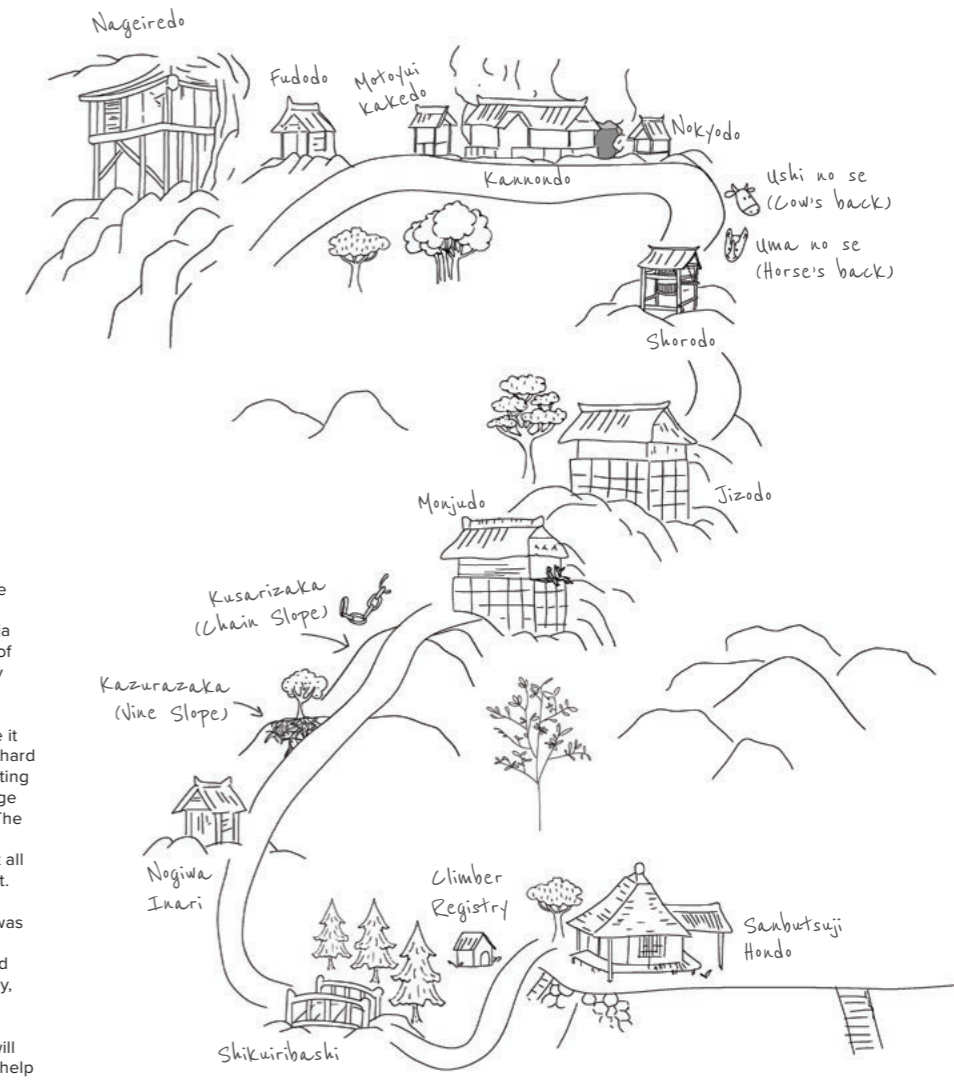


## A PILGRIMAGE TO ANOTHER WORLD

There is a small red gate not too deep into Tottori's Mount Mitoku that symbolizes the separation between the mortal and the spiritual world. On one of its sides is the world of imperfect human existence; on the other is where nature's gods reside, a world of ultimate purification. This is the symbolic explanation. The physical is that this gate leads you to Nageiredo, a wooden temple mysteriously built on a massive rock 900 meters above ground inside the mountain. It is known as Japan's "most dangerous national treasure," but also, one of the most spiritually rewarding destinations to tick off of one's Japan conquer list. To reach it, one must endure a long, challenging pilgrimage up the mountains that requires excessive strength, utter determination and a bit of extra courage. The reward for taking on this journey is a breathtaking midway view from over 450 meters above a gorge of trees dotting the mountain below — and ultimately, the incomparable feeling of satisfaction for having crossed over into the other side at the final destination.





How and when Nageiredo came to existence is still largely unknown. According to a local legend, however, Buddhist monk En no Gyoja used magic to cast Nageiredo into the side of the mountain some 1,300 years ago, thereby giving the temple its name, which translates as “thrown and inserted.” The mystery and spirituality surrounding the place have made it an object of worship ever since, and it’s not hard to see why. It’s an unexplainable but captivating sight: a wooden building lodged into the edge of a cliff, like a fantastical ancient creature. The long road to there is a process to test one’s endurance, purify the mind and forget about all earthly desires — and it’s completely worth it.

Like every pilgrimage, reaching Nageiredo was never meant to be easy. The journey to the temple begins right after one crosses the red gate. From there on, it’s a long hike (arguably, a climb) characterized by steep and slippery narrow paths and muddy grounds, at times formed on precarious tree roots. Travelers will occasionally spot chains along the way that help them pull their bodies up. Surprisingly, this hike’s recommended footwear is straw sandals, which one may obtain at the beginning of the journey. Straw, as the locals will assure travelers, is the least slippery option. Along the way, you may also hear the echoes of “*sange sange rokkon shojo*,” a chant that monks who train on this pilgrimage use, referring to the act of leaving all earthly sins aside and purifying one’s six senses.

Before reaching Nageiredo, the hike takes travelers to eight temples and shrines in the Mitokusan sanctuary. At midpoint, you can take a rest at the Monjudo Hall, one of the temples

along the route. You’re invited to sit on the edge of the wooden building and take a moment to realize that you’re out there in the wild, sitting at over 450 meters height from the ground with no protection whatsoever. You’ll hear your heart beat faster, feel your sweat dripping off your cheeks before the fear gradually reaches its peak — only to be replaced by ultimate peace and a sense of fulfillment of realizing how far you’ve come, overseeing one of Japan’s most breathtaking views.

The last challenge on the way to Nageiredo is passing through a small, pitch dark tunnel representing a mother’s womb. The saying goes that you pass through a rebirth process before reaching here, and it truly feels like one. You have officially crossed to the other side and as odd as it may feel, you feel reborn and enlightened. Essentially, the road to Nageiredo is a battle with oneself — it’s a story of passing into the spirit realm and conquering a chasm of arduous trials before eventually returning to the mortal world stronger and wiser.

## WALKING ALONG THE GOOD FORTUNE WAREHOUSES OF KURAYOSHI

A thirty-minute drive from Nageiredo takes you to the city of Kurayoshi, a small but famous city reminiscent of an old movie scene. There, the stone bridges and red-tiled roofs accompanied by the peaceful sound of the local Tamagawa River contrast beautifully with the white mortar of the Kurayoshi White Wall Warehouses. Designated as a nationally important preservation district, these Kurayoshi alleys, lined with dozens of white-walled former warehouses dating back to the Edo period, look like a retro movie set. In the past, these buildings were used for storing products of traditional enterprises, such as soy sauce or sake, but today they are attracting tourists from all over the world in pursuit of a glimpse of a nostalgic Japan. Here, despite the time passing, the city of "good fortune warehouses," has changed very little over time.

Kurayoshi is also known for its *kurayoshi-kasuri*, a traditional handmade indigo kimono woven by women only in this region. Travelers can see the handmade manufacturing process of this unique textile at the Kurayoshi Furusato Souvenir Shop in the area and can even opt for wearing one. A popular local attraction includes renting a kasuri and strolling down the warehouses, many of which have been carefully restored, transformed into boutique cafes, vintage and souvenir stores, while others continue the trade as sake or soy sauce breweries. Local street foods like *taiyaki* (fish-shaped sweet baked pastry) or the more contemporary "egg waffle" are always available on the go, serving as a wonderful attribute to the many selfies one subconsciously opt to take while in the area.





#### A STOP AT KURA

A favorite stop at the Kurayoshi White Wall Warehouses area is Kura, a coffee shop famous for having its customers grind their own coffee. Kura has a traditional coffee shop on its second floor where customers are invited to take it slow, and a more contemporary cafe on its first floor where tourists can buy various picture-perfect drinks and traditional *dango* (sweet rice dumplings) sweets on the go.

And, of course, coffee, but they have to work hard for that sip. A large stone grinder welcomes customers as they enter the cafe. The staff would put just the right amount of coffee beans in it before they let customers grind the coffee — it's one of the attractions here. After the beans are ground, the staff takes it from there. In a short time, you'll be served a cup of delicious coffee with red *azuki* beans instead of sugar — a la Kurayoshi style.

For those willing to enjoy their bites on the go, Kura offers three kinds of *dango* mochi on a stick, the signature *mitarashi* (sweet soy sauce) and two seasonal flavors. Drinks in special bottles are also on offer, providing the perfect blend of tradition and modernity for travelers taking it slow in the area.

