

Walking the Kiso Road: A Modern-Day Exploration of Old Japan

William Scott Wilson

Shambhala (Oct 13, 2015)

Softcover \$16.95 (288pp)

978-1-61180-125-5

Fortunate is the man who has found his “favorite place on earth.” William Scott Wilson, noted translator of Japanese classic Samurai texts, is such a man. It is the Kiso Road, an ancient trade route that meanders through mountains and forests for some sixty miles in the Kiso Valley of central Japan.

Wilson has walked it a number of times. The hike he took in 2013, which is the basis for the book, was leisurely, with frequent stops at the small towns found every few miles. He visited inns where the proprietors are from the families that have run them for generations beyond counting. There are Buddhist temples, most of the Zen persuasion, including the Ochakuji, which means “the temple where the nightingale arrives.”

Warlords, samurai, and merchants walked the road, which leads to Tokyo, in centuries before Wilson, and he brings them along in his historical accounts of a narrow (rarely over thirty feet), winding way, along with the reflections of Japanese writers, philosophers, and poets dating back to the 700s. Basho, master of haiku, was charmed in the seventeenth century with the path.

THOMAS BEVIER (Winter 2016)

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