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PEAK, TEMPLE, FARM: 3 TOKYO GETAWAYS

In search of the perfect weekend getaway from Tokyo, writer Rob Goss embarked on three very different weekend getaways: one strenuous, one with family, and one full of Zen.

By Rob Goss

As dawn approaches atop Tonodake (Mount To), a chill wind whips over the exposed peak. Off to the west, Mount Fuji begins to emerge as the darkness that cups the peaks of the Tanzawa range fades to a fleeting purple hue before the rising sun changes the sky to a more familiar hazy orange.

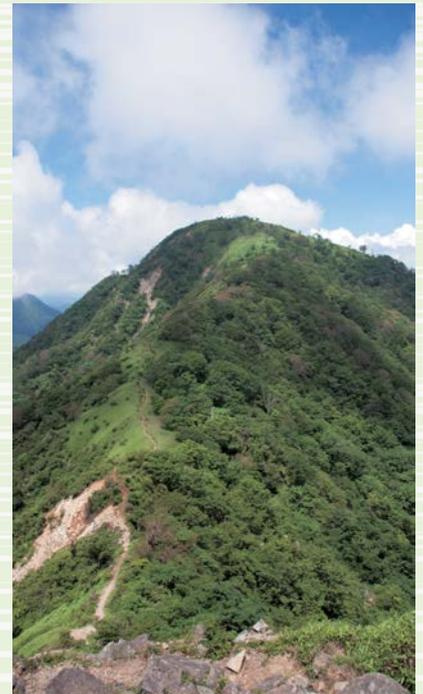
The night before, tired from two days of hiking through 35-degree heat, I grudgingly agreed to be woken early to catch the sunrise. Right now, watching Fuji's symmetrical peak piercing a slow-flowing mass of creamy cloud, I'd have happily hiked a week for this.

The man who woke me, Wada-san, stands beside me sharing the view. Short and lithe, and with skin weathered from living almost half of each year in Tonodake's creaking wooden mountain hut, he's wearing an expression of contentment that wouldn't look out of place on a statue of Buddha.

"It's beautiful, isn't?" he says. "I'm glad you got to see it like this."

I nearly didn't. The three of us on the trip had aimed to reach the 1,490-meter Tonodake in a day and then work our way through to neighboring Mount Tanzawa and several other taller peaks over the following few days. An early cock-up soon put paid to that.





On day one, having already started out late after a train delay in Tokyo, we turned onto the wrong trail a couple of hours into the hike and later had to scramble off-trail for an hour up the side of a steep, wooded peak to get back on track. Exhausted and with darkness descending, we gave up on reaching Tonodake that night, instead pitching our tents on a small patch of shin-high dewy grass that at first provided cool relief and then offered up an infestation of leeches that clung to our flesh under bloodstained socks and t-shirts.

The next morning was only marginally better. Running short on water, we dropped nearly 600 meters and climbed another 800 to restock our

water supplies at a small hut on the peak immediately before Tonodake, then napped through the searing midday heat and humidity before winding our way through undulating wooded trail that eventually gave way to a sharp, sun-baked climb to Tonodake. We were drenched in sweat by the time we reach the mountain hut, where Wada-san greeted us with a smile. “Hot day, eh!” He was the first person we’d seen for hours; only about the third since the trailhead the day before.

For ¥4,000 per person, we spend the night at the hut, talking to Wada-san about the mountains over dinner; about the wild deer that will sometimes feed from his hand;

about the natural springs we can drink from on the rest of the hike; about how Fuji-san changes her colors throughout the year. When we tell him about the leeches, he politely fights to hold back a laugh. The laugh wins.

“You need rubber boots and tobacco,” he says, reining in the chuckles and showing us the crushed up cigarettes he has taped around the top of his black rubber boots. “Leeches won’t go anywhere near tobacco.”

As we leave Tonodake the next morning, Wada-san snaps a photo of the three of us at the peak. A few weeks later several copies arrive in the post with a letter handwritten on washi paper. With it is a photo of an early-morning Fuji dated the

day after we had left. “It looked even better the next morning. I hope you can come and see it like this one day,” Wada-san writes in the letter. I hope so too.

The best starting point for hikes around the Tanzawa area is the trailhead at Okura. To get there, take the Odakyu Line from Shinjuku to Shibusawa Station (1 hour, 15mins; ¥650), then bus #2 (15mins). To book a stay at Tonodake’s mountain hut, see www.cnet-sb.ne.jp/sonbutu (Japanese). Accommodation with dinner and breakfast is ¥6,000. If you want to reach Tonodake in a day, plan to be hiking by 9 am.



THE TEMPLE

Soaking up to my shoulders in the temple's piping hot cypress bathtub, white wash-towel resting on my head, can of beer in hand, I can't help thinking that piety might have its perks. After shuffling back to my room – clunky wooden sandals occasionally snagging in the temple's gravel courtyard – the multi-course vegetarian dinner delivered by one of the monks seals it.

Before coming to Mount Koya (aka Koyasan), I'd expected a temple stay to be more Spartan. I'd imagined bland tofu dinners and cramping up trying to sit cross-legged through lengthy prayer sessions – good fodder for a story, if not for an enjoyable weekend. I'd even smuggled in a couple of one-cup *shochu*, thinking the temple might be dry. I shouldn't have worried. Just before dinner, when a young monk drops by my tatami-mat room to make sure I'm ready for my meal, the first question he asks is, "Can I get you a beer?" No wonder most of the pilgrims I see in Koyasan look so contented.

Koyasan has been attracting pilgrims since the monk Kobo Daishi founded the Shingon sect of Buddhism on the cedar-covered mountain in Wakayama Prefecture 1,200 years ago, and today clustered around its eight peaks there are some 120 sub-temples and monasteries, half of which, like Eko-in (www.ekoin.jp/en), where I am staying, offer accommodation.

Unlike Tonodake, the journey to Koyasan is about time and money, not sweat and leeches. After taking the shinkansen to Shin-Osaka it's a short hop on the Midosuji subway line to Namba Station, from where the Nankai Line slowly makes it ways to Gokurakubashi Station on a route that becomes gradually more winding, over the course of 90 minutes eventually making its way into densely wooded valleys. The final leg is a five-minute cable car ride from Gokurabashi up to Koyasan.

From the upper cable car station the classic Koyasan tourist route begins. Buses run to the Shingon sect's main temple, Kongobu-ji, which houses a fine collection of 16th century screen paintings and has one of the largest Zen gardens in Japan. A short walk from there is Koyasan's sacred inner precinct, the Garan, where Kobo Daishi built the mountain's first monastery and where today some of the Shingon's most valued antiquities are kept in modern reconstructions of Koyasan's earliest buildings. Another bus takes you to the far side of Koyasan, to Okuno-in cemetery, where Kobo Daishi's understated mausoleum is partially hidden in the woods behind a lavishly decorated hall illuminated by 10,000 constantly lit oil lanterns.

It's a warm sunny afternoon by the time I get to the sprawling cemetery, but Okuno-in's towering cedars keep it cool and dark. Dank



moss carpets the ground and creeps over the statues and headstones. Yoda would feel at home here. But for the occasional group of pilgrims – dressed in white and carrying rosaries and staffs – nothing stirs. It feels as if I have the place to myself. And that would have been the highlight of the trip, if it weren't for what happened the next morning.

Come 6 am there's a knock on the sliding door to my room and a gentle reminder that morning prayers are about to start. Five minutes later I'm scuttling across the courtyard to the faintly lit inner temple, where the air is thick with musty incense and the heavy scent of aged wood. Several seated monks are reciting sutra in a low, hypnotic drone that occasional breaks form, quickening and peaking in concert with the pounding beat of a single drum. Then silence comes abruptly, and we – the monks and half a dozen other guests – move single file to another smaller, darker building in the temple compound.

Here, we sit around a kneeling monk, who readies a pile of 108 kindling sticks – one for each of the 108 defilements to be overcome on the road to enlightenment – with the poise of a kabuki actor. As the drum beat and chanting begins anew, he starts to burn them on a small altar. Flames rise and spit. The drum ups tempo. The chanting soars. Like Hendrix sacrificing his Strat at Monterey, a fiery crescendo caps a spectacular gig. More than that, it caps a spectacular weekend away.

To book a stay at one of Koyasan's temples, contact the Koyasan Tourist Association and Shukubo Temple Lodging Association (www.shukubo.jp/eng). Expect to pay around ¥10,000 per person with two meals. Budget ¥15,500 each way for trains, which take four and a half hours from Tokyo Station.

THE FARM

If there's any drawback to mountain huts and temples, it's that they aren't suited to family getaways. My six-year-old boy would love the trains to Koyasan, but he wouldn't last five minutes at a temple – come to think of it, the temple might not last five minutes with him there. Brown's Field Farm (www.brownsfield-jp.com) on the Boso Peninsula in Chiba, however, is an entirely different getaway.

Founded in 1999 by essayist and natural foods cooking teacher Deco Nakajima and her husband, writer/photographer Everett Kennedy Brown, Brown's Field was born out of a desire to create an eco-village where people can experience traditional Japanese rural living.

Although visitors can help out on the farm, Brown's Field is more about unwinding than it is about getting mucky. The first thing we do when we get there on a warm May day is pile into one of the rainbow-colored hammocks by the farm's rice paddies and sway for a while before grabbing a lunch box from the farm's organic café and picnicking under a tree.

After lunch, with my wife and son off chasing frogs and counting insects, Everett stops by to give me a tour of the farm. We start with a peek into one of the two tree houses and the renovated Meiji-era barn where visitors can stay overnight, then walk around Ji Ji No Ie, a beautifully restored farmhouse a few minutes' walk from the farm that now functions as an inn. As we stroll around we pass children petting the farm's goats. There's a woman doing yoga. A couple is fast asleep on the barn's wood decking. Others are picnicking in the fields. The soundtrack is one of frog croaks and birdsong. A week on from our visit, when the rice planting begins, it'll be a far busier scene, but at this moment there's almost nothing really happening – and that's perfect.

“The idea is for there to be a variety of little cubby holes where people can come and get away; spaces where we can escape the daily things,” Everett says, as we clamber up to the second floor of an old wood-built *kura* (warehouse) he's renovating into a gallery. “This is a place for time travel.”

This particular time machine creaks gently in the wind like a galleon drifting on calm seas, but is otherwise quiet enough to hear silence ringing in your ears. It's so peaceful I'm starting to wish we'd booked in for a night so I could make the *kura* my cubby hole for the evening, or maybe cycle down to the local beach Everett tells me about to watch the sunset. Instead, I wander back to the paddies for another hour or two of time travel in a hammock, before it's time to head back to Tokyo. 📍

BROWN'S FIELD FARM is a 10-minute taxi ride (¥1,200) from Chojamachi Station on the JR Sotobo Line, which can be reached from Tokyo Station via the Keiyo and Sotobo lines in one hour and forty-five minutes (¥1,620). Accommodation, with dinner and breakfast, starts from ¥8,000. www.jijinoie.com



ROB GOSS writes about Japan for publications that include *Time*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and many others around the globe. He is also the author of several *Japan* and *Tokyo* guidebooks.

