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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Teen tourist carves name into 1,200-year-old Japanese temple

The 17-year-old Canadian admitted to police that he was killing time at the Toshodaiji Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage site

By [Natalie B. Compton](#) and Julia Mio Inuma

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A teenage tourist carved his name into an 8th-century temple in [Japan's](#) Nara prefecture last week, police said, the latest example of [bad tourist behavior](#) this summer.

According to police, the 17-year-old Canadian used his fingernail to carve “J” and “Julian” into a pillar of the Toshodaiji Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The carvings — one about an inch and a half long and two inches high, and the second roughly an inch long and four inches wide — were discovered in the temple’s main, or “Golden Hall.” A male Japanese tourist was said to have seen the teenager committing the crime around 1:10 p.m. on July 7 and reported his actions to the Toshodaiji Temple staff. After the teenager was questioned by authorities, police say he admitted to the crime, saying that he did it to kill time.

The temple [posted a sign](#) at the entrance the following day in Japanese and English that read: “Please do not damage the hall. You will be punished for violating the Cultural Property Protection Law.” Under the [law](#), the punishment for damaging objects considered “important cultural property” is up to five years in prison or a fine of up to 1 million yen (about \$7,200).

A temple spokesperson called the incident unfortunate and sad, but not done maliciously. It occurred as inbound tourism is beginning to increase, and there is concern that something similar could happen again. In the future, they will put up etiquette signs in different languages.

The [Golden Hall is described](#) on its website as “the greatest Tempyo Era structure (of the 8th century) remaining in Japan today” that has “been written about in many famous old poems.” Additionally, “the row of its pillars is reminiscent of the Parthenon of Greece.” It reopened in 2009 [after being closed for about a decade](#) for restoration work.

Unlike common tourist etiquette blunders in Japan, like not knowing when to take off one's shoes or when to bow, "desecrating an important temple or shrine is a whole other level of disrespect," said Catherine Heald, chief executive of the Asia-focused luxury tour operator Remote Lands. "It's like writing nasty graffiti on a church."

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rome. In a letter addressed to the city's prosecutor and mayor last week, Ivan Danailov Dimitrov, 27, wrote he didn't understand the importance of the monument and apologized for causing the damage.

Naomi Mano, president and chief executive of the Tokyo-based luxury travel company Luxurique, says vandalism isn't a unique problem to Japan or only carried out by foreign tourists. And given the suspect's age, she doesn't think it was fair to vilify him.

"I'm raising two teen boys," she said. "And although I hope I have taught them to be respectful, sometimes these things happen."

Toshodaiji Temple is located on the outskirts of Nara city, one of the most popular destinations for tourists in Japan behind Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. The city is famous for its Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and large population of deer that roams free in the city's parks and historic sites. And being just an hour's train from Kyoto, Heald said the company sends a "huge number of clients" to the city either as a day trip or for one- to two-night stays.

Since Japan reopened its borders for tourism in October 2022, the country has had to remind visitors of its etiquette norms through public service announcements. While Heald says most of her clients tend to behave properly in Japan, "we have had the entitled people who don't want to play by the rules," she said. "And bottom line, if we don't want to follow the rules, we shouldn't go."

Jintak Han contributed to this report.