisture filled the tree-fragrant-air. And it is silent. Silent, silent.

This is Koyasan, the mountaintop given by the Emperor to Buddhist monks in 816. 1200 years later, they've still got it. They are vastly outnumbered, however, by 400-year-old cypress trees.

The founding monk, Kukai, wanted this high plateau with its eight surrounding hills because it looked like a lotus. Once there were two thousand temples near. Now there are only 117. I'm staying in one of them, if I can find it.

I clamber onto the local bus. My instructions tell me to get off in front of the police station. I can hardly believe they need one but here it is and there, its little red lamps glowing between the trees, is Hongakuin Temple.

As I rumble up the cobbled driveway with my rolling suitcase I feel as if I've been lifted out of the 21st century and set down in medieval China. Warriors in saffron robes are going to swing off the roof on ropes, armed with broadswords. But instead a mild-mannered clerk checks me in. I sock-foot it along the open air corridor past the dripping garden to my cell.

OK, cell doesn't do it justice. I have several rooms with *tatami* mats on the floor, and sliding screens. It's beautiful-- and bare. And cold-- thank god I brought my MEC fleece pants. I sit on the floor at the *kotatsu*, a traditional heated low table.

A pair of charming young monks brings my *shojin* dinner. The many dishes are all vegetables. Buddhists will harm no living creature so they eat no dairy, eggs, fish or meat. I discover more types of

mushrooms than I knew existed. We try to talk but my thirty words of Japanese don't mesh with the monks' thirty of English. Do they grow the vegetables? I mime. "Market," they say.

Later I lie on the futon near an open window listening to the rain. *A Life of Buddha* in English sits conveniently on a shelf, like a Gideon's bible. I read it. Nice story. But I'm distracted by the bottomless silence. This has to be the quietest place in all Japan. When I told Tokyo friends that I was staying three nights, they said, "What for?"

But there's plenty to do during my *shukubo*- temple stay. I intend to go for morning prayers at 6 am but the first two mornings I miss the bells. Breakfast arrives at 7.30. It is the most sumptuous meal I've ever seen at this hour. My meditation class is a limited success due to the language barrier, but I feel good after an hour of staring at a mandala and breathing to a count.

And I walk. Koyasan was closed to women for its first thousand years. I visit *Nyonindo*, a shelter on the edge of town where women could post their petitions with a male courier. I walk in Okunoin Cemetery, where the graves of ancient warlords are being crowded out by old growth cedars. Hokusai and O-Ei were devout Buddhists and keen to achieve immortality, which was (of course) harder for women because they started out so impure. I try, and fail, to understand why women would practise a religion that derogates them. Perhaps it was just for the peace and quiet. I pass a golden-robed monk with a black clad nun trotting behind him, returning from meal delivery to Kukai's Mausoleum.

Or the food. It's so good that even the dead are hungry: Kukai, known posthumously as Kobo Daishi, has not died, but is said to have entered a "long meditation". Lucky man, the monks bring him two meals a day.