Japanese Religion and Culture: A Travelogue for Students Abroad

Visiting a foreign country can be daunting for young students, especially if they have never left their home country before. Even more challenging can be the language and cultural barriers. However, study abroad programs to foreign countries provide the opportunity for sightseeing, scholarship, and exploration, rewards that far outweigh any initial trepidation students may have. The faculty-led study abroad program “Japanese Religion and Culture” is a great example of such a program where students are able to stay overnight in temples, visit hard to reach mountain top religious sites, engage in cultural ceremonies, and interact with foreign students. If you are thinking of enrolling in this program in the future, here’s a bit about what to expect, see, and do to fully take in what Japanese religion and culture has to offer.

Japanese Buddhist temples are an important part of Japan’s cultural and physical landscape. Students can expect to unpack their bags, unroll their futons, and get a good night’s rest at one of the most important Buddhist temples in Tokyo, Zōjōji. Resting in the shadow of the Tokyo Tower, Zōjōji is an active Pure Land Buddhist Temple,¹ with monks regularly chanting the name of Amida Buddha at morning and evening services. The temple was built in 1393, although it has been almost entirely reconstructed over the years due to earthquake and fire damage. It is the family temple of the Tokugawa shogunate, and owes some architectural design to this fact, as elements like the mausolea behind it were built to convey power, authority, and beauty.²

¹ Jones, Lindsay, et al. “Jodoshu.”
² Self, Elizabeth “Fit for a Shogun's Wife: The Two Seventeenth-Century Mausolea for Sōgen-In.”
Memorials donated from various organizations and people can be seen all around the grounds, including a tree that was planted to commemorate the 1982 visit of then vice president George H. W. Bush. Still older is the tree planted by former President Grant when he visited the temple in 1879. Clearly the temple is a great source of pride for Japan, and being allowed to stay there for the duration of the trip is a rare and exciting opportunity for students.

Apart from trees commemorating visits from Western diplomats, the temple is home to the famous Black Amida statue. Considered to be a secret Buddha too sacred for year-round display, the statue is only available for public viewing three times a year. It is legendary in the Tokugawa myths which helped to legitimize the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate. One myth tells of the statue coming to life and protecting Ieyasu Tokugawa from being shot in an ambush on his way to Nara. While students may not be able to see the statue of the Black Amida, it is important to know a bit about its history and connection to the temple.

Highlighting an important cultural and religious practice, all along the far side of Zōjōji rows of little statues of children with knit caps can be seen. These children are the guardians of children who have been miscarried, aborted, or stillborn. At other religious sites across Japan it is common to see the Bodhisattva Jizo guarding such memorial children’s statues. However, at Zōjōji they are accompanied by Kannon, the Bodhisattva of compassion.

Kannon is a popular Bodhisattva in Japan, and it is common to see her enshrined at temples. However, at Sensōji, or the Asakusa Kannon Temple, her image is hidden much like the Black Amida statue, both considered too sacred for display. At Sensōji, the statue of Kannon is not even temporarily displayed. Instead, another statue crafted in the 9th century is displayed

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once a year on December 12th. Even without the promise of seeing an image, Sensōji attracts a large crowd. Much different from Zōjōji in style and attractions, Sensōji is surrounded by shops and packed nearly shoulder to shoulder with tourists. The lively atmosphere is commonplace at many Japanese temples, where the local businesses thrive by accommodating tourists and pilgrims. People from all over come to toss go en, or five-yen coins into the offering box at the front of the temple and bow in front of the altar. Tradition says that the statue of Kannon which the temple commemorates was miraculously pulled out of a nearby river in 628 A.D. by two brothers fishing. Since then, the temple has been an active part of the local community, even running a hospital and kindergarten. By enacting Kannon’s compassion in the world through these social outreach projects, the temple seeks to inspire those who come to visit and to continue the tradition of worshipping Kannon which began in Japan around the sixth century.

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5 Id.
6 id
Kannon is worshipped at many other sites around Japan as well. Pilgrimage routes can focus on visiting sites recognizing Kannon, Jizo, or even the founders of various Buddhist sects and can include visiting up to 100 temples in a single route. Some temples, like the frequently visited Yakouin temple located at the top of Mt. Takao, have shrines with dirt collected from all the stops on a particular pilgrimage route so people who cannot make it to all can visit them in one stop. Of course, there are other reasons tourists and religious pilgrims take the long hike to Yakouin temple at the top of the mountain.

Yakouin is a Shingon temple, an esoteric branch of Buddhism which performs goma, or ritual fire ceremonies and also a site of Shugendo practice. Visitors can pay to have a prayer, desire, or wish written on a board to be burned at a fire ceremony, and can even sit to watch one of the regularly scheduled rituals. The temple priests perform the ceremony and attendees receive incense for purification, a look at the hidden deities inside the shrine, and a chance to see their board offered to the fire. The temple priests themselves can be noted for their traditional garb, most notably the large conch shell they wear around their neck and blow ceremonially. The sound of the conch shell is understood by the tradition to be the voice of the Buddha, allowing all who hear it to have a taste of enlightenment. Other esoteric Buddhist practices have been blended

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8 Hitoshi, Miyake. “Religious Rituals in Shugendo: A Summary”
with Shinto practices, a notable example being waterfall purification. Though not typically done by the public, with special arrangements pilgrims can undergo a waterfall purification on the way up the temple path. The ritual involves dressing in a white robe, purifying one’s body with salt and then water, then clapping and chanting to the masters of the lineage who have gone before. Then, after sitting down under the waterfall, the ritual primarily consists of chanting “Fudo Myo-o” to the deity Fudo Myo-o, a powerful protective incarnation of Dainichi Nyorai who is the cosmic Buddha the Shugendo lineage worships.9

The blend of Shinto and Buddhist practices and imagery does not stop there on the mountain. Tengu, a large nosed Shinto kami,10 or deity, thought to inhabit the mountain is portrayed all over the temple grounds, including on t-shirts at souvenir stands. Masks of Tengu sit above doorways, and statues stand outside shrines all around the mountain. Tengu are certainly a sight to behold, and one of the more fascinating Shinto deities one can see while visiting Japan.

Tengu are not the only Shinto deities to see at shrines around Japan. Inari, or fox shrines, are popular for tourists and pilgrims to visit. Sasuke Inari Shrine located in Kamakura is an example of one such shrine. The shrine itself is tucked away in a residential neighborhood, up a long flight of stairs through a tunnel of red Torii gates which demarcate the space as sacred. At the top, thousands of white foxes have been placed on rocks, in crooks of tree roots, in miniature shrines, and all around the steps of the looped walkway. Commonly understood to be protective spirits, foxes can be found at shrines all over Japan.

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9 Jones, Lindsay, et al. “Fudo.” *Encyclopedia of Religion*
10 Jones, Lindsay, et al. “Kami.”
Elsewhere in Kamakura, tourists and pilgrims can be found at Kotoku-in Monastery, home to the “Great Buddha” statue sitting in the center of the space peacefully year-round. Weathered to a minty green, the bronze statue is hollow inside, allowing visitors to go in to look around for only 20 yen. Once inside, instructional plaques tell of the construction process for making the immense statue, and pictures can be taken looking up at the giant hollowed out and anti-earthquake stabilized head. The temple itself is in the Jōdo-shū, or Pure Land lineage, so the Buddha depicted is Amida Buddha who presides over the Western Pure Land.
Many of the temples and shrines around Kamakura are somewhat off the beaten path, an exception being Tsurugaoka Hachimangū, an enormous Shinto shrine in the heart of the city. The expansive grounds include lotus ponds on either side of the walkway up to the large shrine. The Buddhist architectural style harkens back to a time when Buddhism and Shinto were inextricably linked and practiced, before the state mandated their separation and declared Shinto as the state religion after the Meiji Restoration. At this temple, as with many other temples, the opportunity to get a hand drawn religious stamp called a GoShuin is a great way to remember your trip to the site. GoShuin stamps are about 300-500 yen depending on the location, and are written in beautiful calligraphy in a stamp book that can be purchased at any major temple. 

One place not to miss on your journey is the Yasakuni Shinto Shrine, a memorial shrine dedicated to the military dead. Adjacent to the shrine there is a military and war museum, where one can learn about past Japanese conflicts and see weapons, uniforms, and military documents from Japan’s military history. The shrine and museum have been a source of controversy since World War II and the memorialization of war criminals at the shrine. However, families of those who have lost loved ones in battle argue that the shrine is a place they can visit their deceased relatives and remember them, especially those who were lost in the war or presumed dead with lack of remains. Still others argue that the site deifies those who have died in a war that Japan was on the wrong side of. Visits from Japanese politicians remain controversial and chaotic with protests, but on most days a visit to the site is uneventful and an important look at the way politics, religion, and culture are interwoven throughout Japanese

11 Jones, Lindsay, et al. “Shintō.”
12 Nelson, John. “Social Memory as Ritual Practice: Commemorating Spirits of the Military Dead at Yasukuni Shinto Shrine.”
history. Aside from the shrine, the Noh theater on the grounds is active and visitors may catch a play being performed in the traditional format.

For those specifically on the Japanese Religion and Culture study abroad program, the opportunity to visit some active sites for new religious movements provides an insider’s look at the religious sphere of the modern era. Mahikari, a religious group focused on light healing, ghosts, and spirits, share a bit about their beliefs and practices with students at their headquarters in Tokyo.14 Students can expect to learn about the healing light that Mahikari adherents believe in, and see some of the pictures that members use to bolster their religious message. Students are given a healing session to experience the practice first hand, as well as a protective bell to ward off harm and keep wearers from getting sick. Mahikari practices and beliefs are similar to other new religions in Japan, and students can expect to read about them leading up to the experience.15

Unrelated to Mahikari, but still a new religion all the same, students can expect to visit Risshō Kōseikai, a new Buddhist movement that places great emphasis on the Lotus Sutra. Their central building is clearly identifiable with its round shape and large surrounding pillars. Although pictures are not allowed inside the shrine, a large Buddha can be seen at the center of a large auditorium with guards on either side. Depending on the time of day, students may see members of the religion meeting in small groups to discuss their spiritual path and practices to keep each other

accountable. Further into the complex, students can visit the founder’s museum where the life of Nikkyō Niwano is memorialized. Learning about Niwano’s life and vision for the movement provides an insider’s look at the goals, primarily of world peace and social engagement, members of the religion have. Still, prior reading and class lectures touch on the cultural point that most Japanese citizens view new religious movements with suspicion and Risshō Kōseikai is no different. Japanese media has been notorious for attacking new religious movements in the past, but Risshō Kōseikai, while once under the microscope, has been able to retain members and uphold their organizational values despite controversy.16

On the other end of the spectrum, steeped in tradition, students will have the opportunity to visit Sengakuji Temple, the grave site of 47 ronin, or masterless samurai who avenged their master who was wrongfully sentenced to death. Visitors come from all around to offer incense at the grave sides, or go through the small museums on the grounds to learn more about the famous story. In the surrounding area, books, tea cups, fans, and other souvenirs are on display for tourists passing through.

The Tokyo National Museum is another place visitors can go to learn more about Japanese history, religion, and culture. Exhibits include statues of Japanese deities, Buddhas, and Bodhisattvas. Special exhibits can include large tapestries or mandalas, that show the material culture of esoteric Japanese Buddhist lineages like Shingon.17 Still other museums focus on architecture and cultural life. The Edo-Tokyo Museum is a massive multi-story complex with life size reconstructions of village buildings, theaters, and even parade floats all from the Edo period. Most displays are interactive, where visitors can try to lift shoulder yokes full of fish or water.

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16 Kiyomi, Morioka. “Attacks on the New Religions: Risshō Kōseikai and the ‘Yomiuri Affair.’”
17 Jones, Lindsay, et al. “Mandalas: Buddhist Mandalas.”
Miniature displays depict Edo period castles, villages, and festivals. Of all of the museums in Tokyo, this museum is perhaps one of the most immersive.

Students on the study abroad trip will also have the opportunity to meet Japanese university students. Many day trips include students studying Buddhism in Japan accompanying the group around the shrines. Lectures at Taisho University, Western’s partner for the study abroad program, show what school is like for university students in Japan, and question and answer sessions with the students helps build great relationships. Whatever your reason for visiting Japan, make sure to check out these sites to learn more about the people, history, culture, and religious landscape so you can learn more about the world you live in!


