

Giant Buddha rules Kamakura

by Charlie Price

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A giant Buddha and an 11-headed goddess rule over an age-old culture's ancient capital, and all in the shadow of one of the world's most modern metropolises. Only a one-hour train ride from Tokyo, Kamakura, Japan, is home to time-worn idols, sacred artifacts and mementoes of Japanese antiquity.

Founded in 1192, Kamakura served as the center of government for Japan's samurai rulers for 150 years. Steeped in history, Kamakura's wooded, rural setting makes for an easy escape from Tokyo's glitz and glamour. Practically a suburb of the Japanese capital, Kamakura is Tokyo's temple town. With dozens of temples and shrines, a tourist could easily spend a week exploring Kamakura's wealth of religious locales, but the day tripper can get a taste of the city's sacred sites with only a few stops.

Daibutsu, the great Buddha, is literally Kamakura's biggest attraction. Cast in 1252, the 121-ton bronze deity has survived a 15th century tsunami's tidal wave, a 20th-century earthquake and more than 750 years of pilgrims and tourists. Sitting 36 feet high, the giant Buddha has peacefully meditated amid timber-covered hills for almost eight centuries.

For a look deep into the soul of Buddhism, tourists can crawl right inside the massive Buddha belly and see firsthand the impressive statue's innovative construction. Because of its enormous size, the big Buddha's 13th-century builders employed a then-unique construction technique called ikarakuri. The statue was cast in 30 separate stages, and the individual castings were connected horizontally from bottom to top.

With captivating views over Sagami Bay, Hase-Dera Temple is home to Kannon, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy. Standing 30 feet tall, Kamakura's 11-faced Kannon is almost 1,300 years old, and each of the statue's faces exhibits a different expression. Legend says the 11-faced icon was carved in 721 from the trunk of a camphor tree and tossed into the sea near Osaka with a prayer that it would some day reappear. In the dark of night 15 years later, the wooden statue washed ashore near Kamakura bathed in light, and a temple was constructed to house the goddess.

Also worth visiting at Hase-Dera Temple is the shrine to "Happy" Jizo, which is surrounded by thousands of tiny stone statues said to comfort the souls of unborn children.

Built to honor the souls of dead soldiers from a pair of 14th-century Mongolian invasions, Engaku Temple is dedicated to the study of Zen. Calm and serene, the temple's gates, shrines and buildings sit naturally among lush gardens and dense foliage. The temple grounds are quiet and peaceful, and a visitor should not be surprised to hear chanting voices rising from the temple's many shrines. Two particularly enjoyable spots at the temple are the Shari-den, the Shrine of Sacred Tooth of Buddha, and the Ohgane, the 14th-century temple bell, which hangs on a hill high above the temple.

Kamakura is also home to numerous museums, beautiful parks, a botanical garden and sunny beaches. The lively avenue Komachi Dori is a good bet for lunch and Kamakura souvenirs, with more than 200 shops and restaurants.

From Buddha's belly to the many faces of Kannon, Kamakura is a must-see day trip for Tokyo tourists.

If you go

* Getting there: Flights from Oklahoma City and Tulsa to Tokyo start at about \$2,100 on several airlines.

- * Staying there: Rooms at Tokyo's Ritz-Carlton start at about \$500 per night.
- * Not to be missed: The Great Buddha and statue of Kannon
- * On the Web: www.city.kamakura.kanagawa.jp

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