



Woodblock print depicting tattooed Kabuki actors purifying themselves in a waterfall before completing the pilgrimage to Mt. Oyama. 1863, by Kunisada (Utagawa Toyokuni III) ©Isehara city, Board of Education

Mt. Oyama Pilgrimage

Experiencing Edo Culture Near Tokyo

Alice Gordenker, USA

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Hiking view at Mt. Oyama ©Alice Gordenker

Motivation Located in Kanagawa Prefecture just a short train ride from Tokyo and Yokohama, Mt. Oyama is a popular destination for hikers and day-trippers, particularly in late autumn when the fall colors change. But most visitors – Japanese and international alike – come and go without discovering anything of the mountain's history. This was certainly true for me: I first came to Mt. Oyama in 2014 for a day hike. But it was only a year later, when I was asked by Kanagawa Prefecture to develop a model tour for foreign visitors, that I learned that Mt. Oyama was once one of Japan's most popular pilgrimage sites.

Objective This essay introduces Mt. Oyama, while underscoring its importance in Edo period culture, including art, theater, and commerce. Information is provided so travelers can visit the mountain to learn more about this fascinating history while enjoying beautiful nature, local food, and spectacular views. Mt. Oyama's designation in 2016 as a Japan Heritage site brought an influx of energy and funds. There are now signs in English, both directional and explanatory, that will provide international visitors with a smoother and more rewarding experience.

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Woodblock print depicting the Oyama pilgrimage. 1865, by Utagawa Yoshifuji
Courtesy of Kanagawa Prefectural Library

Context A pilgrimage is a journey of spiritual significance that typically includes travel to a shrine or other location of importance to a person's beliefs. The practice of pilgrimage exists in virtually every culture and across many faiths. In Japan, people of noble birth undertook pilgrimages as early as the Nara period (710-794) and generally traveled to single sites or on a circuit to several related sites.

During the Edo period, when movement within Japan was strictly controlled, going on a pilgrimage was the only opportunity most common people had to travel. The once-famous Oyama pilgrimage is no longer well known but it is depicted frequently in the ukiyo-e woodblock prints that are collected and admired by people all over the world. The pilgrimage also figures in Kabuki plays and comic storytelling. In addition, many modern Japanese travel practices evolved from pilgrimage traditions, making it meaningful to look more closely at these earlier customs and behaviors.

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Mt. Oyama (right) was often depicted in art together with Mt. Fuji (left), as in this woodblock print by Utagawa Hiroshige, part of his 1858 series, Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji. Courtesy of Kanagawa Prefectural Library



In central Kanagawa Prefecture, just a short train ride from Tokyo and Yokohama, is a pyramid-shaped mountain called Mt. Oyama. Although today it enjoys little name recognition, during the Edo period (1603-1867) Mt. Oyama was one of the most famous pilgrimage sites in Japan.

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Distant View of Mt. Oyama, Courtesy of Isehara city

At a time when the population of Edo was about one million people, approximately 200,000 pilgrims – equivalent to one-fifth of the city's residents – would make the trek to Mt. Oyama every summer during the short pilgrimage season. Given those figures, it's likely that nearly every adult male in Edo experienced the Oyama pilgrimage at least once in his lifetime. It was a journey to aspire to, figuring prominently in the popular guidebooks, art, and theater of the day.

Pilgrimage is a practice seen in many cultures and typically involves a journey to shrines or other sites that are important in a person's spiritual or religious beliefs. In Japan, pilgrimages generally fall into one of two categories: journeys to a single site, such as a famous temple or shrine, or circuits to multiple sites on which pilgrims carry a small book that is stamped at each site with a beautiful *shu-in* (seal) to serve as testimony that the place was visited. It is thought that the earliest pilgrimages in Japan were made in the eighth century, gaining popularity during the Heian period (794-1185), when popular pilgrimage sites included the Hasedera Temple in Kyoto and Mt. Koya on the Kii Peninsula. But these were destinations primarily for people of noble birth. Mt. Oyama, in contrast, would become one of the first pilgrimage sites accessible to common people.

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Burial Mounds in Sannomiya foothills ©Alice Gordenker

Mt. Oyama stands at 1,252 meters, separate from surrounding mountains and visible from all directions. In ancient times, before the advent of modern navigation tools, easily distinguishable mountains were revered as landmarks. Travelers on land and fisherman at sea would look to such peaks to orient themselves so they might return safely. Mountains were also worshipped as a source of water. And because Mt. Oyama's summit is often shrouded in clouds, the mountain was also believed to bring rain. Even today Mt. Oyama is sometimes referred to by the name *Amefuri-yama*, meaning Rainfall Mountain, and local farmers still pray to the mountain to ensure adequate rainfall.

From archaeological evidence we know that humans have lived around Mt. Oyama since very ancient times. Stone tools have been discovered in late Paleolithic-era stratum dating from more than 30,000 years ago. Early people would have chosen this location in part because of the mild climate and abundant food and water, but there is also evidence that suggests that spiritual considerations were very important. Excavations conducted on the summit in the 1960s uncovered shards of Jomon-period pottery, dating from approximately 5,000 years ago, that are believed to have been used in rituals to bring rain. In addition, the Sannomiya foothills, located slightly southwest of Mt. Oyama, are dotted with burial mounds called kofun that date from the late sixth century. These stone-lined tombs provide further proof that the mountain held special status, as the early people of Japan buried their rulers in the most desirable and auspicious locations. The Sannomiya area has the highest concentrations of burial mounds in Kanagawa Prefecture.

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Many temples and shrines are marked on this 1858 woodblock by Gountei (Utawaga Sadahide) of Mt. Oyama and the surrounding area. Note Mt. Fuji in the top right of the far right panel ©Isehara city, Board of Education

By the medieval period, after Buddhism had entered Japan, Mt. Oyama and the surrounding hills were dotted with temples and shrines, and more than a thousand *yamabushi* (mountain ascetics) lived and worshipped in the woods. Throughout the medieval period, the religious at Mt. Oyama aligned themselves with local war-lords, receiving their patronage and land in exchange for military service and ritual assistance. Many famous samurai visited the temples and shrines on Mt. Oyama, sometimes donating beautiful swords as part of their prayers for victory in battle.

Later, in the relatively peaceful Edo period, the ruling Tokugawa shogunate took steps to limit the power of the priests and monks on Mt. Oyama. Temples were closed and the mountain ascetics were forced out of the woods. As a result of these and other changes, today there are only two main religious institutions on Mt. Oyama: a Buddhist temple, Oyamadera, near the halfway station on the cable-car line, and Oyama Afuri Jinja, a Shinto shrine.

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The statue of Fudo Myo-o is the main object of worship at Oyamadera Temple
Courtesy of Oyamadera Temple

Oyamadera Temple is said to have been founded in 755 by Roben, a priest of the Kegon sect who also established Todaiji Temple in Nara. Oyamadera is dedicated to Fudo Myo-o, one of the wisdom kings, and houses a rare image of the deity that dates to the 13th century and is made of iron rather than the more usual wood or bronze. The Oyama Afuri Shrine has two parts: a scattering of buildings at the summit and a larger complex of buildings halfway up the mountain at the top of the cable-car line. This complex is known as the *Shimosha* (lower shrine). The view from here is outstanding, and on a clear day you can see Enoshima Island and the Miura Peninsula.

It was during the Tokugawa rule, as peace prevailed and the common people gained the means and freedom to travel, that Oyama developed into a popular pilgrimage destination. Dozens of inns, called *shukubo*, were established to provide lodging and services to pilgrims. The innkeepers, who acted as official representatives of the temples and shrines, would travel great distances to promote the Oyama pilgrimage, bringing talismans and taking orders for protective amulets. In response, tradesmen, shopkeepers and farmers would organize themselves into confraternities specifically for the Oyama pilgrimage, called Oyama-ko. Each group would pool their resources to send an annual delegation to pray on behalf of the group. Some, like the Nihonbashi Ohana-ko, have been sending representatives to Oyama every year without fail for more than 300 years.

The Oyama pilgrimage was ostensibly a spiritual journey, but it was also a source of fun and entertainment. Oyama became a center of Noh theater and comic rakugo performance, and there were many opportunities for travelers to drink and carouse. Teahouses and snack stalls sprang up along the many roads that led to Oyama from Edo and other population centers, with shops earning much of their income for the year during the busy summer pilgrimage season.

One area that links its prosperity to the Oyama pilgrimage is Sangenjaya, now part of Setagaya ward in Tokyo. According to a historical signboard by the station, the place got its name when the existing two teahouses were not enough to handle all the trade from pilgrims bound for Oyama. A third teahouse was added, and the place began to be called *Sangenjaya*, meaning three teahouses.

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18th century stone guidepost near the exit of Sangenjaya station. The front inscription reads: To the left Soshu toori, Soshu street, and Oyamado, Oyama street ©JIN



Pilgrims' clothing drying in the morning sun at Shukubo Oosumi Sanso ©Alice Gordenker



Oyama's tofu cuisine serviced at one of the inns ©Tougakubou

Tofu is Oyama's most famous local product and is closely tied to the area's geography and history. Tofu-making requires good water, which is abundant in Oyama. The other main ingredient in tofu is soybeans, always in good supply because pilgrimage groups traditionally paid the inns where they stayed in agricultural products. The innkeepers would process the soybeans they received into tofu to serve their guests. Tofu was a delicacy during the Edo period, and worked well for feeding large groups during the summer as it could be kept cool and fresh in the spring water running throughout the area. Today, there are still many shops making fresh tofu daily and people flock from all over to enjoy Oyama's tofu cuisine. Some of the inns that traditionally served pilgrims have shifted their focus and opened their doors to individual tourists. A handful are registered on English-language reservation sites and welcome travelers for overnight stays or sumptuous tofu lunches. Four that I have personally stayed at and can recommend are:

Shukubo Kageyu

Owner Utsumi Masashi is a 15th generation *sendoshi* (pilgrimage guide) and will happily show you a video in English about the Oyama pilgrimage as well as various antiques used by pilgrims, including a wooden lunch box carrier that is over one hundred years old.

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Ryokan Meguro

Meguro father and son are the priests at Oyama Afuri Shrine and are very knowledgeable about both Shinto and local history, as well as the Noh theater performed in Oyama. Most guest rooms open onto the river running behind the inn and there are Edo period sliding door paintings in the first-floor banquet area.

Shukubo Oosumi Sanso

Owner Satoh Takeshi's family has lived in Oyama since the Kamakura period. The inn is full of interesting memorabilia related to the pilgrimage.

Tougakubo

This inn has a lovely outdoor bath by the river. In addition to overnight stays, Tougakubo offers lunches and day-use packages for hikers that include free parking, use of bath, and a tofu lunch or early dinner.



Oyama Himatsuri features Noh performances every year in October

©Meguro Kunihiko

There are various special events held throughout the year at Oyama outside of the pilgrimage season. Of note is the Oyama Himatsuri when outdoor Noh performances are held on two successive weekdays in early October. In 2019, the dates are Oct. 2, when the play *Tsuchigumo* (Ground Spider) will be performed by top-ranking professional performers including the head of the Kanze School of Noh, and Oct. 3, when *Momijigari* (Maple Viewing) will be performed. For a general list in English of annual events at Oyama see www.isehara-kanko.com.

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Members of the Ohana-ko pilgrimage association from Nihonbashi approaching Oyama Afuri Shrine on their annual pilgrimage ©Alice Gorderker

Closing Although many pilgrimages in other parts of Japan have died out, the Oyama pilgrimage continues to this day, albeit in smaller numbers. Pilgrims to Mt. Oyama still come in confraternities, rather than individually, and if you visit during the peak pilgrimage season in late July or early August, you may well encounter groups of pilgrims, easily identifiable by their matching white pilgrimage outfits.

It's interesting to observe the customs they follow and reflect on how practices that developed as part of the pilgrimage tradition can be linked to modern Japanese travel habits. For example, Japanese travelers today are more likely than people of other nationalities to purchase package tours and travel in groups rather than alone or in family units. Another present-day custom in Japan that can be linked to pilgrimages is the stamp rally. In this popular activity that is part of many special events, participants collect stamps at different points in a specified area, just as pilgrims collect the shu-in stamps at holy sites along a pilgrimage circuit.

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Alice Gordenker is a writer and travel-industry consultant based in Tokyo, where she has lived for more than 20 years. She is certified by the Japan Tourism Agency as an expert consultant and has served since 2016 as a special adviser to the San'in Tourism Agency. Ms. Gordenker has a special interest in introducing lesser known destinations in Japan to visitors from other countries and works actively with local governments and tourism boards in many different regions of Japan.

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Places **Hibita Shrine, Sannomiya Local History Museum**

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Hibita Shrine is a very old Shinto shrine located in the Sannomiya area in the foothills of Mt. Oyama. Access to the Rachimen kofun burial mound, which is located on private property behind the shrine, can be requested through the shrine office. The shrine also operates the Sannomiya Local History Museum, a very small private museum of important antiquities, including swords, mirrors, and other sacred items excavated from tombs and other ancient ruins nearby. Information materials are in Japanese only.

259-1103, Kanagawa, Isehara shi, Sannomiya 1472

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

Isehara Station

Station on the Odakyu Odawara line which is the gateway to Mt. Oyama. Follow the signs for the North Exit. There is a tourist information office halfway down the stairs that provides free maps and brochures in English and other languages. At bus stop #4, board the bus bound for the cable car station, which runs approximately every 20 minutes on weekdays and more frequently on weekends. Ride about 30 minutes to the last stop. From there, you will climb stairs for about 15 minutes along the Koma Sando shopping street, which is lined with pickle stands, craft shops and restaurants. At the top, you can either start a hike on the trails that begin there or ride the cable car as far as Oyama Afuri Shrine, where you can find additional trails, including a steep path to the summit.

259-1132, Kanagawa, Isehara shi, Sakuradai 1-7

[web-site](#)

Kokugagakuin University Museum

To learn more about early Japanese history, the roots of Shintoism, and archaeology in Japan, a visit to the Kokugagakuin University Museum in Tokyo is highly recommended. The museum is free and has captioning and information sheets in English as well as Japanese.

Open every day year-round including Saturdays, Sundays, and national holidays from 10:00 to 18:00. As closed occasionally for maintenance and the university's convenience, best to check the website before visiting.

150-8440, Tokyo, Shibuya ku, Higashi 4-10-28

[web-site](#)

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Places **Oyama Afuri Shrine**

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This ancient shrine has two parts: the main but smaller buildings at the summit of Mt. Oyama, and the larger complex (*shimosa*) located partway up the mountain at 700 meters. The lower shrine can be accessed easily via cable car while getting to the summit building requires a strenuous hike. The view from the lower shrine over the Kanto plain is better than from the summit and was awarded two stars in France's famous Michelin Guide. Don't miss the passageway under the shrine, to the left of the counter where amulets are sold. Here you can fill your water bottle with sacred water from a dragon spout and view interesting artifacts associated with the shrine.

259-1107, Kanagawa, Isehara shi, Oyama 12

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

Oyamadera Temple

Built by the priest Roben in 755, this temple is dedicated to Fudo Myo-o, one of the wisdom kings and a very important deity in Japanese Buddhism. The temple houses a rare iron image of the deity that dates to the 13th century. Visitors who pay a small fee are permitted into the temple for viewing, but only on days with eights (the 8th, 18th, and 28th of every month). You can get off the cable car at the halfway station to visit this temple and reboard later for the end station. During the Edo period, Oyamadera was the primary destination for pilgrims. Twice a year, the temple holds an unusual Sandan Goma fire ritual to pray for the safety of the nation.

259-1107, Kanagawa, Isehara shi, Oyama 724

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

Ryokan Meguro

Meguro father and son are the priests at Oyama Afuri Shrine and are very knowledgeable about both Shinto and local history, as well as the Noh theater performed in Oyama. Most guest rooms open onto the river running behind the inn and there are Edo period sliding door paintings in the first-floor banquet area.

259-1107, Kanagawa, Isehara shi, Oyama 433

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Places **Shukubo Kageyu**

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One of the shukubo pilgrims' inns around Mt. Oyama. Owner Utsumi Masashi is a 15th generation *sendoshi* (pilgrimage guide) and will happily show you a video in English about the Oyama pilgrimage as well as various antiques used by pilgrims, including a wooden lunch box carrier that is over one hundred years old.

259-1107, Kanagawa, Isehara shi, Oyama 314

[web-site](#)

Shukubo Oosumi Sanso

Owner Satoh Takeshi's family has lived in Oyama since the Kamakura period. The inn is full of interesting memorabilia related to the pilgrimage.

259-1107, Kanagawa, Isehara shi, Oyama 490

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

Tougakubo

This inn has a lovely outdoor bath by the river. In addition to overnight stays, Tougakubo offers lunches and day-use packages for hikers that include free parking, use of bath, and a tofu lunch or early dinner.

259-1107, Kanagawa, Isehara shi, Oyama 437

[web-site](#)

Projects **Oyama Himatsuri Takigi Noh**

Outdoor Noh performances held every year on two successive weekdays in early October by top-ranking professionals of the Kanze School of Noh and the Okura School of *Kyogen* (comic relief played in between Noh performances).

Himatsuri Takigi Noh dates back more than 300 years ago and is registered as the city's intangible cultural property.

[web-site](#)

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Publications **Emplacing a Pilgrimage: The Oyama Cult and Regional Religion in Early Modern Japan**

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Ambros, Barbara; 2008; Cambridge: Harvard East Asian Monographs
In-depth scholarly information on the Oyama pilgrimage

Web-Sites **Odakyu Electric Railways**

Odakyu Electric Railways offers express-train service which departs frequently from Shinjuku station in Tokyo and make the trip to Oyama in about 60 minutes.

The Tanzawa-Oyama Free Pass is good for two days, covering transportation between Isehara and Shinjuku (and other stations), round-trip cable car fare, and unlimited use of designated bus lines.

For a small surcharge, you can ride in reserved seats on the super-express Romance Car train. Reservations can be made in advance and online.

[web-site](#)

Tanzawa-Oyama Digital Archive

The Kanagawa Prefectural Library maintains a large digital archive of images related to Oyama and the Oyama pilgrimage, including maps, woodblock prints, old photographs and photographic postcards which are searchable online.

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

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Glossary

Edo

Former name of Tokyo, the seat of power for the Tokugawa shogunate, which ruled Japan from 1603 to 1867. During this period, it grew to become one of the largest cities in the world and home to a unique and flourishing urban culture. A majority of the pilgrims to Mt. Oyama came from Edo, covering the distance of 60 kilometers on foot over the course of 2-3 days.

Edo Period (1603-1867)

The years when Japanese society was under the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate and regional feudal lords, characterized by economic growth, increased freedom of travel for the common people, and widespread enjoyment of arts and culture.

- ▶Edo
- ▶Ukiyo-E

Fudo Myo-o

Buddhist deity and one of the Wisdom Kings, referred to as Acala in Sanskrit texts. In Japan, Fudo Myo-o is highly venerated in the Shingon Buddhism, Tendai, Zen, Nichiren Buddhism, and in *Shugendo* (mountain asceticism). The main object of worship in the Oyama pilgrimage during the Edo period, its image is displayed in the Oyama-dera temple on Mt. Oyama.

- ▶Oyama-Ko
- ▶Oyama-Mairi

Japan Heritage Site

In 2015, the Japanese government launched a program to recognize places around the country where unique aspects of Japanese culture are preserved and can be experienced by tourists. By 2020, when Tokyo hosts the Olympic and Paralympic Games, one hundred such sites will be identified, including Mt. Oyama which was designated in 2016.

web-site

- ▶Mt Oyama

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Glossary **Jomon Period** (~14000-300BCE)

The earliest historical era of Japanese history coinciding with the Neolithic Period in Europe and Asia. The Jomon pottery found on the summit of Mt. Oyama is believed to date back some 5,000 years.

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Kanagawa Prefecture

Coastal prefecture south of Tokyo, including the city of Yokohama. The eastern section of the prefecture is densely populated and is considered part of the greater Tokyo metropolitan area, but other parts are largely agricultural or mountainous. Access from Tokyo by public transport is excellent, including several private train lines and one bullet-train station.

[web-site](#)

►Kofun

Kofun

Kofun are burial mounds constructed for high-ranking people, generally between the 3rd and 7th century BCE, found all over Japan. The hills immediately surrounding Mt. Oyama have the highest concentration of kofun in Kanagawa Prefecture, an indication of the mountain's sacred status as these tombs were mostly built in auspicious locations.

►Kanagawa Prefecture

Mt. Oyama

Also known as *Afurisan* or *Amefuriyama*, this 1,246-meter-high mountain is part of the Tanzawa mountain range in the western part of Kanagawa Prefecture. The mountain attracted large number of worshipers, especially in the Edo period. In 2016, it was designated a Japan Heritage Site. The view from Afuri Shrine was awarded two stars by the Michelin Guide.

[web-site](#)

►Edo Period (1603-1867)

►Japan Heritage Site

►Kanagawa Prefecture

►Kofun

►Oyama-Ko

►Oyama-Mairi

►Yamabushi

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Glossary **Nihonbashi Ohana-Ko**

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The oldest Oyama-ko in existence, still sending an annual delegation to this day, this group was formed in the late 17th century by craftsmen living and working in Tokyo's Nihonbashi district

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

- ▶ Edo Period (1603-1867)
- ▶ Mt. Oyama
- ▶ Oyama-Ko
- ▶ Oyama-Mairi
- ▶ Shukubo

Oyama-Ko

Name for a group of people, usually of the same occupation or from the same neighborhood or region, organized specifically for the purpose of the Mt. Oyama pilgrimage. Some Oyama-ko that were established in the Edo period continue to this day, sending a delegation every year to pray on behalf of the entire group or neighborhood.

- ▶ Fudo Myo-o
- ▶ Kanagawa Prefecture
- ▶ Oyama-Mairi

Oyama-Mairi

Japanese for Oyama pilgrimage

- ▶ Oyama-Ko

Roben

Founder of Todaiji Temple in Nara, Japan's first capital, which is located in the Kansai region in western Honshu, the main island of Japan. Roben was a native of Sagami, present-day Kanagawa Prefecture, and while on a visit to his parents, climbed Mt. Oyama. There, the deity Fudo Myo-o appeared to him. This experience led him to establish the Oyamadera temple in 755.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Fudo Myo-o
- ▶ Kanagawa Prefecture
- ▶ Mt. Oyama
- ▶ Oyama-Ko
- ▶ Oyama-Mairi
- ▶ Yamabushi

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Glossary

Sendoshi

Tour-guide, promoting worship of Mt. Oyama; managing lodging for pilgrims and showing them around

- ▶Oyama-Mairi
- ▶Shu-In
- ▶Shukubo

Shinto

Japan's traditional religion based on the worship of ancestral kami, deities, and nature spirits

- ▶Oyama-Mairi

Shu-In

A red stamp that is provided at temples and shrines as a record of a pilgrim's visit. These remain popular with tourists today. In a related practice, schoolchildren compete during summer vacation to collect stamps from every station on the Tokyo subway system.

- ▶Oyama-Mairi

Shukubo

Temple lodging for monks and pilgrims. Today some shukubo accept also lay visitors.

web-site

- ▶Mt. Oyama
- ▶Oyama-Ko
- ▶Oyama-Mairi

Ukiyo-E

Literally *Pictures of the Floating World*, a genre that encompasses paintings and woodblock prints, and which flourished during the Edo period. Mt. Oyama has been frequently depicted in ukiyo-e prints, often together with Mt. Fuji.

- ▶Edo Period (1603-1867)

Yamabushi

Literally *one who prostrates himself on the mountain*, yamabushi are ascetics who follow mountain worship through spiritual and physical practice

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Imprint

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