

Kumano Kodo Resources and How-To

Extremely Brief Introduction: What Is the Kumano Kodo and Why This Guide?

Put simplest, the Kumano Kodo is an ancient network of short but rugged pilgrimage trails on Japan's Kii Peninsula, about 150 kilometers south of Osaka. My wife and I walked the Nakahechi route, the most popular one, in October, 2023, and that's what I focus on here. My intent is not to describe the Kumano Kodo in any detail, but to answer the questions most people (i.e. me) would have in advance, and to introduce you to the resources most helpful for detailed planning.

Resource numero uno – Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau

All your Kumano Kodo planning begins and ends with the Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau. <https://www.tb-kumano.jp/en/>.

Its website and the actual office, run by a Canadian expat in Tanabe City, the gateway to the Kumano, contain absolutely everything you need and want to know about the Kumano Kodo: where and what it is, possible itineraries, customs, transportation to and on the KK, accommodations, maps, gps tracks, etc., etc. You can also make reservations for lodgings (at no extra cost) through the website, and arrange for day-to-day transport of your gear.

Spend several hours exploring the website, which is sprawling, and then send away for the Tourism Bureau's Pilgrim Pack.

<https://www.kumano-travel.com/en/travel-services/tanabe-city-kumano-tourism-bureau/1508>. This will include the official guidebook, with additional information not easily found on the website, plus paper maps, and one copy of your pilgrim passport, which you'll need if you want to get your merit badge at the end. (More pilgrim passports can be ordered at the same time). With shipping to the US, the Pilgrim Pack will set you back about \$35, and if that's

above your pay grade, all but the guidebook are available for free at the Tourism Bureau office in Tanabe City.

While most of what I offer here can be found in the website and the guidebook, those resources are dense with information, and can be difficult to navigate. So my aim here is to synthesize that information, based on our own experience, and make it more accessible. To create a guide to the guides, as it were.

Resource numero due: Google Knows Everything

Before you even get to the Kumano Kodo, there's Japan to contend with, a country whose alphabet, customs, infrastructure, and mores bear no resemblance to our own, and if you've never been west of the Golden Gate Bridge (like me), you're probably gonna be pretty freaked out.

Fortunately, there's Google, your starting point for any conceivable inquiry about Japan. Indeed, after even two days in Japan, you'll wonder how anyone ever survived without Google, and you'll hate the Justice Department for its efforts to break it up Google.

Having Google at your beck and call is almost as good as having John Brierley to hold your hand on your first camino. Not knowing where the heck my hotel was in Tokyo, Google guided me step by step through the airport, onto the right subway train, through various transfers, and up to the front desk. Google translate was ubiquitous, a fun game to play with Japanese people who spoke about as much English as I did their language. Google maps steered me to restaurants. Google answered my many questions about etiquette and customs, about how to make up a futon bed, or wear a yukata. It translated signs and menus, provided me with bus and train schedules, gave me sneak previews into museums.

It totally removed the stress from travel. Google: Don't leave home without it.

Which Route Should I Travel / Stages?

Although the Kumano Kodo is a network of routes, like the Caminos in Europe, only two of them have sufficient infrastructure to make for easy travel: the Nakahechi, the one we traveled, and the Kohechi.

These routes are short, less than 70 kilometers each, but are several magnitudes of difficulty harder than any of the popular caminos in Spain and Portugal. The Nakahechi, for example, is entirely on rugged trail deep in the woods, often rocky and crisscrossed by tree roots. On a per kilometer basis, it climbs three times as much as does the Camino Frances between Sarria and Santiago, and twice as much as the Primitivo between Oviedo and Lugo.

Which is not to scare you away, only to explain why it will probably take you five days to walk it rather than two or three.

As to the Kohechi, it is reputed to be even more difficult. Plus, it is not covered in any detail by the Tourism Bureau website or guidebook, though the Cicerone Press book on the Kumano Kodo does discuss it.

Assuming that you, like us, opt for the Nakahechi, be aware that this is an extremely rural area, and other than Hongu in the middle of the route, the stopping places are mere hamlets, with few or no services other than those provided at your lodgings (discussed below). This means that you are pretty much constrained to following five fixed stages, although if you're willing to start with an extremely ambitious first day, you could combine the first two of them.

Shorter itineraries are possible, however, and there are some ring walks and ways to shorten individual stages as well, by bus or otherwise. As an example, many people opt to travel only to Hongu, typically three days into the walk, where you get the equivalent of the compostela (your merit badge). These different possibilities can be confusing, especially if you're accustomed to the linearity of the caminos in Europe, but the Tourism Bureau website outlines various itineraries, as do the websites of various companies that offer self-guided tours, like Oku Japan.

Getting to the Nakahechi

Your gateway to the trail will be the small city of Tanabe, which is most easily reached by regional train from Osaka or Kyoto. It's 2½ hours from central Osaka, and under two hours from Osaka's international airport, should you want to head directly from the plane to the trail. Figure on three hours by train from Kyoto.

At the train station in Tanabe you pick up a local bus to Takajiri-Oji, the start of the trail. It's a 40 minute ride, and bus departures are coordinated with the train arrivals.

At the Tanabe train station, you can also stop in at the real-world offices of the Tourism Bureau, where you can get your pilgrim's passport, if you didn't order it in advance, and your first stamp. Plus whatever information you might still need.

If you elect to spend a night in Tanabe, instead of just transiting through there, you could head out on the trail early in the morning, and walk the first two stages of the five stages – from Takijiri-oji to Nakahara, and then on to Chikatsuyu -- in one day, as these two stages combined total only 14 kilometers. Be advised, however, that in the course of those 14 kilometers you will climb more than 3000 feet over rugged terrain that bears no resemblance to anything you encountered on the Camino Frances. (It took us, for example, three hours to walk the first four kilometers to Nakahara, and we were among the quicker ones to arrive at our lodgings).

Accommodations & Food (Plus Futons, Onsens and Yukatas)

You won't find albergues or hostels on the Kumano Kodo. Rather, the lodgings are generally small, family-run guest houses of one variety or another. Don't get too hung up on the distinctions between the various types. At each stage just choose the one which sounds best for you. (See below on arranging your trip).

Many will feature futon beds instead of western beds. That sounds great in theory, but if you're as ancient and creaky as I am, sleeping on the floor

cushioned only by a futon mattress ain't that much fun when you have to get vertical in the middle of the night to go off to pee.

Important tip in this regard: the futon mattresses, which are far thinner than those we have here, are always stored in a closet in your room. There will generally be extras, so don't hesitate to grab one or two more for further cushioning. Your back will thank you.

Onsens, by contrast, are great, both in theory and in practice. These are essentially hot tubs that are fed by nearby hot springs, and many of the lodgings feature them. Bare-assed is de rigueur, but they are segregated by sex, in case you're prudish about such things. Cameras not allowed!

Onsens also help accustom you to the general dress code, since even outside their confines, you're not going to be wearing much in the way of clothing. For starters, immediately upon arrival at your accommodations you shed your hiking shoes in favor of provided slippers. You won't don those shoes again until you head out the next morning.

The same regimen applies to the rest of your clothes. Once you reach your actual room, you'll doff everything else you're wearing in favor of a provided yukata. (This is a cross between a kimono and a bathrobe). You wear your yukata all evening, including to dinner. It's ok to put your clothes back on for breakfast the next morning, but by then you'll be feeling so mellow, you might want to wear your yukata down the trail.

This wonderful liberation from clothing will also bear on decisions you might make to ship your baggage ahead day by day (discussed more below). Note that since you're never wearing more than the provided slippers and yukatas — not even underclothes!!!! — you won't need an extra pair of pants, or any kind of evening clothes, or footwear beyond your hiking shoes. Not even extra underwear, since you'll wash it all out in the sink immediately upon arrival (occasionally, there's even a washer / dryer) and it should be dry by the time you're ready to hit the trail the next day.

Switching to the other great feature of the Kumano Kodo — the food — all lodgings provide dinner and breakfast, generally in a common dining room. Indeed, you have no other option for food, as most of the villages lack a

restaurant or even a grocery store. (Actually, “villages” exaggerates the size of the hamlets along the way).

For lunch, pick up a bento box at your lodgings. Google that if you don’t know what it means. Sometimes these are included in the price, sometimes you have to pay a few dollars extra. Unless you plan on fasting all day, this is a necessity as there are no places to stop along the trail.

It’s difficult to over-rhapsodize about the quality. Your hosts take incredible pride in preparing dinner, and to compare the meals they serve you to those generally slopped down in Spanish albergues is like comparing dinner at the French Laundry to dinner at Burger King. And while I used that same comparison before in talking about the food in French gites, the comparison is no less apt here.

And your hosts go out of their way to accommodate your food foibles, allergies, psychoses, fetishes, and other particularities. Just make sure you notify them in advance. It’s very bad form to request a vegan meal upon arrival.

Stopping Places on the Trail

There ain’t none. You’re in the middle of nowhere. That’s why you get a bento box for lunch from your lodging before leaving.

You will, though, find occasional shelters along the trail to stop and rest and chill with your fellow walkers, and – wonder of wonders – real toilets to supplement the bio breaks.

Arranging Your Kumano Kodo

First thing to accept is that the Kumano Kodo can’t be winged. Period.

Accommodations are few and fill up months in advance. Six months out is not too early to start planning. Though some lodgings will not take reservations more than six months in advance.

There are two ways to arrange your trip. Cheapest, of course, is making your own reservations using the free services of the Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau (see above and details on their web site and in their guidebook). Note that this process can be tedious and even nerve-racking. First, you comb through the list of lodgings on the website, and then you submit your choices -- up to three for each location -- to the Tourism Bureau (making sure that you order breakfast and dinner, too). Once the choices are submitted, you wait, possibly for a few weeks, until they confirm the reservations.

You may also find some places listed on booking.com, which would be simpler and quicker than working through the Tourism Bureau. But if you do use booking.com make absolutely sure you know where the lodgings are in relation to the trail, and also that you can take your meals there.

The other option to arrange your trip is to engage a tour company to make all the reservations. This takes the stress out of the planning, and also ensures that you'll get well-located and quality accommodations, plus the company will provide you with all the details you need on the walk itself so you don't have to do any further research. Downside of doing it this way is that you will pay two to three times what you'd pay by making arrangements on your own.

Given that we waited until the last moment (less than three months out) before diving into the planning, plus the fact that I was intimidated by a culture so foreign to me, we did opt for a tour company -- Oku Japan -- and they were wonderful. They provided us with excellent directions and background information about the trail, and the accommodations were first-rate. Plus, there was always someone available to answer my emails or phone calls if I had a question. But I did feel stupid spending so much money. Here's their web site should you elect to go that route: <https://www.okujapan.com/>. And here's the specific itinerary we booked:

<https://www.okujapan.com/trips/kumano-kodo-self-guided-walking-6-days/>.

Cost

The bad news is that the Kumano Kodo is far more expensive than the Spanish caminos. Since there are no albergues or hostels, you will be paying hotel prices. Plus you can't cook for yourself to save money.

The good news is that it's typically only five nights, and the rest of Japan is every bit as cheap as the rest of Spain.

If you arrange accommodations yourself through the services of the Tourism Bureau, or on booking.com, expect to spend \$90 - \$150 per night per person for your lodgings and breakfast and dinner. If lunch is not included, a bento box will set you back a few dollars more.

Given that it's only a limited number of nights, I would suggest not getting too hung up on finding the absolute cheapest accommodations. You're going to be spending thousands on going to and otherwise traveling around Japan, and I personally would put ease of making reservations and their location ahead of maybe saving \$50 – 100 overall. But chacun a son gout.

Should you opt for a tour company, the cost will be double at least. Five nights' accommodations, plus meals, set us back \$1450 per person with Oku Japan (and it's gone up \$50 since we booked). This did include, however, transportation at the beginning and end of the walk to and from either Kyoto or Osaka, plus information about the trail that was concise and accessible. If you do arrange your trip through a tour company, I would definitely recommend a Japan-based company like Oku Japan rather than a big international company like Mac's Adventures, which will be even more expensive and may not have an office on the ground.

And once you get over the sticker-shock of the Kumano Kodo vs. the Caminos de Santiago, Japan overall is astonishingly cheap. The yen is at an all-time low (150 to the dollar). We routinely spent \$25 – 40 for dinner for the two of us, including wine or beer. Eating and drinking the equivalent in Berkeley would run over \$100.

Other examples: A basic subway ride in Tokyo was \$1.60, and decent semi-upscale hotel rooms (nicer than we generally stayed at in Spain) could be

found under \$100, even in the big cities. Admission to the enormous and wonderful Tokyo National Museum was \$6.70. Contrast that to what you pay to enter the Prado in Madrid -- \$16.00 – or the Met in New York -- \$30.00.

Navigating the Kumano Kodo: Signage and GPS

Generally, you're on a track through the woods and along a hillside, with rarely a place to turn. Even so, every 500 meters or so there will be a marker of some sort, and whenever you do come to any kind of intersection, there will always be a prominent Kumano Kodo sign in English and an arrow to point the way. And if you somehow stumble through that, you will very quickly hit an equally prominent sign, again in English: Not Kumano Kodo.

Should you nevertheless feel the compulsion to navigate by your phone, mapy.cz – a wonderful and free navigation app – includes the Kumano Kodo, with nothing else to download onto it. Should you feel further compelled to go through the hoops of downloading a gps track onto the app. of your choice, here's a link: <https://static-oku.digit.io/uploads/oku/kumano-kodo 1.zip>.

Getting Your Merit Badge: The Dual Pilgrim Certificate

What would a pilgrimage be without a merit badge at the end to prove to the world how cool you are?

And the coolest merit badge of all (and trust me: I got a lot of them) is the Dual Pilgrim Certificate which you earn by walking both one of the Caminos de Santiago and the Kumano Kodo.

Not only do you receive a hand-lettered papyrus certificate, and ever-lasting celebrity by having your picture posted on the Dual Pilgrim Society website, but a real honest-to-god Buddhist priest will perform a personal Taiko ceremony for you at the Taisha (great big temple) in Hongu.

Plus, he beats the enormous Taiko drum in your honor, **and you get to beat it, too!!!!**

This experience may not be equal to the night you lost your virginity, but it's pretty damned close.

You can earn the Dual Pilgrim Certificate in various ways, some surprisingly easy. First of all, of course, you need to have received a compostela in Spain. (You could first get a certificate from the Kumano Kodo and then walk a camino in Spain, but I suspect that everyone reading this will have been to Spain first).

Next, get the Kumano Kodo pilgrim's passport. You can send away to the Tourism Bureau for it in advance, as mentioned above, or you can simply pick one up at their real-world office at the Tanabe City train station.

Then, when you're on the trail, you'll pass lots of Oji's. These are small shrines in the middle of the woods, each one of which will have a stamp so you can fill up your passport. Just like in Spain.

Your goal is the Taisha (Big Temple) in Hongu. If you're wrapped up in linear, western thinking (like me), this may be confusing, since Hongu, as I mentioned, is in the middle of the Nakahechi, and there are still two days to go before you hit its end point, where the two other Taishas are located. Just get over your bad self.

In any event, once you hit Hongu, continue through the temple complex down a very long staircase, at the bottom of which is the Kumano Hongu Heritage Center.

Go up to the reception desk, show them your Kumano Kodo passport and also your passport from Spain, stamped by the pilgrim office in SDC. (I took along a photocopy of my compostela, too, just to be safe, and I'm still not clear what they really needed).

Your royal treatment will begin immediately.

Hardest part, perhaps, is walking back up those interminable steps to the temple at top, where the ceremony in your honor is performed.

In contrast to Spain, getting your merit badge is not a long-distance endurance contest. The object of the KK is to commune – become one – with nature, not to conquer it. We got our Dual Pilgrim Certificate the (relatively) hard way, by walking the 37 kilometers from the beginning, but you could also get it by walking the 25 kilometers from the end point back to Hongu.

A third way involves even less physical effort. You can simply visit, by bus or car if you want, the other two Taisha (big temples) at the end of the Nakahechi at Shingu and Nachi, and then circle back to Hongu in the middle and walk the last seven downhill kilometers to it from the Oji (small shrine) at Hosshinmon. You can even get a bus from Hongu to Hosshinmon.

In Japan, it's more about being there than getting there. Put another way, that Dual Pilgrim Certificate celebrates the journey more than the destination.

Shipping Your Extra Crap

Since it's unlikely that you're going to go all the way to Japan just to walk five days on the Kumano Kodo, you're probably going to haul along some extra crap that you'd rather not tote on your back up and down the trail.

You're in luck. Japan has an amazing system for forwarding luggage ahead – from hotel to hotel, or even to or from a train station. You don't have to do any advance planning or thinking. When you're ready to ship a bag, just bring it down to the front desk in your hotel, tell the clerk where you want to send it, and he / she will take care of the rest. On the other end, the receiving hotel will hold the bag until your arrival, even if that's days or weeks down the road.

In our case, we shipped an extra bag from our hotel in Osaka, where we stayed directly before traveling to Tanabe City and the Kumano Kodo, to our hotel in the city of Nara, where we were staying afterwards. Cost was \$10, and the bag was waiting for us in Nara when we arrived a week later.

It does, however, take 24 hours from consignment of your bag at one end to delivery at the other, so you can't use this service on the Kumano Kodo to ship stuff from your lodgings in the morning to those the same evening. (You could,

though, ship your bag to every other place where you'll be staying on the KK, and be without it for just one night in between).

But to my mind, you can easily do without bag transport altogether on the Kumano, and just ship that extra bag from your pre-KK hotel to your post-KK hotel, as we did. Remember, you don't need a sleeping bag or a towel, or shampoo or soap, as you would in Spain, and, as I indicated above, there's no point in taking an extra pair of pants or shoes, or any evening clothes whatsoever, because you won't be wearing them once you change into your yukata and slippers. And at most, you need one change of underwear.

So, bottom line is you need not carry more (or hardly more) than you'd carry in a day pack anyway – that extra warmth layer, your rain gear, your passport and wallet, and minimal toiletries.

BUT if you really can't do without all that extra junk every single evening, you can arrange day-to-day transport through the Tourism Bureau. <https://www.tb-kumano.jp/en/resources/luggage-shuttle-storage/>. To me, that's more hassle than it's worth, but chacun . . . , etc.

When To Go

Summers are a bitch.

From early in June through the very end of September, daytime highs are likely to be in the 80's with humidity like Washington, D.C. in August. It also rains most in summer, although rain is a presence all year.

So spring and fall, as elsewhere, are best. Late March – early April, with the cherry trees in bloom, and early November, with spectacular foliage displays like in Vermont, are probably the sweet spots.

And even winter is doable, though days, of course, are short. Expect daytime highs near 50.

Check it out yourself. My go-to source for weather information and averages throughout the year is www.weatherspark.com.

And when you're thinking about when to go, bear in mind that the Kumano Kodo will likely only be a part of your vacation. The woods on the trails will provide some shelter from the sun, but you won't even have that while wandering through the concrete jungles of Tokyo or Kyoto. Indeed, we thought we'd die in those cities in early October.

Phones and Electronics

You can easily pick up a sim card for data at the airport or any convenience store, but unlike in Europe, these won't include a phone number. And WhatsApp is not much used in Japan.

Personally, I found it easier to get an esim for data from Airalo before I left. You download the app and then buy what you need through the app. You can get as little as 1 gigabyte of data for seven days for \$4.50 and as much as 20 gigabytes for 30 days for \$26.00. That's enough to stream the Warriors. Easily renewable.

Since I also wanted to be able to make phone calls, if necessary, I bought several hundred minutes of calling through another app called Viber for \$5.00. This enabled me to call any number in the world. Download the app, then drill down to Viber Plus and then World Credits. You pay extra for incoming calls, but I directed everyone back home to use WhatsApp if they needed to reach me.

And, in contrast to Europe, your American plug works fine in Japan. No need for an adaptor of any sort.

Money in Japan

Japan, like much of Europe, is still largely a cash economy, though all hotels and fancier restaurants will take credit cards.

Your one-stop shop for cash is 7/11.

Yes, you read that right. 7/11. Your ATM card will generally not work at a bank ATM, but there are more 7/11's in Japan than there are trendy bakeries in Berkeley. And they only charge a small fee -- \$1 or \$2 -- to withdraw money. As in Europe, however, decline the option to have the ATM machine do the conversion into dollars. Your own bank will charge you a better exchange rate. Warning: watch out for this in general. At my hotel in Japan, I paid an extra \$20 because I mindlessly authorized the hotel's credit card machine to charge me in dollars rather than in yen.

A further shout-out for the 7/11's: These are wonderful! Fresh food. Cheap wine and beer. I could dine out forever on their bento boxes for lunch. These were about \$4 in Japan; upon returning home, I saw a comparable box for \$13 at the local Safeway in Berkeley.

Travel to Japan

United, ANA, Japan Air and ZipAir (new discount airline) fly non-stop to Tokyo from SFO, and United also has a non-stop to and from Osaka, which is the nearest international airport to the Kumano Kodo.

Overall flying time to Japan from the West Coast is slightly less than going to Europe, and fares are comparable, or again, slightly less.

My go-to site for flight itineraries is (naturally) Google flights, which lets you easily search for "open-jaw" itineraries (fly into one city and out from another), and also lets you book directly with the airline, which is far better than booking through a consolidator, like Kayak, because when things go awry, you'll want to be dealing with the airline directly, not the third-party consolidator.

Travel within Japan

Japan has a mind-boggling system of public transportation, which probably explains why cars are a relatively rare sight even in Tokyo. Subway trains arrive in intervals of under 2 minutes, and take you everywhere in most major cities,

like Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto. Signage in subway and train stations is in Japanese and English. Plus there's you-know-what to guide you from place to place.

Local and regional transport: Pasmo or Suica cards:

When you arrive at the airport, pick up a Pasmo or Suica card. They're also available at train or subway stations. These are like Clipper cards in the Bay Area, but so much better. They not only work on all urban transit lines in all major cities – i.e. subways and buses – but they can also be used on local and regional train lines, and even as debit cards in many stores. If you flash your passport, you don't have to put down the 500 yen (\$3.50) deposit. Re-load them in any train or subway station. Here's a link explaining them:

<https://tokyocheapo.com/travel/pasmo-suica-cards-tokyo-travel/>

High Speed Long-Distance Trains (Shinkansen):

Once you've gotten a taste of these, you'll understand why the US is not even a second-world country anymore. Besides the fact that they go at 200 miles per hour, they run with astonishing frequency – way more often than BART or even the New York City subways. For example, if you want to go from Tokyo to Osaka (roughly the distance from San Francisco to LA) tomorrow morning between 11AM and Noon, you have a choice of trains at 11:00, 11:03, 11:12, 11:18, 11:30, 11:33, 11:39, 11:48, 11:57, and 12:00. I'm not kidding! And it's 2.5 hours downtown to downtown. Plus, these Shinkansen trains run not only between Tokyo and Osaka, but between every major city in Japan.

Fares on the Shinkansen cannot be paid with Pasmo or Suica cards, but there are easy-to-use ticket machines in the train stations, as well as people to help you out, and given the frequency of trains, you don't need to buy tickets in advance. In fact, while you could buy a ticket in advance at the station, forget about doing so on your phone. The web sites for the Japanese trains are impenetrable. Insofar as you need schedule and fare information, you'll find it you-know-where. Simply enter the departure and arrival cities, punch the public transit icon, and voila!

One tip on the Shinkansen: it will be tempting to want to reserve a seat on a train when you purchase your ticket, especially if you buy it in advance. But unless you're hauling around a 40 pound suitcase (in which case I have no

sympathy for you), it's easier not to do so. That way you're not limited to taking a specific train, in case you suddenly decide you want to do something else before heading out, and if you arrive at the station earlier than your ticket time, you won't have to wait around while three trains pass you by. We never had a problem finding a seat in the unreserved cars, though sometimes we couldn't find two together (which, from my wife's point of view, was not a big loss).

Travel on the Kumano Kodo

In some cases you may need to travel several kilometers from your lodgings to the next day's trailhead. For example, after Hongu, where you get your Dual Pilgrim Certificate, you need to take a bus to the little hamlet of Ukegawa to pick up the trail again. Similarly, you'll need to resort to public transit to reach the third and final major Taisha, in Shingu, from the official trail's end, at the Taisha in Nachi.

Don't despair, though. Local bus routes connect you up, and they're geared to travelers on the Kumano Kodo, meaning there will be early morning buses and late afternoon ones, too.

Google maps (natch!) for directions to the buses and timetables. Information is also on the Tourism Bureau website and in the Official Guide.

The Pasma and Suica cards won't cover these local lines. Rather, just take a ticket from the machine when you board the bus (in the rear), and pay the driver when you get off. No need even for exact change. Easy-peasy.

Andy Cohn

Berkeley, CA

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cohnandy2@gmail.com