

日本で登山

Hiking Japan with belleelene

*A curated collection of footprints,
stories and journeys.*



belleelene.com

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Japan expert, Hiking aficionado, Bad humorist.

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About the Blog

belleelene.com is a digital sanctuary for those who love the rugged trails and hidden corners of Japan. This book is a curated collection of stories, guides, and photography from the site. For inquiries, contact: belleelene.biz@outlook.com.

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*“My verses are Aigaleo-Peristeri
I give it hand in hand
from Pefki and Marousi I do deals
from Zografou and Galatsi until Gyzi
it reaches everywhere and touches you
night day noon”
– Ksiga, Bita Peis*

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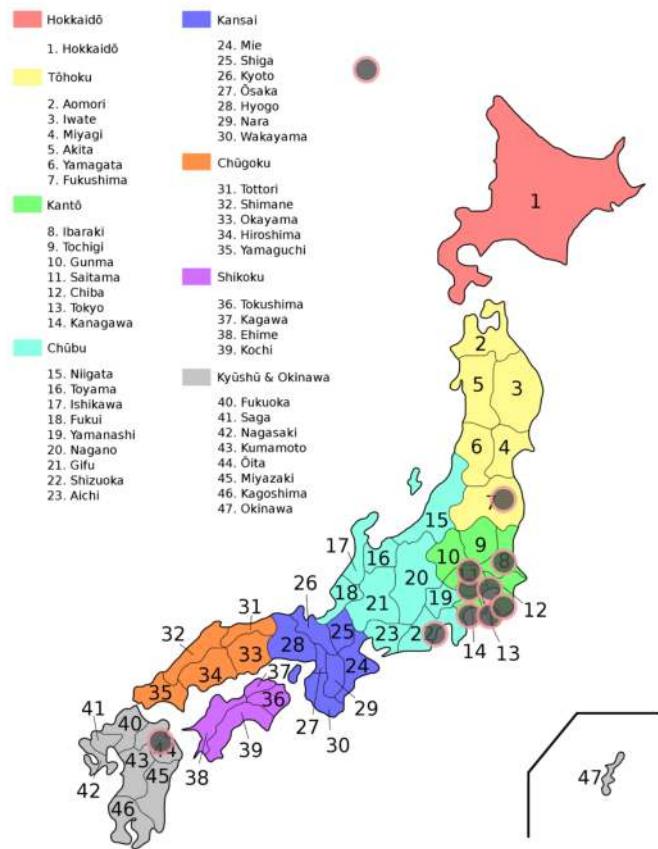
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Map of belleelene's Hikes in Japan

BELLEELENE'S HIKING MAP OF JAPAN

This doesn't look great at small sizes. Click the points to expand them.



Click the map to explore!

Essentials & Introduction

1 Tips about hiking in Japan

DATE: 12.12.2021

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As every Japanese person is surely going to inform you, 'Japan has four seasons and the most amazing nature'. Therefore, the most popular outdoors hobby of the locals is mountain hiking, aptly called just 'haikingu' or 'yama nobori' (山登り) in Japanese. People of all ages go hiking the endless mountain ranges of the countryside. Japan is 80% mountainous, after all.

Mostly a hobby of the elderly in order to maintain physical fitness, families with young children also date the climb. The reason hiking caters to such a diverse audience is that paths are maintained and clearly marked, with kilometres and times from one checkpoint to the next. Most paths are well maintained, either by the prefecture, electricity or other utility companies. The path is marked both with small square boxes in the dirt (at a 50m or 80m distance) and -typically- pink ribbons on tree trunks. Most of the time, path markers have a number, which you can use to explain your location when in danger. There's a long, interconnected network of courses, for example most hikes around Tokyo belong to the Kanto Fureai no Michi. Don't forget that apart from the mountains, there are a lot of paths along the coast. I use an app with maps called All Trails, but be warned that there are rare cases where the path entrances that are shown in the map are not accessible.



A hiking course in Hakone during spring

The best course of action is to double-check the route you want to follow by googling in Japanese; a local website will surely have an updated map about 'XX ハイキングコース' (XX hiking course). In some mountain paths, you might notice a fenced area. The fences are the borders of protected areas, either of wildlife protection where hunting prohibitions are in place, or of technical equipment. Sometimes, the fence might have an unlocked door, which opens easily with a latch. Only recently, I saw a fence door not parallel, but instead on the path, which prompted a mini panic attack. While I thought the path was off-limits, perplexed by all previous signs that didn't mention path closures and hastily calculating whether I'll be able to return to a previous checkpoint before the sun sets, I managed to read the note on the door. Apparently, it was OK to open the door to the other side, as long as you close it, in order to prevent wild animals from reaching nearby villages.

A lot of the mountains in Kanto are rocky or covered by tree roots. Hiking poles are a life-saver in such a terrain, they've saved me from so many inglorious falls. Popular courses, like [Mt. Tsukuba](#), have wooden steps that cover the path to make it safer, but not necessarily easier. At locations where the soil is rocky or eroded, there are chains or ropes to assist the climb. Other courses have the bare minimum, like a block of wood that functions as a bridge or chains to prevent rock falls. Many times the path is extremely narrow, enough to just put one foot next to the other, overlooking a steep cliff. That's why you should also make sure to wear proper hiking boots, especially considering how often it rains in Japan. Quick showers are not uncommon at all at the mountain, despite the weather report. I always bring a raincoat, a waterproof backpack and a set of clean clothes, in case this happens. The set of clothes serves an alternative purpose, since the best hiking paths tend to end at an onsen or sento.

During my years in the countryside, I've come across a variety of wild animals. From field mice, woodpeckers and deer, to wild boars and kamoshika. A few times, I saw signs of a bear, but I've thankfully managed to never come face to face with one. Luckily, the bears in Kanto are of the small asian variety. While they don't hibernate, they are not as dangerous as the brown bear. This however is not true for Hokkaido, where the large Ezo bear roams, as dangerous as it gets. The population of bears and boars has grown considerably in Honshu in the past decades, resulting in infestation and human casualties from time to time. Therefore, there are areas in the mountain where hunting is allowed, and you might come across traps. A way to avoid meeting a bear is to use a bear bell, the noise of which keeps them away. I am not convinced whether it actually works, since deer and wild boars seem to completely ignore it, but since I've never seen a bear that's a 100% success rate. You can also attach a whistle on your bag's shoulder strap, to call for help if you come across danger.

During the hike itself, there are many things to look forward to. Along the path, you might find [jizo statues](#), stacks of stones and pebbles and observatory decks. Many peaks have cable car access and riding it (if you are too lazy to walk) is always fun. The terrain changes a lot, as you move from dirt to tree roots and then to rock, so it never gets monotonous. Every season has its charm, although my favourite is autumn. Shinto religion places the gods at high places, thus many mountains have a shrine on top. I usually bring food with me, but at the weekend there might be an open mountain hut at the summit, serving noodles or soup. A hut at the top of Mt. Oyama even serves takoyaki. Campers often bring mini gas stoves with them. There are benches with tables at flat checkpoints. Speaking of camping, wild camping is prohibited, but there are a few free and rental

campsites available. On the contrary, public toilets are almost anywhere, at least at the start and the end of a path.



The mountain huts on top of Mt. Kobotoke, close to Mt. Takao • A bench for lunch around lake Okutama

If you liked your hike, remember that famous mountains have their own souvenirs, from local produce to commemorative pins. In exceptional cases, the souvenir shop might even sell wooden walking sticks with the mountain's name inscribed. You can get a lot of suggestions about future hikes from lists like the '100 mountains of Kanto'.



A Christmas tree at the top of Mt. Hinode (December 2020)

Western Tokyo (Okutama & Ome)

2 Day hike from Tokyo: Mt. Mitake, Hinode and Konpira

DATE: 9.30.2020

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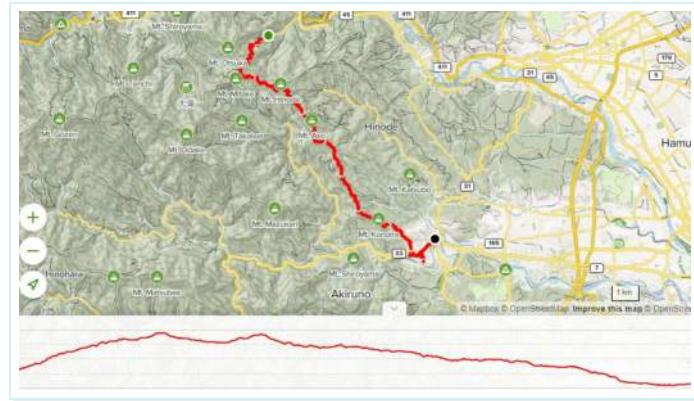


During the peak of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, people of Tokyo were asked not to leave the capital, in order to prevent further spread of the virus to rural areas. Then the long holiday of Obon came about and everyone was stuck in the city, but soon a loophole was discovered: Okutama area belongs to the Tokyo capital area! As you probably guessed already, Tokyoites were soaring towards Okutama's forests in order to cool off the summer heat at the numerous gorges and rivers of the area.

Located in the northernmost part of Tokyo, Okutama can easily be mistaken as part of Saitama prefecture. The area belongs to Chichibu-Tama Kai national park and offers a lot of options for nature excursions to the lake and mountains surrounding it. The most popular mountain in the area is Mt. Mitake (御嶽山), which is also equipped with a cablecar reaching almost to the top. Mitake station itself is exceptionally beautiful, built with wooden materials and decorated with old-school movie posters depicting old trains.



After arriving to Mitake station, we took the bus to the cable car. Since the mountain was still crowded even in September, there were double buses at each route. We decided to skip the cable car and instead walk our way to the top and follow [a 16km hiking route](#).



We visited Mitake on a rainy day, but not a single drop of rain reached us thanks to the lush forest surrounding the path. Still, everything was covered with mist as you can see in the pictures. Visibility was non-existent after 2-3 meters ahead. A lot of locations that usually offer great view allowed us to only see white clouds and the outlines of the nearest ridges.

The hike starts with a steep slope and follows a narrow road with tall trees on both sides. Along the way, a dozen of wooden signs are scattered, indicating the names of checkpoints of the route that were important in the past. Soon, you reach a small village, with a couple of hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops.



This is a good place to take a rest, as there are a lot of stairs to go until you reach the top. So I got myself a nice fluffy sweet made of brown sugar, called Karume-yaki (かるめ焼).



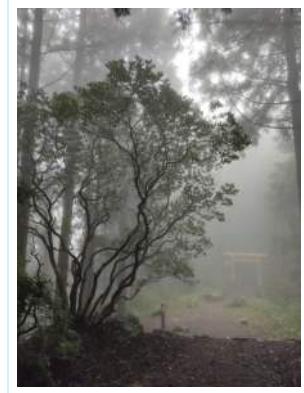
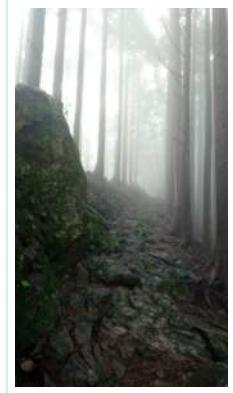
After entering a huge red torii entrance, tight steps take you to the top, where Mitake-shrine is located. The design is quite interesting, with small carved figures appearing to be trapped by or to support the steps. Just below the shrine there is a small museum called Treasure Pagoda, holding precious artifacts.



The shrine itself is not only pet-friendly, but openly welcomes pets. The gatekeepers in front of the shrine are two great hounds and the talismans and prayer boards sold at the shrine office depict a dog. A lot of people visit together with their dogs in order to get a blessing from the priest. At the base of the shrine's entrance, where the purification water-basin is located, there is a separate small area for washing the pets' paws as well.



Although the shrine complex has a couple of levels and a lot of interesting structures, we decided to head further towards Mt. Hinode. From there on there is no street or stairs, only plain rocky path. After a while, there is a landscape that easily qualifies as one of the best I've witnessed. Inside the white mist, a red torii appears and a wonderful branched tree keeps it company.

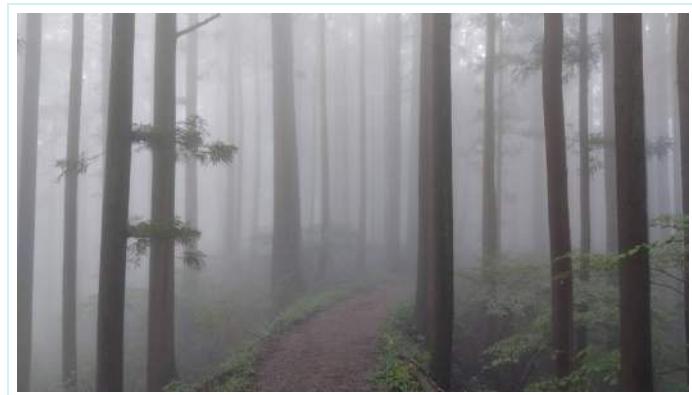


During summer, around here there is a simple lodge to spend the night, with the name of Shinonome Sanso (東雲山荘). Unfortunately, the combination of corona and September meant that it was already closed by the time I visited.



The top of Mt. Hinode follows soon after. On a clear day, it is supposed to have a gorgeous view of the mountains around, but this time we could see only pure white.

Soon, we start following the signs towards Mt. Konpira. This route was full of lush plants, but as empty as can be. It seems there are not many sightseeing spots along the way.



In the end, we never saw the top of Mt. Konpira. But we eventually reached the small Kompira shrine and the surrounding park. On the way down, there is a nice balcony observing the city below.



The city of Akiruno at the foot of the mountain is quite lively, with a nice rural style infused into it. You can find a Buddhist temple with a nice garden, as well as a couple of restaurants and shops. There is also a nice gorge at the Akigawa valley where you can swim during the summer months.

3 Day hike from Tokyo: Mt. Otake

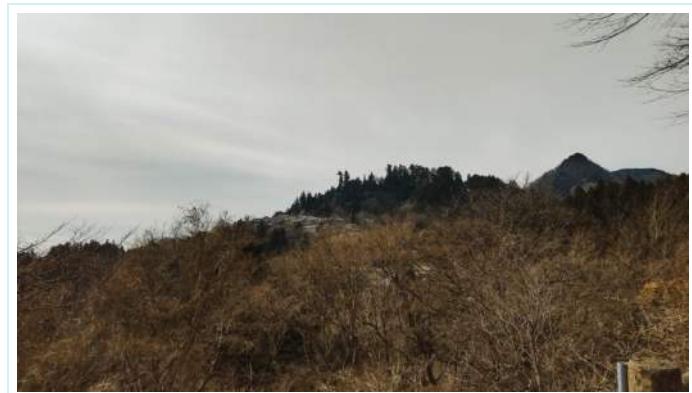
DATE: 3.17.2022

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[Visited on January 23rd, 2022]

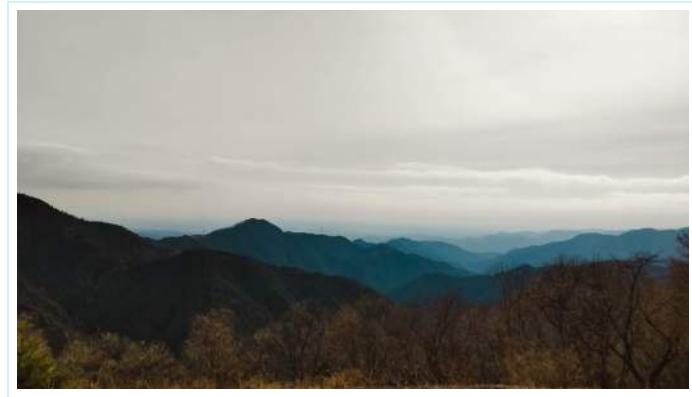
By now, Mt Mitake is probably the mountain that I've hiked the most, already five times. I always come across the sign that leads to Mt Otake, but I'm usually short on time with the sunset looming. This time, I decided to take the cable car up to Mitake in order to save some time and then hike my way from Mitake (御岳山) to Otake (大岳山).



Keep your eyes on the prize (the peak in this case)

The hike mid-winter is gloomy and dry. A lot of fallen leaves are obscuring danger on the path, but luckily there was no snow, just the occasional frozen mud. After passing Mitake shrine, I got a glimpse of the view at the

Nagaodaira observatory (長尾平展望台), headed back to the intersection in front of the Nagao cafe and took the higher path of the two, on the right. Last time I was at that point, I was running away from a wild boar, so be sure to keep your guard up. This time, though, the mountain was crowded with humans, no boars in sight, so I quickly reached a stone torii gate and again took the high path on the right. We will climb Mt. Nabewari en route to Otake.



View to Tokyo bay from Ogunashiya

Expect a path with steep ups and downs which follows the ridge. Large trees are sheltering the hikers and their roots double as steps. I climbed the stone stairs to the Ogunashiya (男具那社), a well-preserved vermilion shrine. Legend has it that when prince Yamato Takeru was lost in this area, a white wolf appeared to help him. So he ordered the wolf to become the guardian of the area and a messenger to god Otake. He also devoted his armour to this shrine. From this point there is a view to Tokyo bay. Takeru looked towards the sea and thought of his late wife exclaiming “我が妻よ” (=ware ga tsuma yo), so the place came to be known as ‘Ajuma’.

Ogunashiya shrine is related to Oku-no-in shrine a few meters above, at 1077m altitude. Some believe that Oku-no-in was the original location of worship for Mitake shrine, which was afterward moved to its present location. It seems that the mountainous landscape is similar to that of Mt. Yoshino in Nara, which led to similarities in terms of pilgrimage locations and the propagation of the Zao faith. Unfortunately, there is not much flat area to rest around Oku-no-in, so I kept going up to reach the top of Mt Nabewari (鍋割山) at 1084 m. This peak got its name due to its shape, because it looks like the lid of a pot (=nabe), and it is a landmark for fishermen in Tokyo bay. The path is a common pilgrimage route for the Yamabushi (the travelling monks) and I also met one just after Nabewari. You can spot them from their white robes, their headscarf and from the jingly staff that they carry.



The Otake mountain hut and the roof of Taiwan temple • The abandoned Otake mountain hut

Now, we come to the fun part. After Mt. Nabewari the path becomes increasingly steep with dangerous foothold. At some parts, there are chains to support yourself. After a few more ups and downs, I eventually reach another

torii gate. To the left, I can see the location of the old Otake mountain hut, which has remained closed since 2008. It used to be a large complex of buildings, including a heliport for provisions. The observatory is at risk of collapsing, so it is off limits. I am not sure if it is currently being repaired or just prevented from absolute decadence. A prominent but weirdly shaped roof is an abandoned Taiwan temple (台灣寺院), whose priest died and left the building to decay. The mountain hut was managed by Tokyo's metropolitan government, which is also evident by the signs at the public toilet. For some reason the marks for male/female bathrooms were marked with swiss-style hats, I wonder how this design came to be.



Public toilets at Mt. Otake

The god of Mt. Otake is a wolf, similar to the nearby [Mitake](#) shrine and Mitsumine shrine in [Chichibu](#). The path continues next to inner Otake shrine (大岳神社奥宮) and this last part to the summit is the steepest. Be aware of your footing and keep going, you will be rewarded by a marvellous view of Mt. Fuji at the top. Mt. Otake stands 1266.5 meters tall. Here there are a few benches to rest and relax. I was lucky to come across relatively clear atmosphere, with the entire southern mountain range of Kanto visible in detail. If you want, from here you can follow a path that leads to lake Okutama, although I returned back to Mitake, although skipping Nabewari this time.



The summit of Mt. Otake • View of Mt. Fuji

At the Nabewari intersection, I took the right path to Ayahiro falls. The entire Kanto sustained serious damage during typhoon Hagibis in 2019. The problems caused at that time are still visible, with some sections of the path still cut off 4 years later. Luckily, the rest area close to the falls is fully restored. Last time I was here, a week after the typhoon, this point was the furthest I could go. Bridges and sections of the path had collapsed, and it was impossible to reach Mt. Otake. Now the path is not perfect, but easily passable.

Back to Mitake shrine, I bought myself some wooden disks to use as coasters, because they smell like the forest. I said hi to the dogs who were washing their paws in the water fountain at the entrance to Mitake shrine and walked to the bus stop instead of taking the cable car.



A mountain hut at Mitake • Purification fountain for humans and pets at Mitake shrine

You can check the route at [alltrails](#).



4 Day hike from Tokyo: Imakuma Shrine and Kongo Falls

DATE: 3.31.2022

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[Visited on February 5th, 2022]

OK guys, this will be a short one. This is a hike for the days that you want to go out, but don't feel like trying too hard. Today we will head out to Mt. Imakuma (今熊山), which contrary to what the name suggests, has no bears present at the moment (Ima=now, Kuma=bear for the ones who happen to miss the joke).



The city of Musashi Itsukaichi and a couple of peaks I've already conquered, Otake and Mitake

To reach the trail, you need to first reach the middle of nowhere, i.e. Totohara in Akiruno city of Tokyo. Get off at the bus stop at Komine Park and start going up. The park is large, popular for families and even features a tiny flying fox, suitable for children. You can enjoy the early spring blossoms or move forward to the forested area. Just follow the path until you reach the end of the park and a sword-like mark of the goddess of mercy, Kannon. Specifically, this one is devoted to Bato Kannon (馬頭觀音 in Japanese, hayagrīva in Sanskrit), a rare depiction of the goddess with the head of a horse. While she is generally displayed as a graceful lady, Bato Kannon is fierce and formidable, a necessary attribute when you need to look after travellers in the woods. Simple stone monuments next to the road, with her name like this one, are used to commemorate the location where a horse died unexpectedly.



The first waterfall

Our next stop is Kongo falls (金剛の滝). The water falls from about 20 meters height, ends up in a small pond and then forms another waterfall. A tiny tunnel carved inside the stone takes you to the inner waterfall. Next to it, you can see stalactite formations in winter, as well as a statue of its guardian, Kongo Rikishi. I wonder if it was covered with leaves, because I never found it. Maybe the guardian had a day off on the day of my visit. What I could see, though, was the figure of Fudo Myo-o, a Buddhist saint, just next to the main waterfall. There was a metal staircase nearby, but unfortunately the path was inaccessible, so I have no idea where it leads.

Follow the signs to Mt. Imakuma, and you'll soon reach the backside of the homonymous shrine. A white torii gate stands in front of Imakuma shrine and a picnic table is located conveniently nearby. The mountain is just 505.7 meters tall, but from here, you can get a clear view of Tokyo. The Skytree and the skyscrapers of Shinjuku are easily discernible. Mt. Imakuma is nicknamed "Yobari-yama" or "call-out mountain". Apparently, if you climb up the mountain and ask it to bring back something you lost, either a person or an object, the mountain will gladly help. I tried asking for my missing necklace, but had little luck. I found dozens of shattered inari figurines behind the shrine, maybe they messed with my luck.



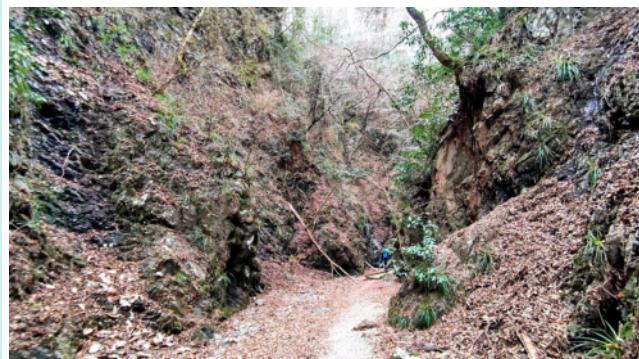
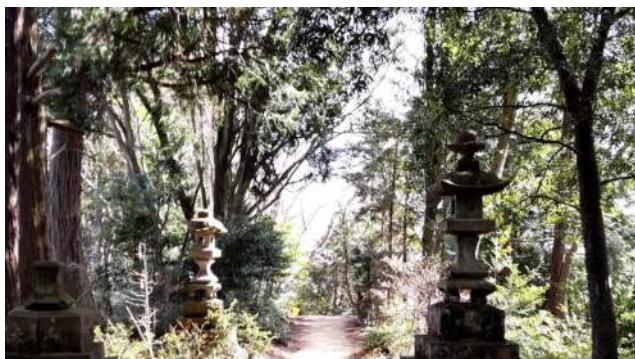
The top of Mt. Imakuma • A view of Tokyo on a clear day

From here, you can either grab lunch and head back, or follow the ridgeline to Mt. Kariyose (刈寄山). The landscape becomes more mundane as you go, since the mountain is being heavily capitalized upon. On the left side of the path there's a stone mine, while on the right side a lot of trees are cut down for forestry. However, by the time you reach Mt. Kariyose, the forest becomes untouched again. On the top of Mt. Kariyose, you can find yourself completely alone in the mountains, since it's one of the less crowded nature spots in Kanto.



Cut down trees along the path • View to Mt. Kariyose and the rest of the mountain range

A recommendation for hiker-campers is to continue from Mt. Kariyose to Mt. Jimba. However, that route is considerably long, therefore I returned the same way as I came. Since I visited the trail at the end of winter, everything looked dry and dusted. I'm pretty sure that especially Kongo falls will look amazing covered with the lush greenery of the summer.



Stone lanterns in front of Mt. Imakuma • The entrance to Kongo falls

You can check the route at [alltrails](#). It's 12 km long with about 800 m elevation gain, and takes about 5 hours to finish.

5 Day hike from Tokyo: Sidelining Okutama

DATE: 4.29.2022

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During the first state of emergency in Tokyo, at the beginning of the pandemic, people started rediscovering Tokyo prefecture (technically Tokyo metropolis). At that point, people realized that Tokyo does have a lot of mountains and nature reserves, with most prominent that of lake Okutama. Suddenly, the normally comfortable trains and buses in Ome city became crowded with first time hikers and families with children.



The Okutamao Bridge, viewed from the train

Apart from the lake itself, the whole Ome line next to it is abundant with hiking destinations. A lot of times I started heading to the lake, but found myself spending more time at the areas before it. Soon, the daylight was

so scarce that I had to leave the lake part for another time. This time again, I decided to hike the surroundings and basically move parallel to the train lines towards the lake. This hike is quick, just 10 km without any big elevation gains. Let's start from Kori station (古里駅).



Kori station on JR Ome line

Okutama is an artificial lake at the west side of Tokyo and the origin of one of its biggest rivers, the Tamagawa. The train tracks run in the valley created by the river, alongside Tamagawa. A notable feature in the landscape are the numerous bridges connecting the river banks. Most of the time, small villages are located on the west bank, while the east side is untouched and suitable for exploring the nature.



View from Mansei bridge • Ignore the dungeons, that's how all horror anime start

First, we cross Mansei bridge to reach the east side of the river. There are various theories about the origins of the name of the river. While it is now written as 多摩川, some said that the original writing referred to holy demons [靈魂], abundant waters [渟り] or its jewel-like beauty [玉石]. The river itself, closer to its delta, forms the natural border that separates Tokyo from Kanagawa prefecture.



View of Kori village

From the other side, you can enjoy a beautiful view of the village. Since the day was humid with sudden rain showers, I was lucky enough to discover the most dazzling tree ever. Its leaves had fallen already and dew droplets were decorating its branches. It was like one of those decorative trees that are artificially covered with glitter, but this one was glittering on its own. The juxtaposition of the tree next to the house with the mouldy thatched roof makes the composition all the more interesting.



The tree that captured my mind • Morning dew • This sign does not say to attack the bears, just to drive them away with noise

I followed the car road and eventually reached the path entrance. Remember to have a bear bell or a small radio with you, to avoid any uncomfortable encounters with a large bear. Right next to it, there is a waterfall, Ue no Taki (上の滝). I remembered it differently, and thought that I could reach closer to it, but apparently not anymore. From there, the elevation started, all the way to the observation deck at Matsunoki ridge (松ノ木尾根東屋). There is a protected area with benches and a clear view towards Hatonosu village and Masakadoo bridge. There is also a path from here that continues all the way to [Mt. Mitake](#), but it was closed for repairs when I visited.



View from Matsunoki ridge to Hatonosu village and the Masakadoo bridge • Hatonosu canyon • Unzen bridge

Finally, we can get closer to the river and walk inside Hatonosu canyon. Here we cross Unzen bridge to the other side, where you can find a few coffee shops and other establishments. It looks like a place that used to be bustling with life but is gradually falling in disrepair. For example, the path takes you inside what used to be a large hotel facility, but is now completely abandoned. In order to reach there, we first have to cross yet another bridge, Hatonosu bridge. It is located right next to cafe-gallery Poppo, which for some reason always brings me the chills.



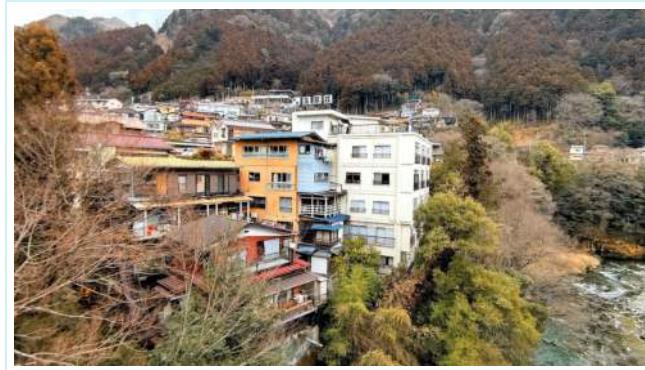
The entrance of cafe Popo • A small bridge you takes you to a shrine • The abandoned hotel

Lake Okutama was created in 1957, with the construction of Ogochi dam. It was an ambitious and highly important infrastructure project, considering that now it is the biggest water source for the city of Tokyo. Apart from that, it is the optimal location for swimming in the gorge, BBQ at the riverside and canyoning. From here on, I followed the stone road (岩の道) and reached the rest area above. However, technically this part was not passable, due to some damage on the bridges, so check in advance is you are planning to head there.



More views of Hatonosu canyon • From this side it looks like one of those old Chinese paintings on hanging scrolls. • The water around here is pretty deep and fast

Continue moving, and soon you'll meet the Shiromaru dam (白丸ダム). On the other side of the dam, there are a lot of canoeing companies to try. A small lake is formed at Shiromaru and on a clear day it has one of the bluest blue colours. Yet another bridge, Kazumakyō Bridge, and you find yourself at a grill house in the middle of the forest. While I was tempted to stay, I moved on to reach Okutama.



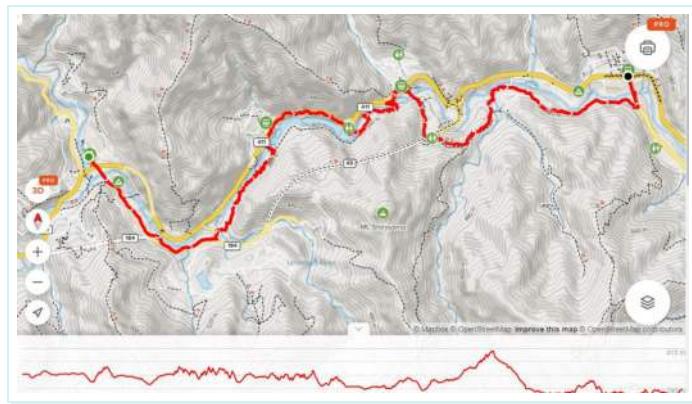
The village of Okutama • A poster for OPT (Okutama's Pika pika Toilet), a project for sparkling clean public toilets next to the hiking path

That's we stopped the hike, so we did not reach the lake, alas, once again. There are a lot of hot spring options around here, but sadly Moegi no Yu was closed on that day. Instead, we went further into the village and visited a much humbler bathhouse at Mikawaya Ryokan. I can't say that I regret it, because I had the entire bath completely for myself.



The hot spring bath at Mikaway Ryokan

You can check out today's route at [Alltrails](#).



The route from Kori station to Okutama station

6 Day hike from Tokyo: Tokyo's only top-100 waterfall

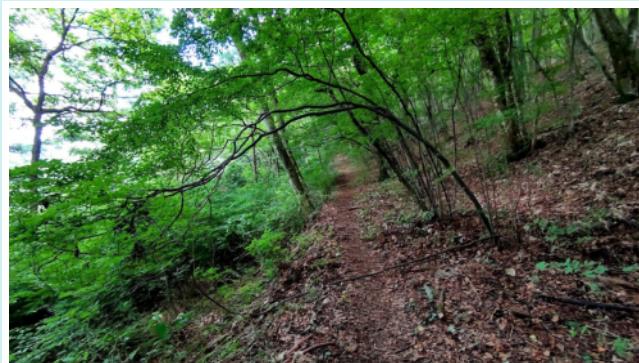
DATE: 8.9.2022

[Click here to view original post](#)



[Visited on July 24th, 2022]

For some reason, Japan likes to have every single matter organized, meticulously arranged in boxes and lists. For example, there are the [3 views of Japan](#) (Miyajima, Matsushima and Amanohashidate), the [100 mountains of Japan](#), or the [100 soundscapes of Japan](#). You can find a ranking list for almost everything. In the list of the 100 waterfalls of Japan however, Tokyo holds only one entry. You may wonder, how is it even possible that Tokyo has a waterfall at all. Well, Tokyo prefecture includes both Tokyo-to (the metropolis) and some small towns and villages in the undeveloped and mountainous western region. The west is where all of Tokyo's natural beauty exists, and where city boys flock to get a detox break.



View from Kamikawanori bus stop towards the pine forest • The mountain path during summer

This time, we are going to explore Hinohara village (檜原村), yes, an actual village in Tokyo. In order to get there, you first have to reach Musashi Itsukaichi station (武藏五日市駅) and then ride bus number 10 until Kamikawanori (上川乗) bus stop. Sit comfortably, because the bus ride is going to take a while. Eventually, you will arrive in the middle of nowhere, to a place covered with a thick forest of pines. There are numerous camp grounds at this location, but if you want to work out a bit, go slightly left and find the entrance to the path towards mountain Sengenrei (浅間嶺). The path starts with a steep slope, and soon you find yourself inside the lush forest. It's pretty humid and damp during the summer, the shade of the trees does not help much with the temperature. There was almost no one climbing in July. After reaching the top and meeting a handful of people who were having lunch at the benches, I found out that Mt. Sengenrei is recommended for the autumn and winter season, because of its low altitude.



The observatory at Sengenrei. It is part of the Chichibu-Tama-Kai national park. • View from Sengenrei to the Chichibu mountains. On the right in the back is Mt Otake. On the left Mt. Gozen.

There are actually two peaks next to each other. First, the observatory, with a 360° view to the mountains of the Chichibu-Tamakai national park. The peak of [Mt. Otake](#) is visible clearly at the background. On the opposite side, hidden among the trees, there is a tiny path to the actual Sengenrei peak. Apart from a tiny Fuji [Sengen shrine](#) and a small wooden sign on a tree, there is no view or anything else of interest there. The shrine looked brand new and the materials of the old shrine were left just next to it, exposed to the nature. This reminds me of the tradition of [shrines in Ise](#), where every 30 years the dismantle the shrines and re-built them just next to the original location. A marker structure is left to mark the previous/future location. In this case however, it looks that the materials are left out of necessity and not as a ritual for future re-building.

From Sengenrei, you can follow the signs towards Tokisaka pass (時坂峠). Along the path, there is amateur equipment for water sourcing. I've heard that many houses in the outskirts of Tokyo and Yokohama are still not connected to the water network, instead sourcing water from streams and springs. After passing an abandoned (?) tea house and restaurant, you will eventually end up at a road with a few houses scattered around. It seems this area is quite popular for bicycle and motorcycle rides. From here, you can easily find the way to the Hossawa waterfall.



One of the abandoned tea houses at Tokisaka pass. • Two well-kept Jizo statues with offerings in front of the chaya • A definitely-not-professional water sourcing system

Actually, the Hossawa waterfall is only one of the 50 waterfalls and the ‘eight waterfall views’ in the area. Hinohara village is located in a valley surrounded by mountains and Sengenrei ridge in the middle splits it in two. Naturally, a lot of mountain streams flow from higher altitudes to branches of Akigawa river, forming waterfalls as they do so. While Hossawa fall is the most popular, Aya, Meoto, Hanamizu and Kichijoji falls are easily accessible on foot. The local tourist association recommends a two-day stay in order to visit as many waterfalls as possible.



People enjoying the cool water during a hot summer day • The bottom of Hossawa waterfall

If you end up staying in Hinohara village, you should try the local potatoes. The villagers are so proud of their potatoes, that even the post box is shaped like one, the mascot Hinojaga-kun. The clean water streams provide optimal conditions for excellent tofu. Alternatively, you can collect some gacha gifts to support the local forestry association, or enjoy some shaved ice with syrup made from local ume plums. Surprisingly, the area is home to a few cozy coffee shops and restaurants. I recommend [Gallery Cafe Yamabico](#) (right next to Hossawa fall), [Harenoya](#) (an old house converted into a café) and [Kanakana](#) (a camper van converted into a restaurant). By bike or on foot, Hinohara village should be on your list for a quick break from Tokyo. Have you been there already? Are you planning to go? You can check out today’s route at [Alltrails](#).



The route from Kamikawanori bus station, to Sengenrei and to Hossawa fall

7

Day hike from Tokyo: Unazawa and the many waterfalls

DATE: 10.15.2022[Click here to view original post](#)

[Visited on October 25th, 2020]

Last time, I told you about [the only top-100 waterfall of Tokyo](#). However, the Okutama area is abundant with myriads of smaller waterfalls to enjoy throughout the year. You'll find the majority of falls concentrated around the Unazawa area, deep in Tokyo's west.



The path starts from Hatonosu station on the JR Chuo line. Like the rest of stations on the same line, it is small, wooden and decorated with colored glass. The highest altitude of the path is just short of 800 meters, so it is accessible all year long. The high season is either early spring or late autumn, when other paths are closed due

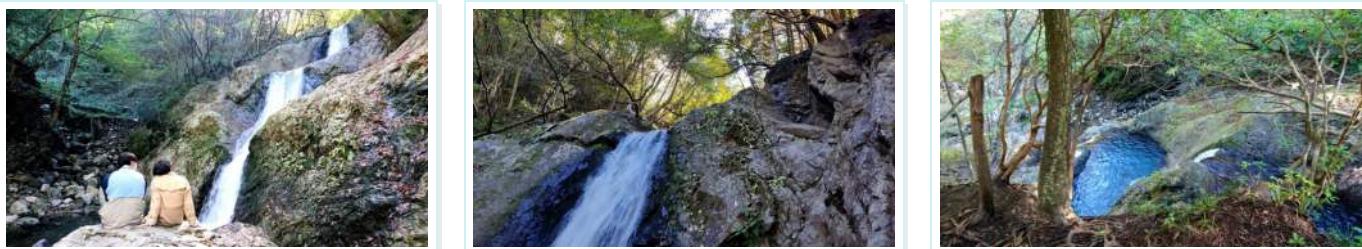
to snow. However, avoid heading there on a rainy day, because you need to climb rocks and ropes in order to reach the largest waterfall.



The goal of the hike is the three falls of Unazawa (海沢三滝). But there are definitely more than three waterfalls. The name Unazawa includes the character of the sea, despite the valley being tucked in between the mountain ranges of Nishi-Tama. Right at the beginning of the trail, you are going to reach an observation deck at Matsunoki Ridge Higashiya. I've mentioned this location a couple of times, because it is where you can turn and [hike towards Mt. Mitake](#). Unazawa is on the other side, so you have to first pass the fork to the small peak Hatonusu Shiroyama (鳩ノ巣城山) and continue to Onara pass (大檜峠). The forest around here is thick and relatively empty. If you are lucky, you may come across kamoshika, the Japanese goat-antelope, which looks exactly like you'd imagine a frankenstein goat-antelope.



Eventually, you are going to meet signs that point towards Mitsugama Falls (三つ釜の滝), a fall with three levels with ponds shaped like shallow cooking pots. This waterfall is easily accessible by car and is by far the most popular for couples. From here on, the path becomes steeper and slippery. I came across a group of people climbing closer to the waterfalls, but they were fully equipped with uniforms and bright-colored helmets.



I didn't dare to venture any closer, so made my way to the next waterfall, Nejire Falls (ネジレの滝). This fall is 10 meters high and relatively thin. By continuing up, you can observe Mitsugama no taki from above. There

is an iron ladder to assist the climb at some point. The path was seriously damaged during typhoon Hagibis in 2019 and has not been restored since.

The last fall is the tallest, the 23-meter-high Otaki Falls (大滝). In order to reach it, you have to follow a dirt path, climb a steep, almost vertical rock with a rope and cross some unstable sections. Otaki Falls is certainly worth the trouble to get there, because of its amazing iridescent blue color and its moss-covered surroundings. Interestingly, the signs mentioned four, not three waterfalls. The last one is Fudo Falls (不動滝), just above Otaki Falls. It is impossible to see it from below Otaki and there is no path to walk there. However, there are metal hoops to assist rappelling and can be accessed if you have experience in climbing waterfalls. Unfortunately, I had to let this one pass.

On the way back, you will pass just next to Iidozawa Falls (井戸沢), also known as Tenguiwa Falls (天狗岩の滝). This area seems popular for sawa-nobori, or waterfall climbing, like the group I met earlier.



The path ends either at Shiromaru station or at Okutama station. The highlight of the return trip is a small tunnel (海沢隧道), that is supposedly haunted. I didn't feel any creepy auras, and I found out it was haunted just as I was writing this article. If you happen to go there, tell me if you meet any ghost. At the American Camp, turn to the left in order to get to Okutama. A good choice for onsen and relaxation is Moegi no Yu, on the way to the train station.



In total, the Unazawa trail is almost 14km long and mostly desolate of people. You can follow the route in [alltrails](#). The hike is mostly moderate but challenging at times and contacting some sports group in the area to try sawa-nobori should worth it.

8 Day Hike from Tokyo: Lake Okutama

DATE: 3.24.2023

[Click here to view original post](#)



I'll be soon running out of hikes, so it's back to basics. After numerous failed attempts to reach lake Okutama (I always got distracted and followed a different path), I finally made it!



Lake Okutama rose to prominence in 2020, because it is the largest nature reserve in Tokyo prefecture. At that time, travel across prefectures was discouraged, so Tokyoites had to settle with re-discovering their own prefecture. While Okutama is technically Tokyo, it is extremely close to Yamanashi prefecture, the home of Mt. Fuji and award-winning wines. Additionally, it is the gateway to Mt. Kumotori, a peak that stands on the tripartite border between Tokyo, Saitama and Yamanashi prefectures, itself popular as the setting of the anime *Kimetsu no Yaiba*.



In order to reach lake Okutama, one has to change trains at Ome station. That's usually the first location that distracts me. Technically a city, Ome is the last stronghold of civilization where conbini's are available. It holds yearly flower festivals, like the Azalea festival at Shiobune Kannon-ji temple. There are a few paths to follow around here, like the one that starts from Mt. Raiden (雷電山) or the one that takes you to the haunted Mummy mountain (ミイラ山). If you continue on the Okutama line, the next distraction appears in the form of Mt. [Mitake](#), a fan favorite for hikers of all ages. Then, there's Kori, [Hatonosu](#) and Shiromaru stations, with their respective peaks and gorges, it's hard to resist stepping out the train. Don't get me started on the gorgeous waterfalls of [Unazawa](#) or the largest waterfall of Tokyo at [Kawanori](#). I know, you got distracted yourself already!



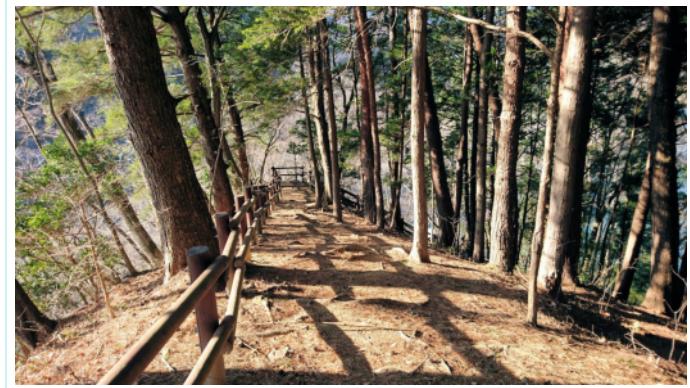
Well, if you managed to stay on the train this long, you are about to reach lake Okutama. The lake itself is man-made, a result of many dams constructed to harness the power of a tributary of the great Tama river. The lake is the main source of water for the mega-city of Tokyo. Until the end of the Edo period, lots of places in the area were off limits for commoners, because it was an official hawk hunting ground. As a result, the forest is untamed and pristine, with especially old beech trees. A few of them remain though, because the flooding caused by the dam construction submerged them, including a picturesque onsen village.



The lake from above looks like an Asian dragon, with twirling legs and spiky claws. Two characteristic pedestrian bridges connect the opposite shores. The most photogenic one is Mugiyama Bridge. It was initially made of floating drums, but it has since been replaced by thick plastic floaters. When walking over it, it feels a bit like you are floating on a raft. Since it is a floating bridge, it may be closed when the winds are high. The opposite side of the bridge used to be a nice village, which was abandoned after the flooding of the lake, because it was separated from the rest of the villages. Needless to say, if you find yourself on the other side of Mugiyama bridge when the bridge is closed off, there's no place to spend the night, so jumping over the fences to cross it might not be the worst idea (don't ask me how I know it).



Anyway, if you cross Mugiyama bridge and walk parallel to the lake, you will soon reach Yama no Furusato Mura, the remnants of the old village which has since been turned in a visitor center with traditional craft activities, restaurants and a campsite. Hovering above the center, there is a ridge and a trail that eventually reaches to Mt. Mito, one of the three mountains of Okutama. The trail is quite steep and pretty narrow at times, especially along the ridgeline. For this reason, I was surprised when a lady at the park told me it was part of the road that the processions of the feudal lords of Yamanashi used on their way to Edo-Tokyo. How did they move all those people, animals and gifts across such a narrow path?



If you want to follow the path to Mt. Iyo and Mt. Mito, you have to be careful because there are some trees marked with pink ribbons that lead to nowhere. The markings of the actual path are small and concealed. I didn't try my luck with Mt Mito, because the path was too steep and the sun was low already. Keep that in mind if you plan to attempt summitting Mito. Additionally, be on alert for bears, because there was a recent sighting. I didn't see any bears, but to be honest, the discarded TV and radio that I found in the middle of the forest, scared me more, do forest ghosts need entertainment?

If you want to check out the details of this hike, you can follow the route in [alltrails](#).

Kanagawa (Hakone, Tanzawa & Kamakura)

9

Day hike from Tokyo: The big mountain

DATE: 7.15.2022

[Click here to view original post](#)



[Visited on July 9th, 2022]

There is a specific mountain that I use as a benchmark for my physical ability after a long break from hiking. I climb it so often, that I know every turn and every rock by now. Even its name is blunt: Mt. Ooyama –the big mountain. But don't let this description fool you, the hike to the top of Mt. Ooyama is more than a simple pleasure.



The bottom shrine (下社) of Mt Ooyama

Mt. Ooyama (大山), with its 1,252 m tall stature, is one of the peaks at the edge of the [Tanzawa mountain range](#). It is one of the most famous mountains in Kanagawa and a popular pilgrimage location since the Edo era. The custom dictated that pilgrims should carry a wooden sword to the top of the mountain, to devote it to the gods. The beauty of the mountain and the surrounding valley has been captured by famous ukiyo-e (woodblock) painters. Among them, Katsushika Hokusai (the one with the wave off Kanagawa) and Utagawa Hiroshige (the one with the 100 views of Edo).



A large torii gate at the shopping street outside Isehara station

But first things first. To reach Mt. Ooyama, you need to get off at Isehara station and take a bus to the shopping street and the rope way. While on the bus, you are going to notice an abundance of rivers and streams. It is not by chance that Ooyama has the most famous tofu in Kanto. Clear running water is an essential ingredient to tasty tofu. Every year in March, a tofu festival is held in the area, which includes Shinto rituals and folk performances. In the past, the shops and inns were kept by monks. They would make wooden spintops (獨楽, koma) and distribute them as lucky charms to the pilgrims who stayed at the inns. A spinning top is auspicious because it symbolizes money moving around, and to be frank, who doesn't want a bit more money.



Don't forget to count the tops along the pavement to solve the quiz at the beginning of the path • The rope way to the bottom shrine of Mt. Ooyama

Here is where you need to make an important decision. Although I mentioned a rope-way, I highly recommend climbing the steps up to Ooyama shrine. If you have trust in your knees, that is. At this mountain as well, there are two ways to climb up: either by the otoko-zaka (男坂, man slope) or the onna-zaka (女坂, woman-slope). Technically, otoko-zaka is harsher, steeper, but faster. Onna-zaka is supposed to be smoother and easier (for fragile ladies, I guess?). I can tell you that while this is mostly true, there is not such a big difference in difficulty between the two. Both have tall stone steps that go straight up and are covered by lush greenery. However, onna-zaka is lit up at sunset, therefore is safer for the way back.



More stairs

After a lot of steps and a few plateaus, you will reach the top station of the rope way. You are going to be all sweaty and sticky from the humidity, trust me. Three shops are there to quell your thirst and hunger, one of which even serves delicacies from the German cuisine and cold beers. Stop and catch a breath, because the path hasn't even started yet. Immediately above the shops is the shrine of Mt. Ooyama. Actually, the shrine is split in two. The main shrine is at the top of the mountain, so this one at 696 m is the bottom shrine (下社, shimosha). From here, you can enjoy a clear view of the sea, including Enoshima and the Izu islands. Three gods are enshrined in Ooyama shrine: Ikazuchi, the god of thunder, Ama, the god of fishermen, and Toriiwakusubune, the god of ships. Before Meiji Restoration and the separation of religions, shinto faith was merged with Buddhism. Therefore, Ooyama temple, which is located a bit lower on the mountain, was also part of this religious complex.



Shaved ice with syrup (kakigori) to cool you down

Did you notice the clouds and the drizzle? The alternative name of the mountain is Mt. Afuri (阿夫利山 or 雨降り山), a homonym to the phrase 'rainy mountain'. If you were in dire need of a rainfall, that's where you had

to pray at. Another nickname is Mt. Kunimi (国見山), the one who ‘observes the nation’. The stature of Mt. Ooyama used to stand out when viewed from Edo (Tokyo) and was in line with Mt. Fuji. So, it appeared as a caretaker of the realm.



The staircase from the rope way station to Afuri shrine • Afuri shrine on a sunny day

There are a few cool things at the shrine, like statues of the twelve Chinese zodiac signs, a propaganda statue of school students and a brand new luxury café with maccha tiramisu and an awesome night view to the Sagami bay.

On the left side of the shrine building, you will find the entrance for the path to the mountain top. From here, it takes approximately 2 hours to reach the top. Expect fog and low-hanging clouds to come and greet you. You may be slightly rained on, but that's OK. I don't mind the humidity at this point, because it is not hot anymore. Temperature drops fast with altitude. The path is more rocky and uneven from here on. You may come across deer, peacefully grazing on grass. They are not scared of people –but they don't come close either. One time, a deer appeared at the end of the path, amid the fog, under a tiny hole in the clouds from where sunlight could pass through. My Japanese friend thought it looked magnificent, like a messenger from the mountain gods.



The path to the mountain top is rocky and foggy • Sometimes, this is what it looks like outside the path

At the top, you will find the main shrine, which is usually unmanned. There is also a mountain hut that serves soups and noodles, with a lot of benches. Did you ever wonder how the materials reach the hut? Well, it's actually a part-time job. There's a poster with the job description on the wall. Anyone can do it as long as they are capable of carrying 20-30 kg of materials and equipment to the hut, on foot. I've met a couple of those guys during my hikes in Kanto. Their thighs are huge, and they huff and puff from the weight, but somehow still manage to move faster than me. One time, I met a guy at the top, who was cosplaying as a neon-green sailor moon. I'm still not sure how they managed to hike on white heels or how they kept a full make-up intact from sweat. It seems I'm the weakest of them all.



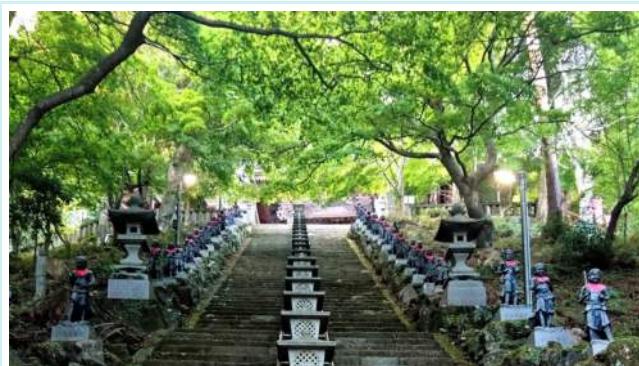
Job description for those who want to carry stuff to the mountain hut • The inner shrine at the top of Mt. Ooyama

Now, you can either return the same way as you came, or be smart and take a slightly different route to the Miharashidai (viewpoint). Not only will you freshen up from the change in the landscape, you will also have a greater chance of meeting wild deer. Moreover, you can get a glimpse of Niju falls and the water dragon that protects it.



The benches at Miharashi-dai viewpoint • The rest of the mountain range

Back to simosha, and in order to make a nice loop, it's better to take the onna-zaka. This passes through Ooyama temple. What's the difference between shrine and temple, you ask? Shrine refers to Shinto religion, while temple refers to Buddhism. This temple was important for Tokugawa Iemitsu, one of the shogun. To be honest, in its current state, it's probably the most untidy temple I've come across. Stone statues and repair equipment are scattered around, without any care. Nevertheless, it still looks quite pleasant. Statues of the 7 local seven lucky gods are guarding the path on the way down, so be sure to count them and receive their blessings.



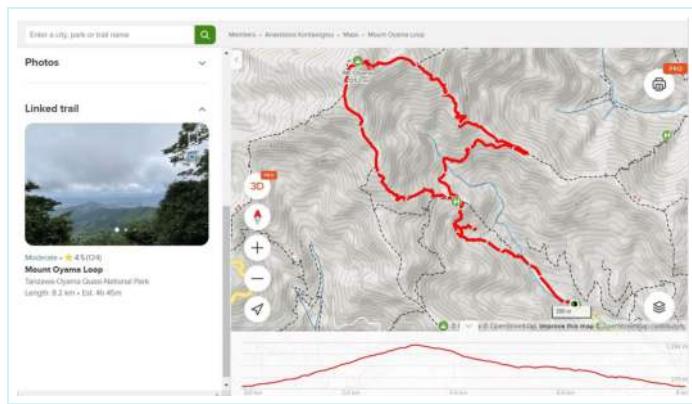
The main hall of Ooyama temple • Buddhist statues with swords guarding the stairs to Ooyama temple

Most probably, by the time that you reach the shopping street at the base station of the rope way, almost all shops will be closed. There are a few restaurants that serve set menus with Japanese cuisine and local tofu. I usually just wash the mud off my boots at the rest area next to the bus stop, and grab a few packs of tofu at the shop just across. Instead of ice packs, they give you a bag of tofu scraps for cooling. Be careful, those are not edible!



A few surviving hydrangeas at the shopping street at the cable car

You can check out today's route at [Alltrails](#).



Mt Ooyama loop from and to the bus station below the rope way

10 Day Hike from Tokyo: From Mt. Takao to lake Sagami

DATE: 11.17.2022

[Click here to view original post](#)



Back to the basics, because the MOST elementary mountain around Tokyo is none other than Mt. Takao (高尾山). It is tiny (only 599m tall), easily accessible by train and cable car, and has interesting foliage colors all year round.



The station for the lift • The train station at Takaosan-guchi

Mt. Takao is primarily famous as an easy pilgrimage location, owing to the Buddhist temple complex that is located at its summit. The association of Mt. Takao to the Yamabushi and Shugendo pilgrims helped increase

its status ([read about Shugendo here](#)). Departing from Takaosan-guchi station, there are two different ropeway routes and eight hiking routes that can lead you to the top. The paths and hiking facilities are well-maintained; there's even a boot-washing corner in front of the station. It is almost always crowded, but the peak season is during the cherry blossoms in April and during the red foliage in November.



Monuments dedicated to ancestors and spirits along the path • The mountain is covered by lush greenery

The symbol of the mountain is the Tengu (天狗), the messenger of the gods. Although the name means “heavenly dog”, Tengus are depicted with human bodies, bird beaks and wings. The large nose and the red-colored face are also common traits. In Takao, a pair of Tengu is the most prominent iconography. The first Tengu is a Karasutengu (烏天狗) with greenish skin and a crow's beak, which holds a sword. The second Tengu is a Hanatakatengu (鼻高天狗) with reddish skin and a long nose, which holds a feather fan. Statues of Tengu, octopi, squirrels, turtles and other lucky animals can be found all around the mountain.



The two most famous Tengu of Takao • Wooden steps and mushrooms

Another sightseeing spot on the mountain is the cedar tree with octopus roots. The Tako-sugi tree was blocking the way when a Yamabushi monk was trying to open a path. He thought that there was no other way to solve the problem, apart from cutting down the tree. On the next day, when he was getting his saw ready, the monk realized that the tree had curled its roots like an octopus, making way for the path.



Jizo statues of the ancestors • Grape ice-cream and statues of Buddhist saints

A few small waterfalls are scattered around, depending on the ascending path. I liked the Snake falls and the Biwa fall. There is an observation deck at Inari-yama. I usually like to hike the unpaved route 6 and then do a small loop to get to the Yakuoin temple.



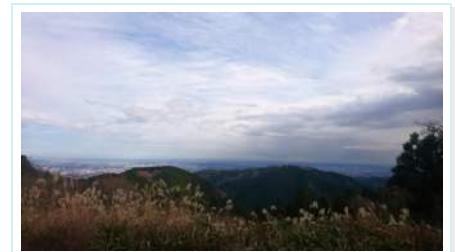
Wood carvings that depict a monkey • One of the temple buildings, proudly supported by the Yakult yoghurt company

At the top, there is a flat area with a couple of shops and restaurants. A few meters further you can find an observatory with a view to Mt. Fuji. This part is also where you can enjoy red Momiji and pink Sakura trees.



The top of Mt. Takao

Actually, Mt. Takao is the exit point of a large network of paths that reach as far as Mt. Minoo in Osaka. If your end goal is exercise, you can keep moving and get further away from Hachioji in Tokyo to end up at lake Sagami in Kanagawa. In between, there's Mt. Kobotoke-Shiroyama. The large hut there is more spacious and less crowded than the ones on Mt. Takao. You can recognize this mountain peak from the grumpy, wooden Tengu statue that has turned its back to Tokyo.



The top of Mt. Kobotoke-Shiroyama • The mountain hut on top of Mt. Shiroyama • View towards Tokyo

From Kobotoke, the path turns and climbs down the mountain towards lake Sagami. A lot of Jizo statues are scattered around. I recommend stopping for mochi and tea at Fujimi-chaya (富士見茶屋) in Chigira. The thatched roof of the chaya is barely holding the weight of all the moss that is covering it, but the grandma who owns the shop has a smile that cures everything.



View to lake Sagami • Rice fields and cemeteries

The next checkpoint is Benten bridge (弁天橋). Right before the bridge there's a cat sanctuary for stray cats (弁天橋猫の会). You can donate money for our furry friends and receive some fresh yuzu as a reward. Continue walking along Sagami River and you will eventually end up at the hydroelectric plant and the dam. The lake was one of the large infrastructure projects of the Showa era.



Sagami river and Benten bridge • A cat sanctuary • The banks of Sagami river • View of the lake

Sagami lake used to be a prominent resort a few decades ago. Nowadays, only the shell of its past self remains. The boat owners can be racist so beware, but the lady with the small coffee shop Fujiya (富士屋) gave me three traditional dolls and a tea pot with a 90% discount. You can also find some establishments that have arcade machines so old that I doubt that they are still working.



The park at lake Sagami • Enjoy the boat ride • Arcades from decades past

If you want to check out the details of this hike, you can follow the route [here](#).

11 Day Hike from Tokyo: The Tanzawa Mountains, Tonodake and Tanzawa

DATE: 10.28.2020

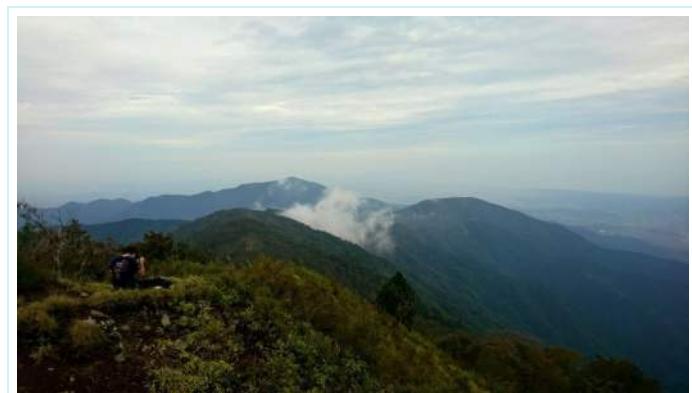
[Click here to view original post](#)



[Visited on October 4th, 2020]

We already know that people are mesmerized by Mt. Fuji. But as I have already [described before](#), Mt. Fuji up-close doesn't have the best view –or best scent for what is worth. In order to get the most out of it, a lot of people opt to climb the peaks of a mountain range just on the north of Mt. Fuji. Beware, the Tanzawa mountains are much rougher than Mt. Fuji will ever be, despite being half its height.

The Tanzawa mountain range is a group of peaks located on the south side of Kanagawa prefecture, reaching to the border with Shizuoka and Yamanashi prefectures. While the highest peak is Hirugatake (蛭ヶ岳) at 1,673 m, the most popular is Mt. Oyama (大山) at 1,252 m due to its religious significance. I've recently experienced the many, many, many stone steps of Mt. Oyama, so a natural and untouched path was much needed.



We decided to head to Tonodake (塔ノ岳) and if the sunset allowed for some margin, continue to Mt. Tanzawa itself. It was a nice day, with some persistent clouds and a relatively cool breeze. A lot of people climb the mountain, and a considerable amount of accidents seems to happen. A helicopter evacuation needed to be arranged just the previous day, according to the [blog posts](#) of one of the mountain huts. For this reason, at the starting point next to Okura Bus Stop (大倉バス停) there is a box where hikers leave a notification paper with all their contact information and hiking plans. We're starting our way up, climbing the Okura ridge.

The path itself is well-marked, but quite rough, with hard rocks laying disorderly in contrast to the clean stone steps of Mt. Oyama. At points, the path was covered with man-made wooden supporters or steps. However, these structures were available only on relatively flat areas; there is no way to bypass heavy rocks with wooden steps.



Tanzawa mountains are not easy to climb. Adding to this, the prettiest season is supposedly in winter, when everything is covered in snow. As a result, 5-6 huts are available along the path in order to provide a resting place to climbers. Some of them only serve food or beverages and operate only on weekends. Others provide accommodation and remain open throughout the year. You can determine which serves what by the suffix on the hut's name; chaya (茶屋) are resting places and sanso (山荘) are mountain lodges.

This fact poses a question. How do the mountain huts get provisions? One option is by helicopter, although it is expensive. Another option appeared in front of us after 30 minutes on the path. A muscular guy wearing only a T-shirt (imagine us with jumpers, raincoats and such on his side) carrying no rucksack. He was carrying something much more valuable; 5 cartons of two dozens Asahi beer each. A lot of athletic guys take up the task of hiking up to mountain huts in order to transport anything necessary, from beers to soba noodles and to blankets.



Hanadate Sanso

The climb towards Tonodake did not offer anything remarkable until the top. The only things around were trees and wood planks and rocks. Quite the detox indeed. Clenching teeth and mustering courage, you climb peak after peak just to discover you are not quite there yet.



Suddenly, the trees start to clear up and a magnificent view of the mountain range and the city of Hadano below catches you by surprise.



Sonbutu Sanso

Soon, we reach the To-peak. The To (塔) in Tonodake means “tower” and indeed the peak at 1,490 m is towering above the city. The temperature in the afternoon is at 10 degrees Celsius, as per the thermometer on the top. On Tonodake, there is a small Buddhist sanctuary. Actually, just the previous day there was some Buddhist festival on the top, thus the statues were covered with confetti and ribbons.



From now one, there are two options; either grab hot coffee in the hut of Sunbutu Sanso or continue as quickly as possible to Mt. Tanzawa, which needs an approximately 1.5 hour round trip with a fast pace. Mount Fuji is barely visible due to the heady clouds, so second peak it is.



In order to reach the peak that gave the name to the whole range, you need to go down and back up again, crossing the ridge. The hike continues with more foliage and shorter trees. Due to the lower temperatures of high altitude, a couple of trees have started turning red for the koyo.



Parts of the path were violently destroyed, but that for sure does not hinder a determined hiker.

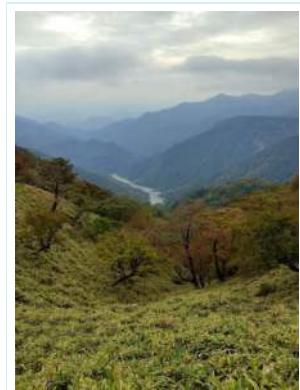


With some patience, the 1567 m of Mt. Tanzawa are conquered. A smaller Buddhist statue is there to take care of emergency prayers and reward your devotion to climbing all the way to the top. Another mountain hut is waiting at the top.



Miyama Sanso

Looking on your left, either from Tonodake or from Tanzawa, one can see a white river-like shape in the valley below. That is none other than the pure blue of the Yushin valley. Unfortunately, due to major disasters in the area, most paths in the valley are closed, even dangerous to access. If it reopens soon, and you are able to get there, rumor has it, you can see there one of the prettiest shades of blue.



If you actually liked the mountain range, consider grabbing a stamp-rally pamphlet from the nearest hut. Climbing these two peaks, along with the neighboring Nabewari and further away Mt. Oyama, and collecting stamps from checkpoints along the way, is not only proof of your achievement, you are also rewarded with a collectible gift.

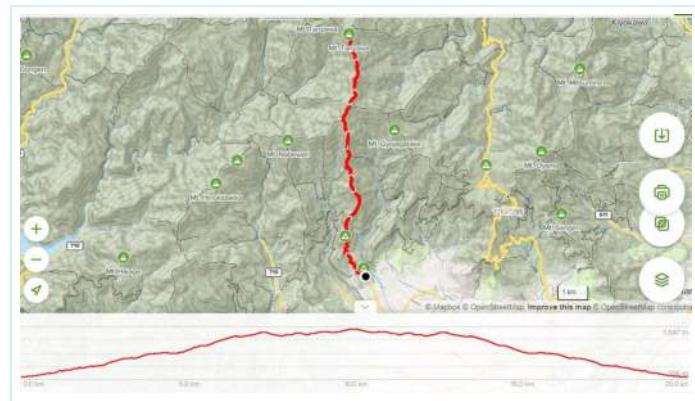


We were the last people to start getting down the mountain at around 4pm. The owner of one of the huts was kinda worried about us starting to climb down that late, but was still confident that we would make it. Oh, and guess what, we met the beer-transporter guy arriving finally to Tonodake. It took him double than us, and

he sure looked exhausted. Anyway, in the end we had to hike with flashlights for the last 30 minutes, but the terrain was flat enough to be safe. We also met a couple of people who seemed to not worry too much about their pace.



The reward for such a hard day was some spicy korean BBQ with handmade kimchi. We entered the shop all muddy, with our full hiking gear, but luckily no one seemed to bother. I usually try to get to an onsen and clean up first, but at that time my hunger was stronger than my shame.



If you are interested in the route, the detailed are available [here](#). I strongly recommend allocating enough time, in order to avoid having to move after the sunset, like we did. I am not sure if I will try to climb again during winter, but the images of the snowy landscape got me tempted, I will not lie.

12 Day hike from Tokyo: Mt. Jinba, a mountain with a horse

DATE: 7.17.2021

[Click here to view original post](#)



There are days that you want to be out in the nature, but don't have the courage to do a long hike. There are also days when you can't decide on a possible hiking destination between Tokyo and Kanagawa. A mountain with a horse is the ideal solution that can get you out of the pinch.



Last year, in the beginning of the summer, there was a short while in early June that the rain stopped. On that time, I decided to hike around Mt. Jimba, a quiet small mountain –or so I thought. Head to Takao station, but don't climb up to Mt. Takao. Instead, hop on bus 32 to the east. Our 13km course starts at a bus stop called 'Jimbakougenshita' in front of a solitary soba shop. The first part of the course is along a mountain road, but

don't let that disappoint you. Lush greenery accompanies you, as well as a few [stone guardians](#). Walk the road until you find a downward facing entry point to the new hiking path (新ハイキングコース分岐). Are you out of breath? You are going to be in a minute, for the path continues upwards with a steep slope. The stair steps you are walking on are tree roots, hugging each other harmoniously. Oh, did you bring a bear bell? I was basically running, because I heard one was seen around here recently.

The slope soon starts to flatten and a strange view awaits. The right of the forest is vivid, green, alive. The left side is branchless and dusky. Is it because of the sun not being able to reach and nourish the other side? Is it some kind of forest protection measure? I don't know, but the scene looks like the meeting point of light and darkness, like an introduction to something fierce and glorious.



After a relatively narrow section of the path and a wide curve, you meet a checkpoint with a route going up and another going to Wada-touge (和田峠), a mountain pass with the standard mountain cafe-restaurant-resting place. You could take the detour to grab a refreshment, but I suggest continuing straight to the top. Soon, there are no more trees in view and the land flattens a bit around the peak.

The name of Mt. Jinba (陣馬山) means literally 'horse camp', so maybe that's why you find yourself staring at a giant horse's buttocks. As the story goes, when the Takeda clan was planning to attack the Hojos at Takiyama castle, they set up camp on the flat summit of this short mountain. Thus, the name was changed from Chigayaba (茅場, harvesting ground for Kaya branches used to make Go and Shogi game boards) to Jinba (陣場, campground). Then, the 2nd character of Jinba was changed to the homonym character of the horse (馬), a necessity during the warring states period. Maybe that's why this white horse statue was erected, as a nod to the mountain's name.



The highest point of this flat peak is 857 meters tall. The interesting thing about it is that it sits exactly on the border separating Tokyo and Kanagawa prefectures. The wooden pole on the horse's right side writes 'Tokyo prefecture', while the pole on its left side writes 'Kanagawa prefecture'. The view is amazing, because on a clear day you can see Mt. [Fuji](#)(Yamanashi pref.), the mountains of [Chichibu](#)(Saitama pref.), the mountains of [Tanzawa](#) (Kanagawa pref.), even Mt. [Tsukuba](#)(Ibaraki pref.) and Boso peninsula (Chiba pref.) with some effort.

A full 360 degree view of the entire Kanto plain is what this horse statue observes every day. The peak finds its name written in a lot of lists (why do they even have so many lists), like the 100 best spots with Mt. Fuji view in Kanto, 50 best scenic spots of Kanagawa and 88 best views of Hachioji.



On the summit there are three different mountain tea shops, the Shimizu, the Fujimi and the Shingen. At the Shimizu chaya, I found one of the best balconies I've ever come across. I drank a sour Ramune, but I still couldn't get enough of the view. The red flowers below the shop made the color palette even fuller.



After you relax and invigorate yourself with mountain soba or soup, there are three options; go around to follow a loop back to the bus stop, head to Mt. Takao (it needs a lot of hours) or go down towards lake Sagami. I chose the latter and I followed the signs to Narako pass (奈良子峠). The path here is flatter and well maintained, with blocks of steps along the way.

There are not so many things to see in this part of the course, just trees and the occasional stone markers. So, I continue down to Myo pass (明王峠), where there is a small structure that maybe used to be a sort of resting space, as well as a stone monument devoted to the fire god (明王).

Occasionally, when hiking in Japan or Korea, you might come across carefully constructed piles of stone. Usually, passersby make these piles as a good luck mark. If the pile is exceptionally tall and wide, it might be hiding a jizo statue underneath. Hikers usually don't carry incense sticks, so they throw stones as an offering instead (if someone threw a stone at me as an offer, I would probably have thrown it back, such an insult). For this reason, the big pile is called Ishiage Jizo (石投地蔵娘ヶ塚, stone throwing Jizo). So, back during the wars of the 16th century, a lady of the Kai-Takeda clan married a guy from the Satake clan in Hitachi. The marriage turned sour, with the lady leaving her husband and daughter to return back to her parents. After years, her daughter, now a beautiful princess, decided to travel in the midst of war to meet her mother. She walked vigorously along the mountain roads, but upon reaching Myo pass, she fell ill. A lady in her service tried to carry her on her back down the path, but the princess died while crying the word 'mother'. She was buried here and the Takedas put a jizo statue in her memory.

The path continues without surprises, the next checkpoints being Yanone (矢ノ音) and Oohira (大平). After a smallish peak called Magoyama (孫山), the next big thing is lake Sagami (相模湖). This lake is man-made with a large dam. Surrounded by mountains, this used to be a fun waterfront resort some decades ago.



Now, it is a shadow of its past self, everything looks old and abandoned. Like the old bowling alley next to the lake, which is almost completely reclaimed by vines.



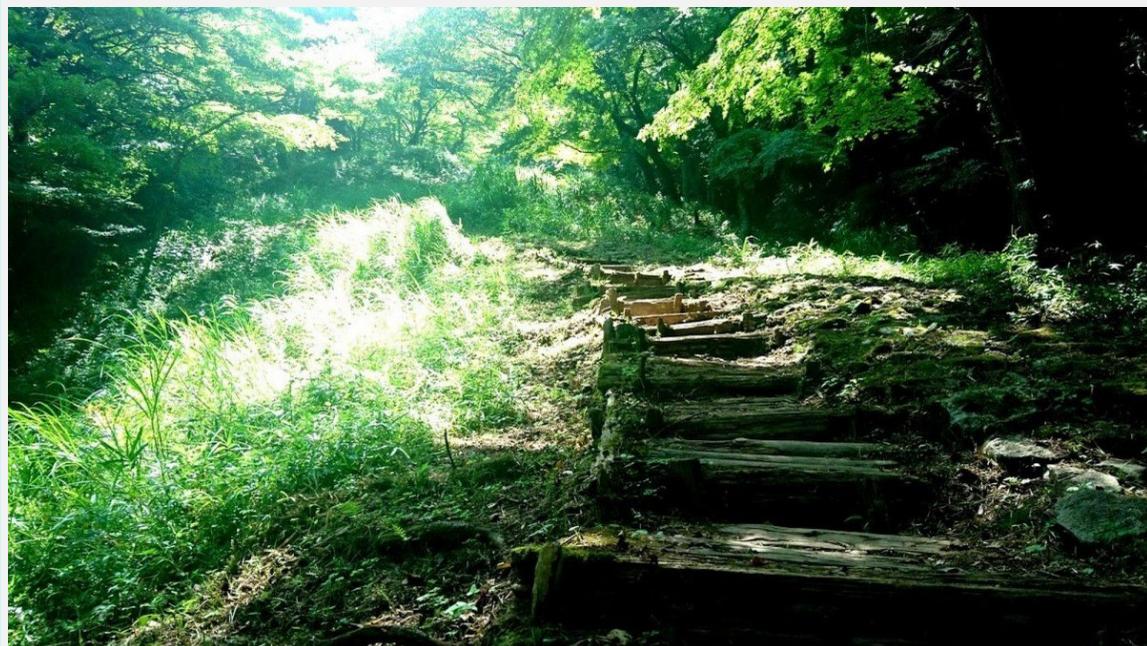
Because ABSOLUTELY nothing has changed in the last 30 decades, it is an ideal location for retro lovers. After all, this is the place where I managed to get 3 fabulous traditional dolls (a geisha, the wisteria girl and the bucket-carrying girl from kabuki theatrical plays) for 400JPY each, because they were too bulky that no one wanted to carry home. For sure, you can find some old school souvenirs here. You can also enjoy a swan boat ride around the lake or coffee next to the water. Sagamiko always makes me feel melancholic, because I can see a prosperous past long gone, and it makes me wonder if this is the future that awaits other places which are prospering now and which I love.

So this is the story of the mountain with the horse. I heard it is becoming a hit recently, it was among the locations re-discovered during the covid-induced states of emergency.

13 Day hike from Tokyo: Chisuji falls, Mt. Takanosu and Mt. Byobu

DATE: 8.24.2020

[Click here to view original post](#)

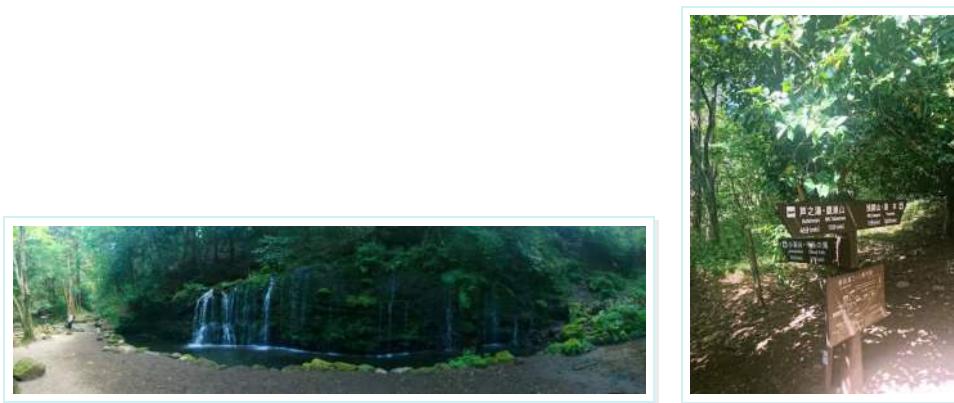


Hakone is one of the most visited places among people visiting Japan for the first time. Despite its popularity as a casual travelling destination, it is also known for its various hiking routes. It is also famous for being the last part of the Hakone-Ekiden relay marathon race, that is held for two days at the beginning of the new year.

Last week, we decided to follow a 10km path that climbs up Mt. Takanosu, then Mt. Byobu and finally ends at lake Ashi, famous for its great big lakeside torii and the spectacular view of Mt. Fuji. In order to get to the starting point of the course, we used a -pricey- bus ride from Odawara station, and (ignoring all the Neon Genesis Evangelion bus stops) got off the bus stop “Horaien”(approx. 900yen). From there, we got down the staircase and turned right towards a nearby parking lot and found the first sign pointing towards the hiking course.

*A map of our hiking route*

The first point of interest we found was the thread-like Chisuji falls (千条ノ滝), which appear just 5 minutes after entering the path.

*Close up of Chisuji falls • 270° view of Chisuji falls*

Afterward, we followed the signs towards Mt. Sengen, but eventually turned when the path splits towards Mt. Takanosu. If you have time, it is possible to do a circle and go to Mt. Sengen (浅間山) first and then head from there towards Mt. Takanosu (鷹巣山).

*The path signs are well managed, showing all available routes*

Mt. Takanosu does not have a clear mountain top, but instead has a sign describing that it used to be the location of Takanosu castle that played a supporting role during the battles against the Hojo clan of Odawara.



A view of the area of Kowakudani from just before the top of Mt. Takanosu • A sign commemorating the castle of Takanosu

Soon, we head back down towards civilization. We avoid the path that goes towards Lake Ashi and instead follow the signs towards Hatajuku (烟宿).



The road that heads down to Hatajuku

The lush green switches positions with tall trees with clean trunks and the sound of water becomes increasingly louder. The water sounds are due to none other than Hiryuu falls (飛竜の滝).



A part of Hiryu falls, the waterfalls extends high above in the background

I remember visiting these falls at some point three years ago, but the landscape seemed different. There was considerable damage from falling rocks, to the point that a small observation deck made from cement was left with one side hanging.



The top of Mt. Byobu

Moving down to Hatajuku, the path is severely damaged and quite narrow at certain points. This part needs some attention in order to avoid taking the wrong direction, but thankfully there are at least two big maps. The main point to remember is to head towards Sugenji temple. Soon, the landscape becomes boring because instead of moving freely in the forest, you have to climb stairs or move along the pedestrian walkway next to the national road to lake Ashi. That is where the first mention of the old Tokai road (東海道) makes its appearance, This refers to the stone paved road during Edo period connecting Edo-Tokyo with Kyoto following the eastern coastline. A part of this road is preserved and is accessible in the mountains around Hakone. Unfortunately, this time we didn't follow the path along the Tokaido, but instead took a left turn to Mt. Byobu (屏風山).



View of lake Ashi and the old-school cruise ship.

The ascent to the top of Mt. Byobu was rougher than that of Takanosu, but you can still get relatively quickly to the 948m. Then, you can only go down to the lake, entering from the south side, at the Hakone Checkpoint.



Side view of Hakone checkpoint

The checkpoint is a museum with re-built barracks and other military structures. A lot of establishments around Odawara and Hakone are ninja-themed due to the involvement of a ninja clan with the siege of Odawara. A ninja restaurant next to the checkpoint had this interesting cannibal dango eating a dango at its entrance.

*A cannibal dango*

By the time we arrived, it is already sunset and the lake view appears magnificent. Since the sky was clouded, Mt. Fuji was not visible, safely hidden behind a giant cloud.



If you follow the lake to the right, you move closer to the town center where all the restaurants, hotels etc. are located at. If you continue moving, you will reach the Hakone shrine. The shrine itself is not as important as the giant red torii gate, that you probably had seen already at the far end of the lake. This gate is one of the most famous photo-shoot locations of lake Ashi.



If you are curious about the size of the gate, here is me -as an average height banana- for scale.



If you are interested in the exact route, you can find a recording at [alltrails](#).

In case you are lucky and the sky is clear, consider going to the Benten observatory deck (弁天の鼻展望台) to capture some awesome shots of Mt. Fuji appearing behind lake Ashi.

14

Day Hike from Tokyo: Exploring Myojingatake and the Outer Caldera of Hakone

DATE: 10.25.2020[Click here to view original post](#)

[Visited on September 26th, 2020]

Since I recently moved to Kanagawa (again), it makes sense to focus more on visiting mountains inside the prefecture. It is not easy to wake up and head all the way to Saitama after all. Well, considering that I had already been to Mt. Oyama, Mt. Jimba and [Mt. Byobo](#), a change of scenery was much needed. We decided on avoiding civilization this time and instead go to as quiet a place as it could be. Myojingatake in Hakone proved to be a perfect fit.

It was a rainy day, with a constant amount of rain that was thankfully reduced to drizzle. Not the best omens for a day up on the mountains. Regardless, we prepared our raincoats and hiking poles and decided to go for it. We were greeted by a thick white mist and a spooky lack of visibility.

A lot of times, the landscape seemed abnormally white and abnormally quiet. There were certain locations along the path that only the flora reminded to the hikers that we are on Japan.



Unfortunately, it seems that due to the hills and mountains consisting mainly of volcanic dirt instead of rocks, the whole area is prone to erosion. For this reason, a project of intensive bamboo planting was introduced, in order to assign the role of keeping dirt in place to fast multiplying bamboo trunks.



The appeal of this hiking course lies on the fact that it goes along the outer rim of the caldera of Hakone volcano (Hakone Gairinzan). On the border of Kanagawa and Shizuoka prefectures, the Hakone volcano has a couple of peaks around 1000m, among which Myojogatake and Myojingatake. The outer rim of the caldera was created some 200.000 years ago.

The hike to the first top, that of Myojogatake (明星ヶ岳) is fast, but unsurprising, to the point that when reaching the top, there was no peak, just a wide flat area with a sign indicating its name. The actually interesting peak is that of Myojingatake (明神ヶ岳) at 1169m. On a clear day, this peak offers unobstructed view of Mt. Fuji with Mt. Kintoki (previously called Mt. Ashigara) and the rest of the outer rim peaks of the caldera in the front of it.



The interior slope of the caldera looked steep and slippery, as expected due to the violent phenomena that created it. The flat ridge hovering above it, had some more bamboos and small benches to rest. No mountain hut or restaurant was available on the top. A truly solitary peak.



From here, there is a path leading to Yagurasawa. Instead, we continued our hike downwards towards Hyochishidake (火打石岳). This peak at 988 m got its name from a type of black basalt used to make stoneware, that were discovered in the area dating back to the Jomon period.



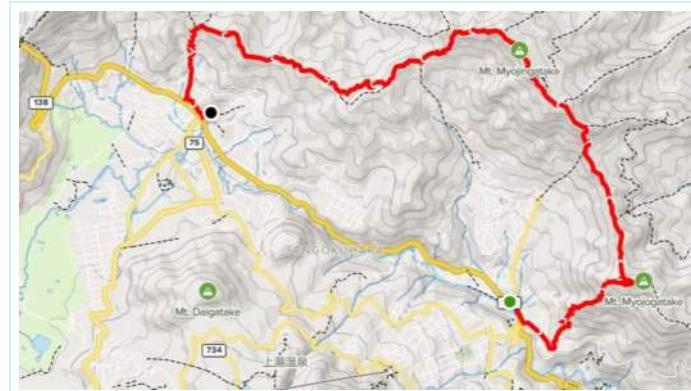
Finally, we reached the town of Sengokuhara. If you happen to be in the area during the red foliage period (koyo 紅葉) I would suggest visiting the Choanji temple (長安寺). During the end of September, the leaves were just starting to turn yellow, but I imagine that the large cemetery-garden should be amazing in November. There are a lot of unusual statues scattered around, adding to the landscape.



Additionally, Choanji had one of the weirdest hanging structures for bad fortunes I have ever seen. Instead of the usual square board with ropes or a tree branch, this one consisted of a black cube containing a red cube and

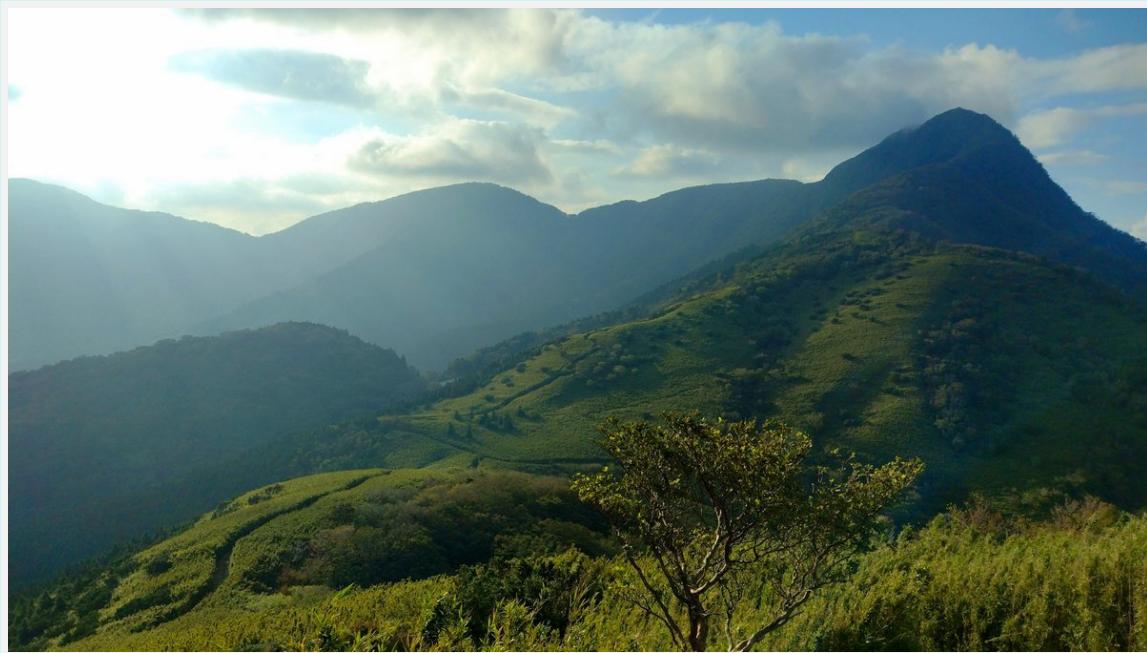
some rows of threads connecting the cube edges. Last but not least, both the monk and the cat of the temple were heartwarmingly friendly. I chuckled when the monk, obviously surprised to hear me speaking Japanese, asked whether I “arrived to Japan by airplane [as a tourist] or if I was born here”. In the end, he gifted me a set of postcards depicting photos of the temple during different seasons, and he went out of his way to write the date on the goshuin both in Japanese and English, in order to help read it more easily.

After a long bus ride back to Odawara, I was home at last. If you are interested in the 13 km hiking route, you can find the details [here](#). Whether on a rainy day or on a sunny day, this hike is refreshing for sure.



15

Day Hike from Tokyo: Exploring Myojingatake BUT on a sunny day

DATE: 11.22.2021[Click here to view original post](#)

[Visited on October 3rd, 2021]

The first time I hiked Mt. Myojogatake and Mt. Myojingatake, it was a gloomy, rainy day. Mist was covering everything and I couldn't see any further than 2 meters in front of me. The otherworldly atmosphere was much appreciated, but considering that there is a literal rim of a caldera to see, it was such a bummer. A year passed, and I was ready to attempt this hike again, this time with the sun on my side. Let's see how Mt. Myojingatake actually looks like!

After the initial slope which is covered by thick foliage, as soon as you reach the ridge close to Mt. Myojingatake, an excellent view of the active Mt. Hakone appears. You can recognize the crater from the steady white puffs that come out of it. These sulphuric gases are the reason why Owakudani, a popular sightseeing spot for the volcanic activity, is currently closed. On the right of Hakone, Mt. Fuji (also a volcano) stands tall and graceful. In between, at the valley, lie the villages of Gora and Ashigara. The last peak on the right is Mt. Ashigara-Kintoki. Keep that name in mind, because it needs a post all for itself!



Mt. Hakone (left) and Mt. Fuji (right), hovering above the valley

Mt. Myojogatake is nothing special, apart from being the location for a summer ritual, that of burning a giant kanji that spells 'big' (大). On a sunny day, it's easy to maintain a fast pace and reach the next peak, Mt. Myojingatake relatively quickly. The caldera rim is visible, and the purple flowers are still in place.



Cloudy • Sunny

The biggest difference, landscape-wise, was that instead of looking from the rim of the old caldera into a white and fluffy void, now you could see and gauge the depth of the valley and the distance to the volcano. A lot of hikers took advantage of the good weather, so most of the picnic tables at the top of the mountain were constantly occupied.





View from Mt. Myojingatake to Mt. Hakone • Cloudy • Hikers at the top • Sunny

This time around, the way downhill towards Sengokuhara had the most breathtaking views. Despite practically running down (due to a non-existent path exit and an early sunset), it was hard not to stop for a minute to enjoy the scenery. Dense, vivid-green bamboo sprouts are covering the entire mountainside, with only small cracks hinting the path below.



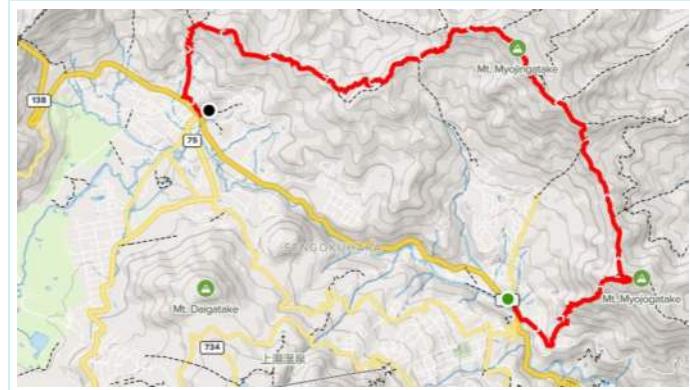
The proud tree I saw last time was staying put, ready to keep company to passer-by hikers. With the same pace, we continued all the way towards the intersection for Mt. Kintoki. Despite it looking awesome from the side, unfortunately we didn't have enough time left to continue onto that one (we did go on another day). On a rainy day, I wasn't even able to see the Kintoki's peak, much less to observe the patterns of the mountain paths!



Cloudy • Sunny

My final thoughts are that I can't decide which hike I prefer. During the rainy-day hike, my boots were slipping, I almost fell a couple of times and I couldn't see beyond my nose. On the other hand, the mist makes everything

appear magical, while the path remains relatively safe due to the absence of rocky ground. On a sunny day, there's so much more to observe and more chances to appreciate the colourfulness of nature. Plus, Mt. Fuji!



A map of the hiking route

16 The golden boy and the mountain

DATE: 1.15.2022

[Click here to view original post](#)



Maybe it's time to unbury the hatchet. Or perhaps not, since it's standing right there, as if looking at you from the rock's edge. Who's the one who used to carry that hatchet, who did he fight with, and which mountain are we going to hike today?

In the south part of Kanagawa lies the active volcano of Hakone, one of the most popular tourist destinations. There's a lake, refreshing hot springs, fancy restaurants, a large selection of museums, what more could you ask for? Together with Mt. Fuji and the Izu peninsula, they comprise a national park. Due to the increased volcanic activity, the morphology of the area is ever-changing across the millennia. Let's observe the valley of Hakone from above.

Close to Hakone to the west lies the town of Ashigara, known for the eponymous mountain and the folk hero Kintaro. His name literally means "the golden child" and indeed he was a marvellous child. He grew up similarly to Tarzan and Atalanta, as a baby on Mt. Ashigara, raised from a mountain-witch Yamauba, a friend of wild animals. There's an extreme version of his origin myth, which references the mountain-witch as being Kintaro's mom, after she got magically impregnated by a thunder that the red dragon sent.



Kintoki shrine and two chicken

Kintaro has superpowers since birth and raised to fame after killing many formidable monsters. Finally, his achievements earned him a place in the court of Minamoto no Yorimitsu. The Minamoto clan became one of the most powerful clans of the 10th century, choosing Kamakura in Kanagawa as their base. The Minamoto name became known from ballads and epic songs about their war with the Taira clan. Anyway, when Kintaro became a proper member of the court, he was given the name Sakata no Kintoki. A shrine was built at the foot of the mountain he grew up on and the mountain got a nickname, which eventually became its official name, Mt. Kintoki. It seems Kintaro was indeed a good friend of the animals, since a dozen of chicken were hanging freely around the shrine. The shrine's [goshuin stamp](#) also shows Kintarocarrying his trademark hatchet and riding a bear.



In terms of art, Kintaro is usually depicted as a child that wears minimum clothing, carries a hatchet on his shoulder and bears the character 金 (which means gold) at his chest. He is simultaneously chubby and muscular, he would look like a sumo if it weren't for his bob hairstyle. Other times, he is depicted hugging a giant fish, called Namazu, a harbinger of earthquakes in Japanese mythology. Kintaro fought with that monster as well, nothing was able to stand in his way. Not even that solitary rock on the path towards the mountain top, he slashed it in half. Because of his bravery and strength, Kintaro became a famous character in theatre plays, as well as a role model for young boys, who remembered him especially on Children's day.



This is Kintoki Yadori Ishi, the rock that Kintoki slashed

The path that travels up to Mt. Kintoki is wonderful during autumn, but quite hard and rocky to trek. The route from the shrine to the top is 2 km long, with elevation gain of only 500 until the peak of 1212 m. A large part of the path has a view towards the valley of Hakone, with the steamy Owakudani capturing the attention. Owakudani is known for the volcanic activity that is responsible for the sulphuric vapours which come out from the ground. The black eggs that are boiling there will supposedly give extra years of life to the ones who taste them. Owakudani was created 3000 years ago, a remnant of the crater at that time's eruption. The last eruption happened in 2015 and since then the rope way to Owakudani operates with some inconsistencies, for security reasons.



The Hakone volcano and Owakudani (left) and lake Ashi (right)

On the right side of the view, one can see lake Ashi, another product of the eruptions. There is a famous sightseeing spot at the lake, a red torii standing above the water. The land between Kintoki and Hakone is covered by small towns, Gora and Sengokuhara. Apart from the Hakone view, Mt. Kintoki is famous for another view, that of Mt. Fuji from the side of Gotemba. Unfortunately, on the day of my hike, the mountains were covering Mt. Fuji. Perhaps you think that the body of Mt. Fuji is blue, however that is due to light reflection and scattering phenomena. In reality, Mt. Fuji is covered by reddish brown dust, as you can see at the exposed area around its foot.



The base of Mt. Fuji, while the top is covered by clouds

On the top of Mt. Kintoki there are two small restaurants or chaya. The menu includes hot soups with fresh mountain vegetables, noodles and sweet soup with red beans (oshiruko). Kintaro's hatchet is also there, at the top, standing tall to make the height of the mountain known. The small balls on the hatchet could be sakimitama (幸御魂), soul spheres of blessing in the tradition.

I decided to hike down from Otome toge, the “girl’s ridge”. It got its name from the story of a girl, who climbed up there every day to pray at the [jizo statues](#) for her father’s ill health. Her prayers were answered by the gods and here father recovered, but she got buried under snow while praying up there. Another chaya used to operate at that location, but the owner suddenly got sick and the building has since perished.



The old chaya at Otome toge

Before heading down to Sengokuhara, I climbed one last peak, called Marudake. From there, one can enjoy the best view to lake Ashi, since even the cruise ship is visible. This mountain is part of the caldera rim of an older eruption and next to it stands a 1000 m tall parasitic lava dome.

Although Hakone is blessed with plentiful sightseeing spots, it found another way to brand itself. It was used in the storyline of a popular anime, Neon Genesis Evangelion, as the location of Tokyo-III, the new capital in an apocalyptic future where Tokyo was destroyed. The NGE story got mixed with Kintaro’s story, which resulted in the public toilets at the start of the mountain path to be decorated with concepts from both worlds.



Public toilets at the base of Mt. Kintoki • A vending machine decorated with Kintaro and NERV

And. this was the story of the mighty Kintaro.

17

Day hike from Tokyo: Be a Yamabushi

DATE: 6.5.2022[Click here to view original post](#)

[Visited on June 4th, 2022]

Today we will visit a small peak; Mt. Bukka at the base of the Tanzawa mountain range in Kanagawa. But this time, the story about the visitors of the mountain is more interesting than the mountain itself.



Have you ever heard of the Yamabushi (山伏)? It literally means “the one who bows at the mountains”, but you will most commonly find it translated as a “travelling monk”. Their harsh and ascetic lifestyle upon the lonely mountains only heightened the rumours that they possessed supernatural strength. The yamabushi are followers of a syncretic religion that combines Buddhism, Shintoism and Taoism among others. It became popular

in the Heian period, until it was outlawed by the Meiji government, which brought forward the modernization of Japan. Its practice was allowed again post-war, where freedom of religion was established.

The religion of Shugendo (修験道), which is more of a spiritual way of life, rather than common performative religions, was developed in the pre-feudal Japan. The goal is to reach enlightenment through harsh practice, by immersing oneself into nature. Living a more-than-modest life on the mountains can bring the practitioner closer to the spirits of the kami. Therefore, the yamabushi put themselves under intense strain, pain and hunger to reach the point when their spiritual powers would awaken. The mountains of Tanzawa were an important route for yamabushi, to the point where records of the visitors were kept in a temple close to Mt. Kyogatake in the Kiyokawa area.

The founder of Shugendo is an exiled wizard, called En no Gyoja (役行者) or En on Ozuno. Gyoja is a more formal alternative to yamabushi. So that guy, En, had some friction with the members of the royal court in Nara, resulting into him being exiled on the island of [Izu Oshima](#) in eastern Japan. He was so powerful that kept two demons around to do his bidding and could heal all kinds of ailments. At some point, his reputation was restored and started walking around the mountains of Japan. He is claimed to be the first person who visited every single peak in the country. At the year 703 AD, he visited Mt. Oyama and the waterfalls in Shiokawa, in nearby Aikawa. There are claims that En no Gyoja spent 49 days on top of Mt. Bukka to meditate and pray. However, En no Gyoja's base remained in Mt. Yoshino in Nara. It is said that the god appeared to him, and he carved its form on a wood block from a mountain sakura tree. Afterward, he ordered his disciples to plant cherry trees, which make the landscape on Mt. Yoshino as magnificent as it is now. He might as well be the founder of the fascination with cherry trees as well. If you want to train in order to become a Yamabushi like En in the modern day, better try your luck at the Dewa Sanzan mountains in Yamagata prefecture.



The path towards the top is narrow and covered with vegetation • A view of the Tanzawa mountain range to the south • Jizo figures at the top of Mt. Bukka

Apart from En, Zen masters also came to meditate on the mountain. Actually, that's the origin of its name because Bukka (仏果) means Nirvana. A famous Zen master (bukka zenji, 仏果禪師) of the Muromachi period was meditating on the mountain, when a stone fell on his head and killed him. Whether he reached Nirvana or not is irrelevant; the mountain became Bukka since that moment. If you happen to meet a hiker with all-white robes, holding a staff, great them, they are probably a yamabushi. I doubt any Zen pilgrim would like to follow the fate of their great master.



Lake Miyagase and the rest of the ridge

There are two ways to enter the path to Mt. Bukka from Kiyokawa. Either to walk until Richland campground and climb a steep slope, or walk along the mountain road, but cover double the distance. The latter option is highly favoured by cyclists, I met at least 20 people on that route. Afterward, the path along the ridge is intentionally harsh, that's the whole point of shugendo training. The mountain is 747 m tall, and practically the path covers its entire height. After lots of steps and the occasional rock climbing, the top of Mt. Bukka is surprisingly refreshing. There are a lot of benches to rest and have lunch. In the 1980s, a 13-meter tall platform was built, to offer a 360 view above the tree tops. The paint on the platform rail is rusting, so if you are afraid of heights, take that into account. I guarantee that the view is worth fighting your fears, because on a clear day you can see all the way to Skytree in Tokyo and Mt. Tsukuba in Chiba. On cloudy days, the view of lake Miyagase and Sagamihara city is a small treat. I visited on a humid summer morning, so the entire area was covered by mist around noon.



The view towards Tokyo • The view to Sagamihara city

On the way back, be sure to hand around Hanbara village. It is an interesting place, where the past is still visible. I found an abandoned car mechanic's shop with dozens of cars and -probably collectible- engines. Hanbara is also the home of the first Vietnamese temple in Japan, Chùa Việt Nam. I saw a lot of people having barbecue or fishing at the banks of Nakatsu river.



Abandoned cars in Hanbara • A flying car, left as it was, in a derelict mechanic's shop • Reclaimed by nature • Kenmyoji temple (did you notice the butterfly?) • People fishing at Nakatsu river

You can check out today's route at [Alltrails](#).



The route from Sakajiri (坂尻) bus stop to Hanbara (半原) bus stop

18 Day Hike from Tokyo: Rokkokutoge to Kamakura

DATE: 2.14.2023

[Click here to view original post](#)



Ok, so it snowed again in Tokyo this week, plus it's Ume blossom season and you don't feel like walking much. You'd much rather find a nice viewpoint to have a picnic and some drinks, preferably relatively close to the sea. Alright, I've got you covered. Today we are going to traverse [Miura](#) peninsula, from Yokosuka to Kamakura.



Let's say you find yourself roaming around in Yokosuka, but it's quite early. You've visited [Taura park](#) before, you went to the [retro district](#) already, you did the military port cruise and the [cruise to Sarushima](#). There are not so many options left to explore. What you can do, is head to Kanazawa-Bunko station (not to be confused with

Kanazawa city in Ishikawa prefecture). If you have limited time, you can roam around the traditional garden of Shomyoji (称名寺市民の森). But it's better to focus on the west side and make a leap across the mountains, in order to end up in elegant Kamakura.

Walk parallel to the train tracks until you find the entrance of the Rokkokutoge hiking trail (六国峠ハイキングコース金沢文庫口). Climb up the stairs and you will reach a plateau, where the ruins of Nokendo (能見堂跡) are located. A sign board shows a picture of the exact same spot 100 years ago. The photograph was probably taken from foreign (American?) visitors, as the inscription "NOW KEN DOW" hints. On top of the hill, there is a variety of plum trees, both white and pinkish. It was a bit early for the blossoming when I visited, but the trees should be getting ready by now.



This was the location of a Buddhist temple in the 1600s. A famous Zen master from China stood at this hill and while observing the view, reminisced of eight magnificent views of his hometown. The "eight views of Kanazawa" became a prominent theme for ukiyo-e painters, including Utagawa Hiroshige, and the spot rose to prominence.



Less than an hour later, you will arrive at Kanazawa Zoo. I'm not so fond of zoos, so I just walked on the wooden deck path of the Will Rice Field Valley (しだの谷). From the Sekiyaoku Viewing Platform, you can observe a nice view of the sea. Continue walking and you will find an extremely large cemetery. I will be honest, it was one of the largest I've ever come across, so I took a second there to contemplate about death.



While you marvel at the bamboo grove, follow the signs to Tenen (天園). This spot gives the name to the ridge as Rokkoku (六ヵ国 means six countries)), because you could see the six provinces of Izu, Sagami, Musashi, Awa, Kazusa, and Shimousa. I saw the ruins of an abandoned tea house, but it seems a newer one (天園休憩所) is operating nearby. It also seemed abandoned to me, but at least it had a working vending machine to grab a bottle of water. The landscape changes a bit from here, since you have to hike down a path that cuts the rocky substrate in half. A lot of rock formations have names, as per usual, for example the lion rock below (yeah, it doesn't look like a lion at all, I know).

Eventually, you are going to find a few more blossoming plum trees. This is the entrance to the Yofukuji Temple site. There is not much to see, apart from the foundation of some old buildings from the era of the Kamakura shogunate. I would advice moving towards the shrine next door, the Kamakura-gu (鎌倉宮). The lucky charms are shaped as cute red lions and there a lot of fun pilgrimage activities (if you are 5 years old) like throwing tiny plates to a rock or rubbing a stone turtle for luck. The shrine is an imperial one, so they distribute a pamphlet with the emperor's genealogical tree together with the goshuin stamp. They seem to be fond of cats, because they have a program for supporting stray cats and also celebrate the cat day on the 22th of February with honors.



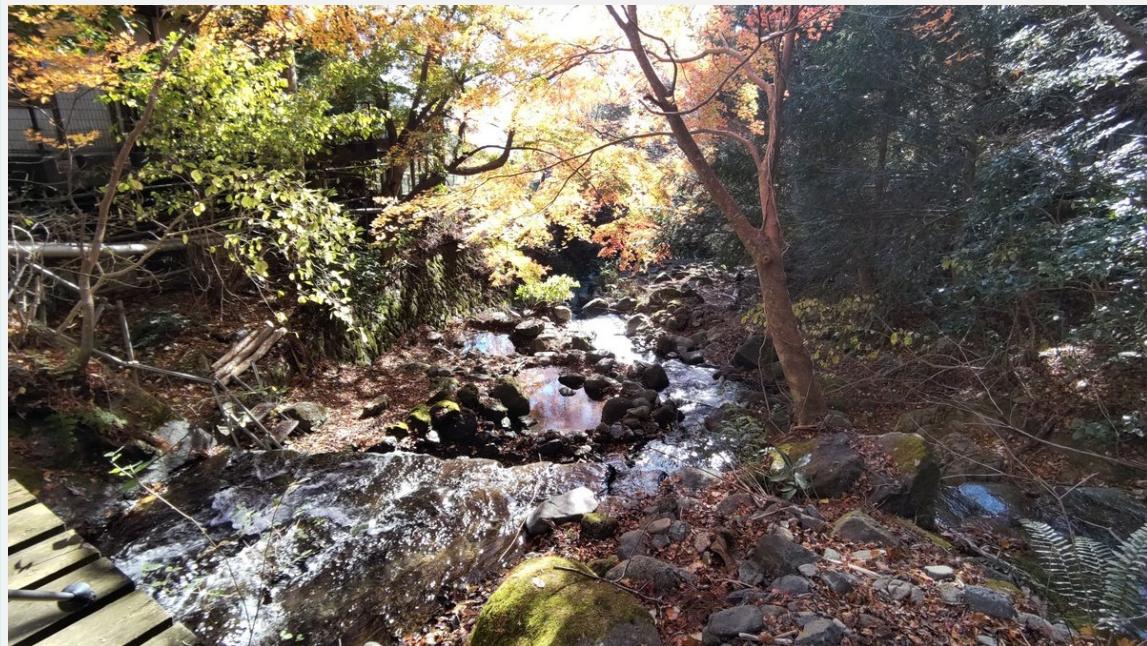
After almost three hours, you have finally arrived in Kamakura. There are millions of things to do here, but I chose to lay low and have lunch with fresh seafood and frozen yogurt with honey. Alternatively, you could go for tea or old school coffee or visit one of the myriad [temple gardens](#) if it's early in the afternoon.



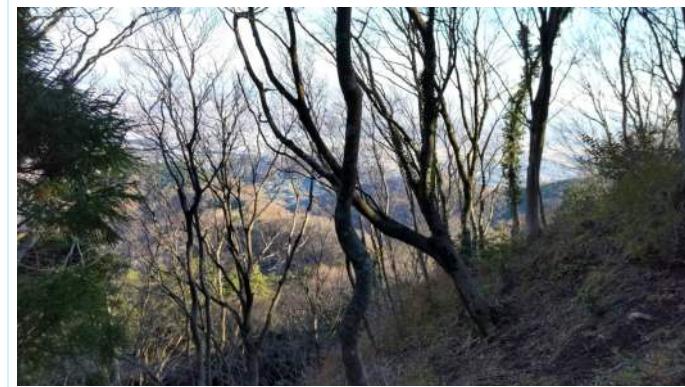
If you want to check out the details of this hike, you can follow the route in [alltrails](#).

19

Day Hike from Tokyo: Mt Takatori, Mt Nenbutsu and Mt Azuma

DATE: 5.5.2023[Click here to view original post](#)

Let's say you are tired of people and would like to find a serene route to retreat to. If that's the case, then Mt. Takatori (高取山) at Hadano in Kanagawa is an ideal option.



You might come across the name Takatori for various mountains around Kanto, but in this case, I am referring to one of the low peaks of the [Tanzawa](#) mountain range. At 705.7m height, it is an ideal choice for beginners. It is nearby Kiyokawa and Aiko villages, which I visited previously, on my way to [Mt. Bukka](#). Apparently, Mt. Bukka, Mt. Kyogatake, Mt. Kegon and Mt. Takatori, all around 700m height, form a low mountain range

called the Bukka-renzan (仏果連山). These mountains form many narrow and steep mountain trails called “thin ridges”; therefore one can enjoy superb views on both sides of the path.



First things first, get a bus to Minoge bus stop (蓑毛) in Hadano and grab a coffee from the mountain-whale (山くじらコーヒー) coffee shop, if you can spare a minute. Follow the road for a little bit, and you'll eventually reach the trailhead for Minoge-pass (蓑毛越) on your left. You will come across signs that head to [Mt. Oyama](#), so you can consider a change of course if you'd like. However, for today's hike, I recommend turning south-east, towards Mt. Terayama (寺山) and Tsurumaki-onsen (鶴巻温泉). No strange detours or turns, just move along the ridge.



After a while you will reach a landmark stone column, devoted to god [Fudo](#)-Myo, which marks the Iyori pass (いより峠). Occasionally, you might listen to the voices of golfers from the country club nearby. If you do, then rest assured that after a quick push on the steep ridge and a swim among the thick shrubs, you will reach Mt. Takatori. There are no landmarks on the peak, apart from a few signposts and a magnificent view to Hadano city.

The next peak is Mt. Nenbutsu (念仏山) and as you can tell, all mountains in the area have a strong connection to Buddhism, maybe due to their proximity to Mt. Oyama and because they are old pilgrimage routes for the [Yamabushi](#). You will find a couple of Jizo statues scattered around, and a few wild chrysanthemums if you time your hike well. This spot is relatively untouched by humans, and it only got its name after 1940. Apart from the local mountain god and inari god, two more spirits are worshiped at this peak. These are the [tengu](#) Tarobo (太郎坊) and Jirobo (次郎坊). The eldest son was usually called Taro and the second son Jiro, while -bo is a suffix expressing affection used for young boys.



Continue until Zenba pass (善波峠) but don't linger there too much, because apparently baby ghosts hang around the tunnel. You can continue to Mt. Kobo, which is famous for its spring cherry blossoms, but I recommend turning towards Tsurumaki-onsen, because who doesn't need a relaxing soak? The last peak is called Mt. Azuma (吾妻山) and is related to a legendary hero Yamato Takeru. While he was on his way with his fleet to conquer Boso peninsula, the sea was turning rough and dangerous. His wife Ototachibana-hime (弟橘比売) then decided to sacrifice herself by jumping from the ship in order to appease the sea god Watatsumi. She dropped to the sea 8 mats made of sedge, 8 mats made of leather and 8 mats made of silk, somehow sat on them (whoa, whoa, there, baby Jesus) and she quietly drowned in the water. Suddenly, the sea calmed down and Yamato Takeru completed his campaign successfully. When he returned back to Kanagawa, legend has it that he was standing on this hill looking towards [Miura peninsula](#), reminiscing of his late wife. For those who read the blog in detail, you might have heard the exact same story about a small peak in [Mt. Otake](#), so probably Takeru was reminiscing of his wife quite a lot everywhere he went. Apart from that, there are some seashores around Tokyo Bay with names such as Sodegaura, and Sodegahama, named after parts of Ototachibana-hime's kimono parts that drifted ashore.



The final stop is Tsurumaki onsen which offers a few hot spring spas, such as Kobo no satoyu (弘法の里湯). Last but not least, I want to inform you to be weary of bears along this route. There were a couple of signs informing about recent sightings of bears. Furthermore, it took me a while to understand that the reason that the trail was suddenly blocked with a tall fence, was in order to keep wild animals away. So, if you come across the fence door, open it to cross to the other side and just remember to close it behind you.

If you want to check out the details of this hike, you can follow the route in [alltrails](#).

Saitama & Northern Kanto

20 Day-hike on Mt. Tsukuba

DATE: 7.11.2020

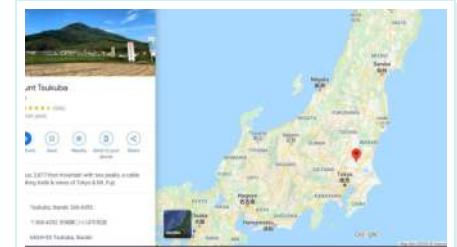
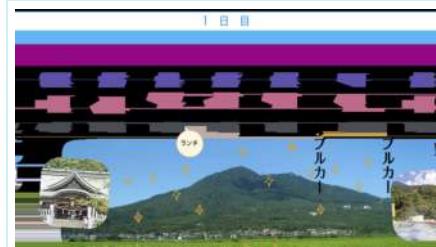
[Click here to view original post](#)



Visited in March 2020

One of the most loved hiking spots of Tokyoites is the area around Mt. Tsukuba (筑波山). Located in Ibaraki prefecture, easily accessible by an express train from the city center of Tokyo, it is an obvious option for a short day hike.

As a rough guide, we used the suggested route below. We followed the Shirakumobashi Trail (orange) to reach the first mountaintop, continued to the Sancho-Renraku Trail (purple) to access the second mountaintop and returned back down following the Miyukigahara Trail (blue). The total was about 6km, relatively easy with a casual pace.



Map of the hiking courses around Mt. Tsukuba

You can get to the base of the mountain by hopping on the bus from Tsukuba station to Tsutsuji-gaoka (つつじヶ丘). As soon as you get off at ‘Tsukuba shrine entrance’(筑波山神社入口), you are greeted by a giant red torii gate next to the Mount Tsukuba Tourist Information Centre.



A giant red torii next to the bus stop

The Tsukuba shrine is located at the foot of the mountain and there are two cable cars that can take you up to the top (Tsukuba Kanko Railway Cable & Tsukubasan Ropeway). I don’t doubt that the view from the ropeway is amazing, but we decide to walk, we came to hike after all. The entrance to the path is on the right of the shrine entrance. The mountain has two peaks; the male peak Mt. Nantai (男体山) and female peak Mt. Nyotai (女体山) . We started heading first towards the lower Nyotai peak.



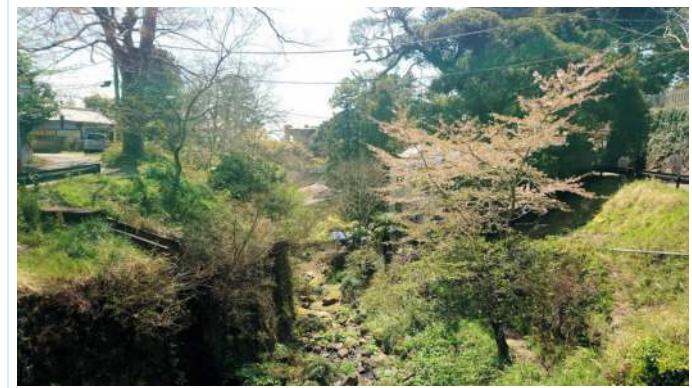
The entrance to the path towards Mt. Nyotai

The path changes a lot as you move forward. It starts relatively flat with smooth dirt, changes to rocky steps and finally to steps made of tree roots. The opposite path going up towards Mt. Nantai is mostly covered with wooden steps so it is a bit harder to climb up, although safer.



[The path vol. 1](#) • [The path vol. 2](#)

There are a couple of small shrines along the way that make the landscape interesting.



The path is properly marked with a lot of signs and maps, so it is really difficult to get lost.



After a while the path turns rocky again. Did you know that one traditional entertainment in oriental Asia is “Rock appreciation”? In Mt. Tsukuba there are a lot of rocks, properly marked with signs and given names, that according to the locals are beautiful or even spiritual.



The cable car is mostly hidden during the hike. It only appears to the field of view when you reach closer to the top.



View from Mt. Nyotai

Both mountain peaks have a shrine on top, although the one on top of Mt. Nyotai is more lavish. It also has better view, almost 360 degrees around. The gray pole at the top, informs that Mt. Tsukuba is one of the 100 most famous mountains of Japan.



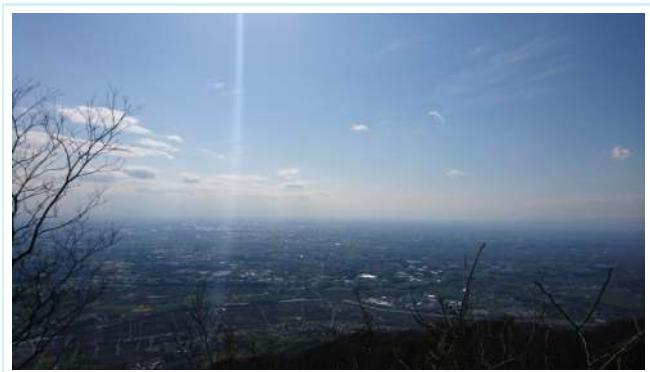
View from the top of Mt. Nyotai

After climbing up, you get back down towards a plateau between the peaks, where the arrival stations of the cable car are also located. There are a couple of restaurants and souvenir shops as well. It seems like a packed place during peak visiting season.



The cable station with Mt. Nantai in the background

After a couple more roots and steps, we reached the top of Mt. Nantai. The shrine there was much more simple. A relatively old meteorological station built with western architecture is located next to the shrine.



View from Mt. Nantai • The top of humble Mt. Nantai at 871m

So, once more we head back to the plateau, get some coffee and ramune (the Japanese version of lemonade, with a characteristic blue bottle opening with the old way of pushing a glass bead down).



In late March starts the season of the Katakuri lily (Erythronium japonicum), a purple flower growing in the woods of Japan and Korea. As a result, there were dozens of large purple banners informing the visitors that the wildflower is in full bloom.



On our way down, we reached once again the shrine complex of Tsukuba shrine. Nothing too fancy about this temple, but it offers a calming aesthetic.



Alas, soon it was time to catch the last bus back to the station. Now, I was able to realize that the view from the bus stop was nothing other but the two mini mountain tops I conquered a few hours ago.



For more information regarding the mountain, hiking maps, access and events, you can visit the official website mount-tsukuba.com.

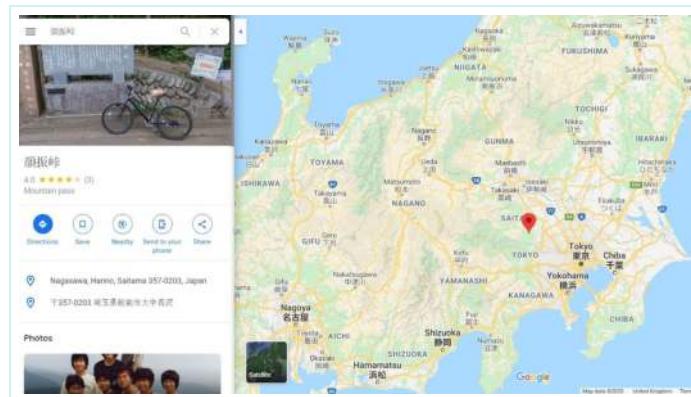
21 A hidden gem: Koburi Pass

DATE: 7.17.2020

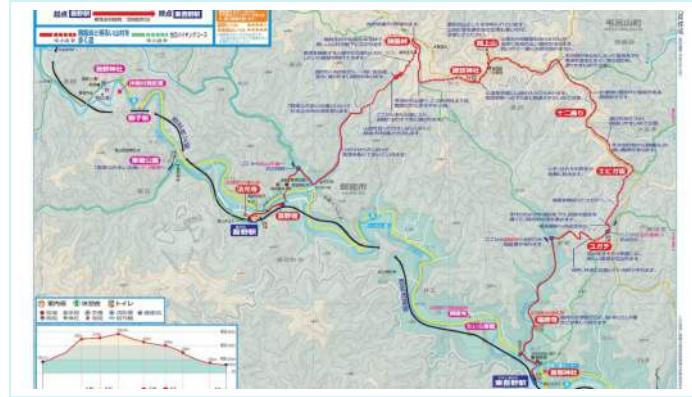
[Click here to view original post](#)



There is only one hiking path in Kanto that I have visited more than 3 times until now; Koburi pass (顔ぶり峠). It is a well hidden path in Saitama prefecture, starting from Agano station of JR Seibu Chichibu line and is part of the Ogose hiking routes. Compared to other hiking routes, this one is remarkably underappreciated, which is actually good because it is never crowded with hikers.



The main route starts from Agano station and continues following path signs for 顔ぶり峠 (Koburitoge) □ 誰訪神社 (Suwajinja) □ ユガテ (Yugate) □ 東吾野駅 (Higashi Agano station). The opposite way up has a slower upward slope, so it is up to you to decide depending on whether you prefer faster altitude gains or not. A detailed path connection map with the proposed route is presented below.



When you first exit Agano station, the most crucial thing you need to do is to check if you have a bear bell. If not, buy one at the shop in front of the station. Bears and wild boars are infesting Saitama prefecture at the moment, so it is always good to keep them away with the bell ringing from your backpack while you are walking. On the right side of the station there is a staircase leading down to the main road, where you are greeted by a statue of happy musician spirit.

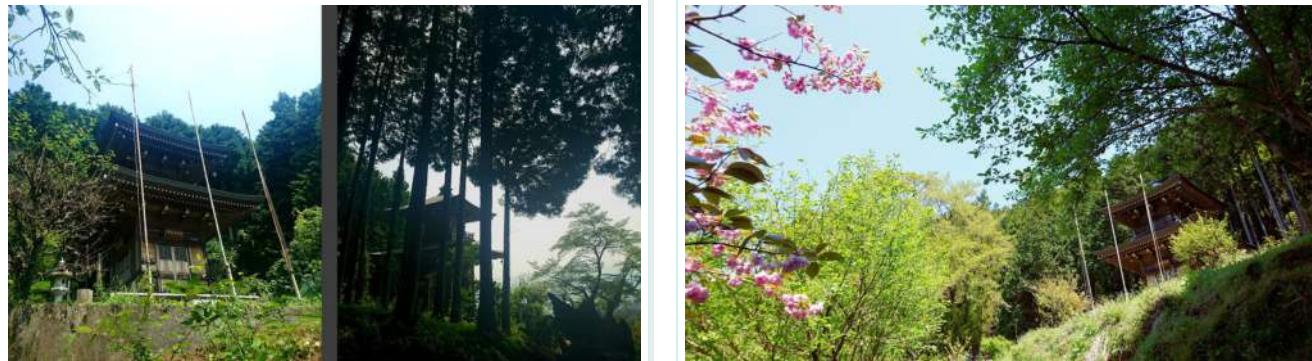


After walking a few km on the road, you enter the route at something that looks more like a spring than a path. A curvy path takes you higher in order to reach a small village. Once I saw tanuki (raccoon dog) miniatures, carefully placed in the hollow trunk of a tree, probably to bring good luck to hikers. Unfortunately, I haven't seen something similar again since.



After the curves, you reach the first house and a road with a small jizo memorial next to it. The view of the mountain ranges at this spot is amazing on a clear day and technically even Mt. Fuji is visible.

Soon afterwards, you reach to a small temple called 摩利支天尊, with a couple of benches to rest next to it. However, since one level above there are 2-3 restaurants with great balconies, it is better to be patient and stop there for lunch instead.



The temple during Sakura blooming season

In addition, the best part of the small village is not the restaurants but rather the café; 忘路庵カフエ is a bit further from the rest of the buildings, on the way to the next checkpoint. The lady owner is one of the kindest people I've met, not to mention how talented she is in woodwork. The café has a ton of wooden details, with the 2-meter tall giant speakers being the highlight. I don't think I've ever witnessed speakers that big, let alone handmade out of wood.

The last time I visited the cafe it was closed, but even the 'closed' sign was so elegant that I couldn't help but like that place even more.



Continuing along the road, eventually you turn left towards Suwa Jinja (諏訪神社), a small temple with two cute lion gatekeepers. After that, you follow the signs to Yugate (ユガテ), another small settlement in the area.



On a clear day, the Oshiage Tokyo Skytree in Tokyo can be seen from this point.



The path continues with ups and downs. At some point, the path is on top of the ridge. Noticing the difference between each side of the ridge, how the trees on the right side are vivid and healthy, whereas the ones on the left side are gloomy and sickly, never ceases to amaze me. Especially if it is windy, the left side has a contrasting spooky atmosphere.

The landscape changes a lot from point to point, thus making it difficult to get bored.



There is also the option between Onna-zaka (女坂) and Otoko-zaka (男坂), the female and male pathway respectively. Supposedly, the female path has a smoother slope albeit takes longer.



Next checkpoint is the forestry association. Recently, they (maybe??) have set up a couple of foreigner-friendly signs and maps in English.



Yugate consists mainly of crop fields, with different vegetation depending on the season. In late summer, the sunflower field is at its full glory. Here you can find again benches for resting or eating.



Sunflower field in Yugate

Depending on the path you take to go to Higashi-Agano station, you can end up to either To-shrine or Kotokuji. To-shrine (東神社, east shrine) is rather simple and has a steep staircase leading to the ground level.



Tojinja

On the other hand, Kotokuji is more complex, with a different flower decor for the different seasons. There are both a Sakura tree of the fluffy 100-petal variety, as well as a hydrangea bush next to the main temple.



View from Kotokuji in spring

Finally, when you reach Higashi-Agano station, the route is complete. Instead of returning from there, an alternative is to not go all the way to Yugate, but turn towards lake Kamakita and return from Saitama Medical University in Hidaka.



JR Higashi-Agano station

Another alternative is, after hopping on the train in Higashi-Agano station, to head towards the nearby Hanno station where the Moomin Village theme park is located. The theme park is built around lake Miyazawa and offers a semi-Nordic experience.



Immediately next to the Moomin Village, there is one of the most wonderful onsen baths I have ever visited, Kirakuri Villa (宮沢湖温泉喜楽里別邸). It has amazing pools, amenities and a large balcony with a full view of lake Miyazawa and the night sky clear from light pollution.

Koburi pass is easily accessible, without being overcrowded. It is perfect for a quick day trip to relieve the stress of the weekly routine. Give it a chance!



A giant black butterfly

22 Day Hike from Tokyo: Takayama Fudoson

DATE: 12.8.2022

[Click here to view original post](#)



After a surprising string of hot November days in Tokyo, the winter chill is finally kicking in. During winter, the hiking options for those who are not into alpine hiking and are susceptible to slippery falls (like yours truly) get severely limited. Don't worry though, miss bellelene has got you covered, with a scenic hiking route that stays open all year long.



The train station at Nishi Agano

As you have probably realized by now, I've been hanging around the mountains of Saitama quite a lot. My weekend commute to Agano was becoming so regular, that I've even contemplated moving there for a change. Alas, Kawasaki won my heart, but Saitama remained the top candidate for the occasional city break.



The path for this hike starts at Nishi-Agano station. The village appears dusty and covered in moss, I barely met anyone walking outside. Some buildings look abandoned, others not so much. The autumn colors are magnificent on this side of the mountain. All colors of the palette dominate the landscape: blood red from the momiji (maple), deep yellow from the icho (ginkgo) and orange from the keyaki (zelkova).



Previously, I've showed you the charms of the hidden [Koburi pass](#) in Higashi-Agano. This time, we will go a bit further and head for a great-but-forgotten Buddhist temple, the Takayama Fudoson (高山不動尊). Fudo temples are dedicated to the homonymous god Fudo-Myo (不動明王), who is the protector of the Kanto region i.e., Tokyo and its surrounding prefectures. The other two famous Fudo temples are Narita Fudo and Takahata Fudo. I also appreciated the smaller but interesting Meguro Fudo downtown. (Kindly remind me to show you all of these temples at a later blog post).



The trails around here are part of the 105km-long [Okumusashi long trail](#). The path to the temple passes close to a couple of waterfalls. There's an Otaki (big fall), a Shirataki (string fall) and a Fudo-taki, all common names for waterfalls. There is also an observatory with the most fabulous name I've ever come across, the Kanto's Eight Provinces Lookout (関八州見晴台). If you don't get distracted by the many alternate routes, Takahata Fudoson is just there. Records claim that it was founded in 654 C.E. The temple boasts a wooden statue of Gundari-Myo, created in the Heian period.



As the story goes, Fudo-Myo is the god that doesn't move, the Immovable one and the Enlightened King, the Japanized version of the Buddhist god Acala. While Acala was a minor deity in other Asian Buddhist traditions, Fudo became prominent in Japan. Fudo is the protector of the imperial court, or even the country as a whole. His symbols are a rope and a sword, and he is usually surrounded by flames. His face looks angry, and his fangs look tenacious. Fudo is a guy that you'd rather not mess with. Despite his fierce appearance, this god's mission is to bring mankind to salvation by cutting delusions with his sword and catching pure souls with his rope. The worship of Fudo is well connected with the traditions of the [Yamabushi wandering monks](#) and Shugendo. For this reason, you can find his statues tucked away into the mountains, close to caves or waterfalls.



The most interesting attraction on the premises is a giant Gingko tree, which was turning yellow at the time that I visited. The ground was covered with a blanket of leaves. The commanding presence of the tree gave me chills, it felt a bit like a serene power spot. This tree is called Childcare Ginkgo and it is supposedly 800 years old. The information board next to it says that the tree is 37-meter tall with a 10-meter trunk circumference. Visible traces from a fire in 1830s that burnt down the complex still remain on the tree, but it miraculously survived. Some of the roots are hanging exposed at the side of the hill and look like breasts dripping milk, hence the name. Women who fail to produce milk after milk can come to pray at the tree for assistance. A small shrine is carefully tucked under the exposed roots, next to the wooden steps that lead down. Nowadays, this tree is considered a prefectural natural monument.



The rest of the route is deprived of sights but attractive, nonetheless. You can explore a few rundown buildings or simply enjoy the colors of nature. I did both.



Eventually, the path ends at Agano station. From there, you can get to Hanno and try visiting the Moomin Valley park if it is still early. Alternatively, you can always wash away your tiredness in Kirari Onsen's hot spring water.



If you want to check out the details of this hike, you can follow the route in [alltrails](#) and the [map](#).

23

Day Hike from Tokyo: Mt Bonoore and lake Naguri

DATE: 1.19.2023

[Click here to view original post](#)



When it finally snows around Tokyo, an issue arises: Where to hike to next? Well, there's this little ridge right on top of the border between Tokyo and Saitama prefectures. Tucked inside the mountains, Bonoore ridge is accessible all year round. It is one of those routes where the journey is more fun than the destination.

The starting point to reach Bonoore ridge (棒ノ折山) is at lake Naguri (名栗湖). The lake was formed after the construction of the Arima dam and serves as a water reservoir. It is an ideal location for weekend activities: there's a canoe workshop, fishing spots and a barbecue area. Naguri lake is also famous for its firefly viewing event in the summer. Nolla Naguri (ノーラ名栗) with tent saunas is ideal for Nordic aficionados, while Sawarabi onsen is more geared towards traditionalist enjoyers of hot springs.

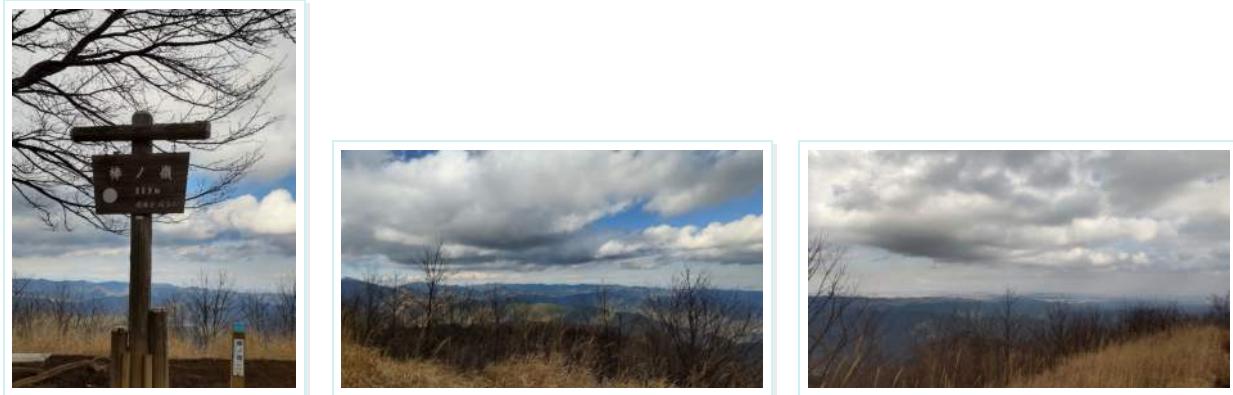
Bonoore means “the stick that got broken”, because according to the legend that's what happened to warlord Hatakeyama Shigetada, when he was crossing the ridge. Shigetada was a powerful samurai at the area of Chichibu. In the legendary Genpei wars, he stood originally on the side of the Taira clan, but midway decided to switch to the eventual winners, the Minamoto clan. After the war, the Minamoto cousins clashed for the throne. At that time, during the battle of Awazu, Shigetada was assigned and failed the task to capture Tomoe Gozen. She was a female samurai, technically referred to as onna-musha (女武者) and a fearsome opponent. Unfortunately, women's issues persist through the ages: Tomoe's master Minamoto no Yoshinaka sent her away from the ending moments of a battle, because he would be ashamed if he died next to a woman.

The hiking path goes around the lake and then turns towards Shiratani valley (白谷). Walking among the tall cedar trees in a serene forest has a calming effect. Soon, the root staircase gives its place to rocks and streams.

Be sure to wear bright clothes when hiking in winter, because the area is popular for hunters during the hunting season.



At some points, you may need to climb vertically on rocks and use ropes to move forward. The path gets especially dangerous after the rain, when slippery mud covers everything. At the top of Mt. Bonoore you can see a sign that marks the 869m elevation. Clear skies might grace you with a full view of Tokyo, as well as the Chichibu mountains.



There are some benches at the top and close to pretty rocks, where you can rest and grab lunch. Apart from that, the landscape doesn't change much on the way back. Since the hike takes less than 4 hours to complete, there's plenty of time left to relax at the onsen or arrange a BBQ session. It seems that this area used to be popular, but not so much anymore, so peace and quiet are guaranteed.



If you want to check out the details of this hike, you can follow the route in [alltrails](#).

Regional Expeditions

24

Hiking trip to Fukushima: Mt. Adatara

DATE: 8.30.2022

[Click here to view original post](#)



[Visited on May 29th, 2022]

The world knows Fukushima for all the wrong reasons. First of all, it is an entire prefecture, the third largest in Japan and the historical continuation of the Aizu domain. It stretches from the pacific shoreline to the interior of Honshu. Mountain ranges split it in three parallel parts, Aizu, Nakadōri, and Hamadōri. The infamous nuclear disaster happened at the shore, where [the tsunami struck](#). The after-effects, both physical and promotional, affected the reputation of the prefecture as a whole. Parts of the towns of Tomioka, Futaba and Namie are still in the ‘difficult-to-return zone’, but apart from these areas, [the danger of radiation has disappeared](#). Regardless, the goal of this hike is the west part of the prefecture, which was not affected by either the tsunami or the nuclear accident.

The Aizu area used to be the stronghold of the local samurai and an important trading post on the way from the north to Edo-Tokyo. It is surrounded by mountains and active volcanoes. Mt Adatara (安達太良山) is a prominent volcanic peak, a bit closer to Fukushima city. Its name consists of a lot of wonderful kanji, which I can vaguely translate as safe and accomplished, thick and nice mountain. The last time it erupted was in 1996, so it is indeed pretty safe at the moment. Because the volcanic activity continues brooding underneath,

as demonstrated by the numerous hot springs in the area, the crater is off limits due to toxic gas emissions. The 1700m peak of Mt. Adatara is the goal of this hike.



Rice fields and mountains in western Fukushima prefecture with Mt. Bandai in the background.

The most beautiful area in Fukushima is probably the Kitashiobara area, just southwest of Fukushima city. Three main volcanic ranges define the landscape: the Bandai range with its characteristic twin peaks, the Azuma range with a perfectly symmetrical crater and the Adatara range with its colorful textures. Mt. Adatara is located right next to the Azuma mountain range. Mt. Azuma-Kofuji, shaped like a miniature Mt. Fuji, is clearly visible from the expressway below. The area in-between the mountain ranges is occupied with lakes and marshes. Our base of operations was a wonderful [Donaludo pension](#) just next to the Goshikinuma lakes.



The most popular peak of the Azuma range, Mt. Azuma-Kofuji, is clearly visible from the expressway

On a sunny day in the early summer, I started the hike from Adatara-Kogen skin resort. The ski lift works as a hiker's lift during the summer. This way, you can skip some of the elevation and get directly from 940m to 1340m. However, it was a bit windy and the lift was not available for security reasons. So, I walked straight parallel to the lift cables, which turned out to be a much nicer alternative. The slope is pretty steep, but the lush greenery and the unobstructed view towards the city makes up for it. A couple of people were collecting mountain weeds on their way up, something that I don't see so often in Japan.



The base of the ski resort Adatara Kogen • People collecting mountain weeds at the base of Mt. Adatara

Mt. Adatara has secured its spot as one of the 100 famous mountains of Japan. All over the Adatara range there are a lot of hot springs and fumaroles. The area smells of moderately of sulfur. In the previous centuries, there was a sulfur mine at the top. Unfortunately, when the volcano erupted in 1900, 72 workers at the mine lost their lives.



View from the path towards Fukushima city

There are **seven trails** to the peak, but I choose the one from Nihonmatsu city's side, that goes up from Goyomatsu-daira (五葉松平). This area Until that point the trail is surrounded by trees and lush greenery, but becomes increasingly rocky. You can catch a breath at Goyomatsu-daira, but it is not a good place to stop because of the many rocks that make the terrain uncomfortable. Patches of snow at the top of the mountain were visible from Goyomatsu-daira.

The next checkpoint is the Yakushidake (薬師岳) peak and the summit station of the lift. Yakushi is the Buddhist equivalent of the Greek god Asclepius. Again, the terrain is covered by rough rocks. A small stone shrine decorates the peak. From Yakushidake you can get a full view of the mountain range. A large waterfall, with an intense flow due to the melting snow, catches my eye. It is nice up here.



The signpost on Yakushidake • The stone shrine on Yakushidake • The Adatara mountain range

The path after the summit station is paved with wood and is easy to walk on. This part of the mountain is abundant with animal life. Watch out for snakes, I saw a pair of snakes mating. After a kilometer or so, the terrain becomes rocky again. A stream flows down the rocks making everything muddy. Turns out that the source of the water flow was a remaining patch of snow just above. It was only 20 meters or so, but extremely slippery and thin to walk on. After that point, the path continues as normal and the landscape becomes even more volcanic.



The terrain becomes rocky again • A last patch of snow covers part of a path

After a final push, I can see the peak of Mt. Adatara. To go to the absolute summit, you have to climb up the rocks using chains and ropes. A wooden sign that marks the height and another stone shrine decorates the peak. The scenery up there is worth it, because of the clear view towards the crater. The dirt is more yellow on the other side, due to the sulfuric content. At the background, there are both green patches of fresh grass and white patches of old snow.



The peak of Mt. Adatara • A stone shrine at the peak • Mt Adatara stands 1700m tall • The view towards the rest of the volcano from the first peak

After a quick break, you can continue along the ridge line, the Ushi no se (牛の背), parallel to the rim of the crater. At this part of the path it is extremely windy, and it was hard to walk straight at some points. You can get

a clear view of the Numanohira crater, which is extremely barren and desolate, compared to the surrounding grassy areas. It has a 500m diameter. The sulfurous smell becomes stronger with every step. Unfortunately, the interior of the crater is off limits. However, both the crater and lake Akimoto deep in the background are clearly visible. After 30 minutes or so, you can reach an alternative peak of Mt. Adatara, also called iron peak.



View towards the Numanohira crater

From that point, the hike continues downward towards the Kurogane mountain hut (くろがね小屋). Another patch of snow is melting into a tiny stream. You can observe figures walking along the ridge like tiny ants. You can rest a bit at the open space in Mine no tsuji (峰ノ辻). It is a great location to observe the changes of the scenery and the rainbow set of colors of the volcanic sand and dirt.



View towards the ridge from down below • The flat area at Mine no tsuji

The Kurogane hut is a cozy two-storied hut another 30 minutes further down. They do not sell water, only soft drinks, but they will let you refill your bottle from the tap outside. They also offer a small onsen to clean up your body and brushes for your boots. The hut owns an off-road jeep and can reach civilization relatively quickly, if need be. They also have a bell to notify the hikers in case of danger due to the volcano.



The bell at Kurogane hut

After that point, the path moves parallel to a small stream and then turns towards Seishidaira. The path is flat and wide, for the jeep to be able to move properly. If you want to save time, you can follow the signs to the old horse road, and walk inside the forest, instead of the dirt road. If you follow the sound of water, you can find waterfalls here and there.



A waterfall close to the end of the path • Rice fields at the foot of the mountain

The whole route took less than 5 hours for a 10km distance with a slow pace. The path directs you back to the ski resort. A large onsen (Adatarayama Okudake no Yu) is conveniently located right there, to wash yourself and relax. The [open air bath](#) has a great view to the lower mountain side. Alternatively, you can drive a bit further to Dake onsen village and stay there.

If you find yourself on the way to northern Japan, make sure to visit Mt Adatara or the other nearby ranges. You can check out today's route at [Alltrails](#).



The route from the ski resort to the peaks, the hut and back

25

Exploring Fukushima: Goshikinuma Ponds

DATE: 6.26.2023[Click here to view original post](#)

[Visited on June 1st 2022]

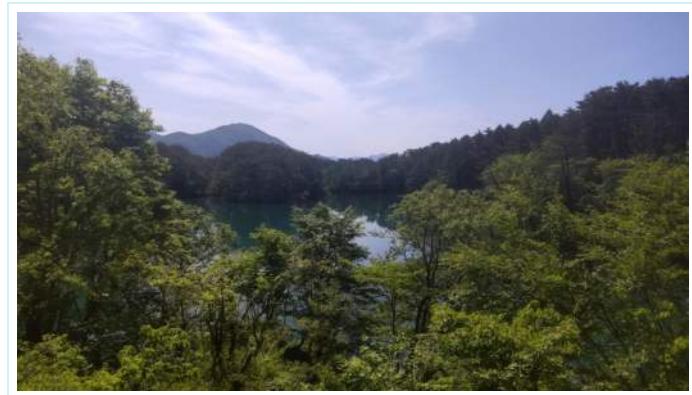
If you are stranded somewhere in Aizu and Fukushima, with no strength left but to drag your feet, I'm here with a hiking suggestion for beginners. Follow the trail around the rainbow lakes of Fukushima and learn more about the Japanese gods. Keep in mind that this is the perfect excursion for mid-June, when lush greenery is abundant.



Bishamon's pond

The trail visits Goshikinuma (五色沼), literally 'the lakes with five colors', which alludes to the varied color hues of each lake. In my mind, I have associated the word *numa* with swampy ponds, but I can assure you

that these lakes look crystal clear. The five main lakes and a lot of smaller ponds were formed in 1888, after a large eruption of the nearby Mt. Bandai (磐梯山) and a subsequent rock avalanche, which re-sculpted the landscape in its entirety. (I have researched, and Mt. Bandai is not associated with Bandai-Namco, bummer). The explosion of Mt. Bandai was serious and caused 500 deaths but gave an abundance of color as condolences to the villagers. A local patron, Endo Genmu, was devastated by the disruption caused by the eruption and funded the planting of thousands of trees, thus revitalizing the area and turning it in a tourist destination.



View from the observatory next to Bishamon's pond

The trail starts at a small visitor center / shop and the first stop is Lake Bishamon. There is a wooden deck next to it and dozens of small boats for those who enjoy rowing. (The boats are going to be a common occurrence, I counted at least 3 boat stations at the various lakes.) Apparently, some giant and hungry Koi fish are aggressively asking for food at this lake. [Bishamon-ten](#) (毘沙門天) is the Japanese equivalent of the hindu god Vaiśravaṇa, one of the four heavenly kings. He is an armor-clad warrior god and is often confused with Hachiman, the other god of war. In Japanese folklore, Bishamon is one of the [seven lucky gods](#), along with Benzai-ten and Daikoku-ten.



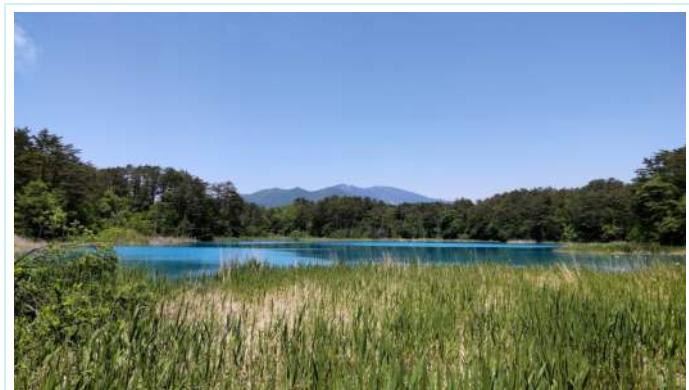
The red pond, Aka-numa

Next come the red pond Akanuma (赤沼), the deep pond Midorunuma (深泥沼) and the dragon's pond Tatsumuna (竜沼). These ponds are much smaller and a lot muddier than the larger ones. The locals say that the colors of the ponds change 'mysteriously' depending on the year and the weather. Indeed, colors may change to red, due to copper and other volcanic minerals that are left over from Mt. Bandai's eruption. The May-June period is regarded as shin-ryoku (新緑), the time of the year when fresh leaves appear and there's no greener option other than the Goshikinuma.



Benten's pond

The most impressive out of all the ponds is Benzaiten's pond with its aquamarine blue color. It is a relatively large pond with a couple of benches next to it so that you can sit and enjoy the view. Benzaiten (弁才天) or Benten is the goddess of music, beauty and speech, another one of the seven lucky gods. She is the equivalent of the Hindu goddess Saraswati and became really popular in Japan, maybe because of her role as bestower of monetary fortune. She is commonly depicted holding a biwa guitar, with dragons and snakes around her. There's another observation deck at the edge of Benten's pond, which offers a magnificent view of the blue gradients of the lake and the Azuma mountains at the back.



Benten's pond

Next, comes Rurinuma (るり沼), the lapis lazuli pond with a deep blue hue. At the time of my visit, it appeared as green as it gets, with its waters still, forming an excellent mirror of the surrounding trees and the hovering Mt. Bandai. It is easy to spot the volcano from its twin peaks and the collapsed caldera. From this side, the Ura-Bandai back side, the mountain appears rough and destroyed, a contrast from its tidy view from the other side.



Rurinuma pond • Aonuma pond

On the opposite side, there's Aonuma (青沼), the bluest of the ponds. The lush greenery surrounding it, makes the color even more mesmerizing. Apparently, this specific spot at Aonuma has been awarded the 'number 1 most beautiful view of Fukushima'. Finally, we reach Yanagi-numa (柳沼), the willow pond that sits directly next to the cafeteria and the souvenir shop at the end of the trail. A dozen of armchairs are conveniently set up in front of a large wooden deck to enjoy the view of the lake regardless of the weather.



Yanaginuma pond

Did you think that we stopped counting ponds? There's one more left! Lake Hibara (桧原湖) is one of the largest lakes that were formed after the eruption. Because of its large size and depth, it does not offer the rainbow colors like the ponds do. However, it is nice to chill, take a quick boat ride and get some ice-cream. You can even try a cruise! If you have time to spare, a few more nature trails start from lake Hibara and are eagerly waiting to be explored.



Lake Hibara and a view to Mt. Bandai

The trail is only 7.1km long, with almost no elevation gain and takes about one and a half hour from one end to the other. If you want to check out the details of this hike, you can follow the route in [alltrails](#). On my way back from the ponds, I observed a lot of wild wisteria trees decorating the road with their purple blossoms. Be sure to look for them. Moreover, don't forget to admire the view of the rice fields at sunset, it's a blessing.

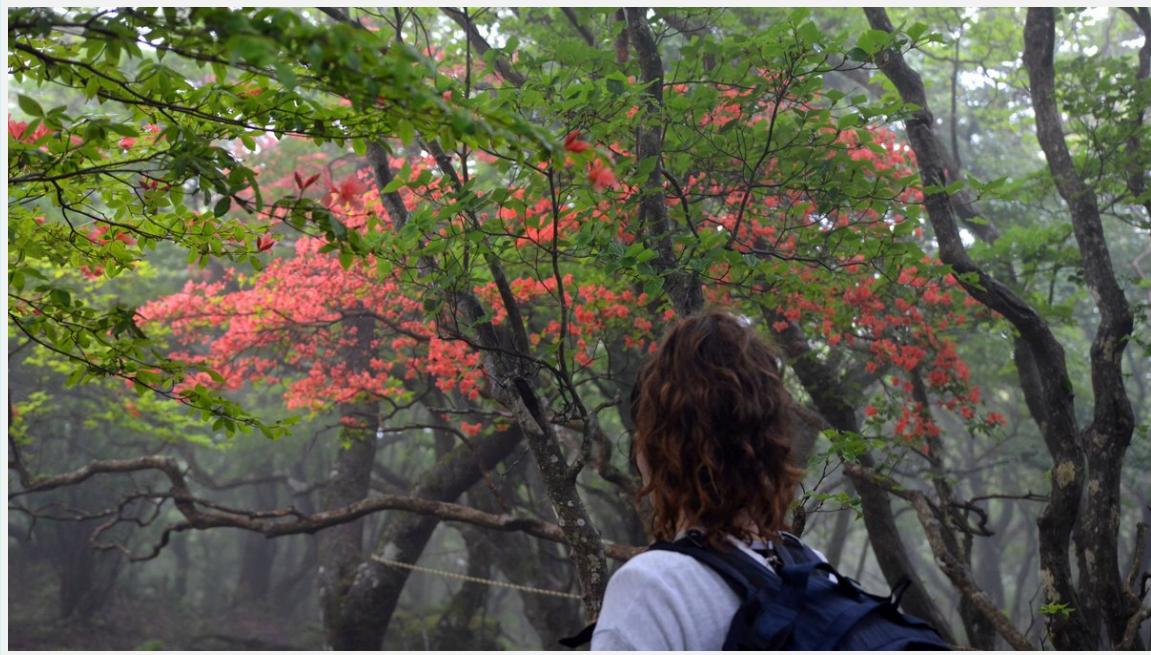


Wild wisteria trees on the roadside • There are rice fields everywhere

26 Hiking in Shizuoka: The haunting Mt Amagi and Hatcho pond

DATE: 4.11.2024

[Click here to view original post](#)



Forgive me for getting a bit emotional with nostalgia as I prepare to recount one of the most exhilarating hiking experiences of my life. While my memories may have blurred with time, the striking images captured by my friends during this journey are bound to leave you spellbound.



Credit: @mallmartin

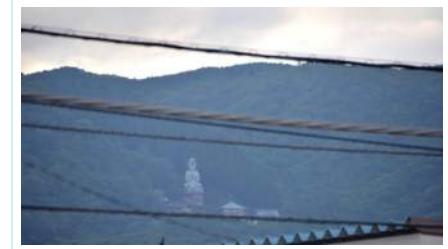
Let's journey back a few years, to the third month of my relocation to Tokyo. It was during this time that I found myself amidst a group of extraordinary individuals who shared two passions: hiking and photography.

It was them who started taking me to mountain excursions, initiated me in the hiking manners, and had me buy proper hiking boots. The rest, as they say, is history. Following a series of shorter excursions around Hakone and Saitama, I graduated to the next stage; a weekend hiking trip to Shizuoka prefecture.



Credit:@mallmartin

The plan was easy. First, we had to take the JR train all the way to Ito, as far as it gets in the Izu peninsula. We would spend the night there at some picturesque ryokan and early next morning we would head to Higashiizu. The plan for the final day was to wing it and head home. I felt completely lost and out of my league, so it's one of the rare times that I've let someone else handle everything (apart from the occasional "Elena, come speak on the phone, they don't understand English".)



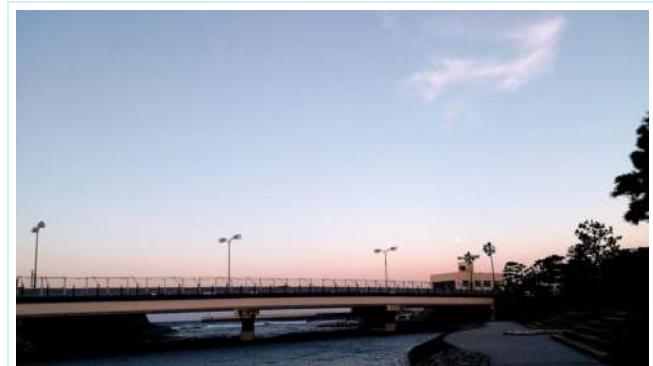
Credit:@mallmartin

Shizuoka was historically significant as the home of the first Tokugawa shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu. In recent times, it is known as a global hub for motorcycle and musical instrument manufacturing, with brands like Honda, Yamaha, and Suzuki originating and operating in Shizuoka. To the west, it extends into the Japan Alps, while to the east, it narrows along a coast bounded by Mount Fuji, leading to the Izu Peninsula, protruding into the Pacific Ocean. Nestled along the eastern shore of the Izu Peninsula lies the picturesque city of Ito (伊東市). Geographically, Ito boasts a landscape characterized by rolling hills and a coastline that hugs the shores of Sagami Bay. The city is especially famous for the [Cherry Trees](#) Street at Izu-kogen. Much of the coastal region falls within the Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park. It is renowned for its onsen hot springs, with numerous hotels and resorts, Ito is one of the most frequented national parks in Japan, offering a perfect blend of nature, tranquility, and adventure.



Credit:@mallmartin • The Tokaikan museum

You might have heard of Izu through the nobelist writer Yasunari Kawabata and “The Dancing Girl of Izu” (Izu no Odoriko), which captures the essence of the region through its storytelling. The local **Kawazu zakura** **cherry blossoms**, famous for their early bloom and vibrant pink petals, symbolize the transient beauty that Kawabata so elegantly narrates. Approximately 20 million years ago, Izu was situated at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, since it was essentially a cluster of undersea volcanoes near Iwo Jima. Over time, these volcanoes migrated northward and the Izu Peninsula is formed by the collision of the Philippine Sea Plate with the Okhotsk Plate at the Nankai Trough, with Mount Fuji marking the junction where the three tectonic plates converge. This explains the rugged geography and the intense volcanic activity, which produces the most magnificent hot springs. Unfortunately, this also means that the peninsula experiences frequent earthquake swarms and tsunamis, with the most recent devastation taking place in 2021.



The dancing girl of Izu • I always thought this landscape would be a good Alpine's album cover

The peninsula features the dominant Amagi Mountain Range (天城連山), home to peaks such as Bansaburo-dake (万三郎岳), Banjirodake (万二郎岳), and Tōgasayama (遠笠山), with the first reaching 1,406 meters. Mt Amagi is of course one of the **100 most beautiful mountains of Japan**. A primary reason for this listing is the fact that the mountain is covered with pink and orange azalea shrubs, which form a stark contrast with the lush greenery.



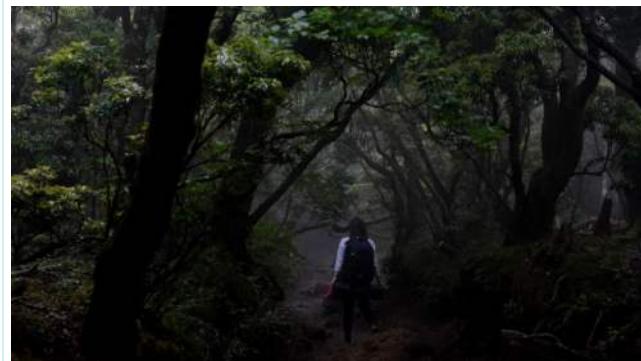
Credit:@mallmartin

We started the hike from the [Amagi Kogen Golf Course](#) bus stop. The plan was to reach a small pond, follow the Miyuki Road (御幸歩道) and end up at the Amagi tunnel (天城トンネル). The day was foggy, it was drizzling a bit and the humidity was piercing through our clothes. That's what June in Japan usually looks like, so we had to bear with it and start walking. The first peak we meet is the Banjirodake. The -jiro suffix usually connotes the second son of a family, but in this case it means the second-highest peak.



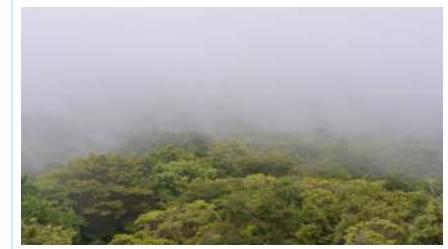
Credit:@mallmartin

After the initial elevation gain to the peak, comes along a horseback ridge (Umanose, 馬ノ背の尾根). This area, near the Ishikusudate (石楠立) checkpoint, is full of azaleas, and it is considered the most beautiful view of Mt Amagi, when they are in full bloom. There's also an asebi (馬酔木) tunnel path, made of the Japanese andromeda plant. This plant is toxic to horses and causes them to gallop like drunk when consumed, which is evident on its name's kanji characters. Soon after, the ascent ends at the Banzaburodake. The suffix -saburo refers to the third son of a family, so I will be left to wonder for an eternity which peak was the “eldest” in this case.



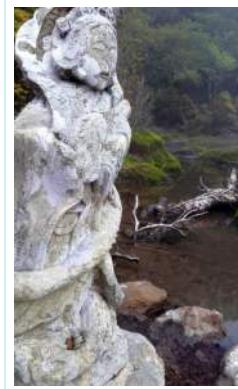
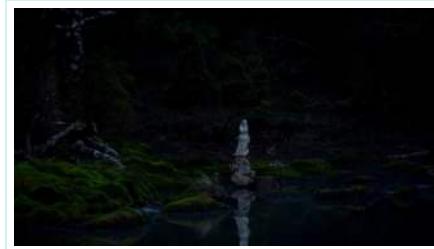
Credit:@mallmartin

The first part of the path showcased a mix of beech trees and azalea shrubs. A specific beech tree shaped as a snake, the hebibuna (ヘビブナ), forms a special landmark. Due to the morphology of the area, only limited amount of light can penetrate the forest. At times, the fog and the shadow made it feel like it was almost pitch dark. Nevertheless, this weather setup formed an ideal set of conditions to enjoy the komorebi (木漏れ日), namely the light that gets filtered through the tree branches.



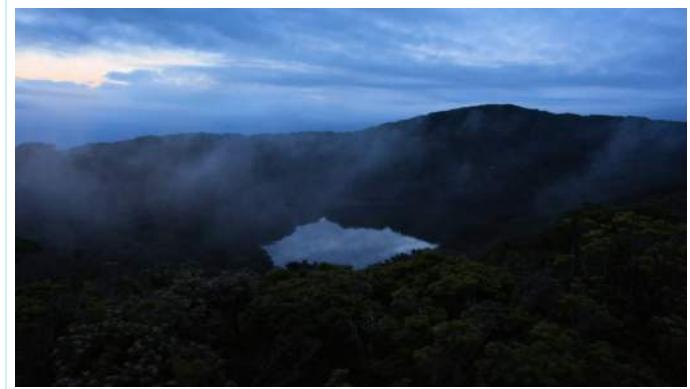
The hebibuna. Credit:@mallmartin • Credit:@mallmartin

After moving on from the Totsuka pass (戸塚峠) the path becomes brighter, with more light coming in. Soon, you will reach the highlight of the route, the Hatcho pond (八丁池). This small lake is located at 1,173 meters above sea level, and while its shape makes it look like a crater lake, it is actually formed due to a fault depression. Its name suggesting a circumference of 870 meters, though it's actually about 560 meters). The pond is surrounded by the scenic primeval forest, including mountain cherry trees and maples. Given its designation as a special protection area within the national park, certain regulations apply. Camping and bonfires are strictly prohibited in [the Special Protection Area](#), with potential legal consequences for violators.



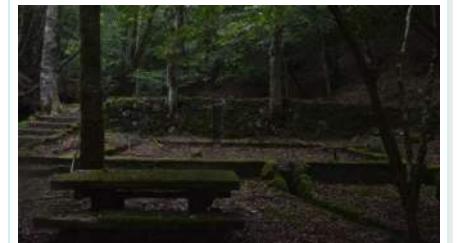
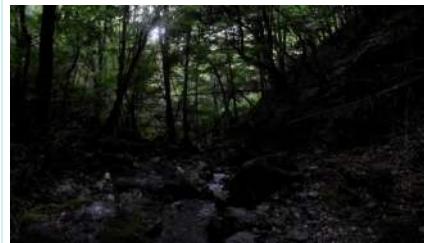
The statue of the water spirit. Credit:@mallmartin

On the shore of the lake there's a statue of a water spirit, which is also thought to be the [goddess Benzaiten](#). We spent a delightful time at the lake shore, as my Brazilian friend tried to teach us how to dance samba, despite not knowing how to dance herself. We were laughing so hard, that she lost balance and almost fell in the lake! If you'd rather have a less close-up view of Hatcho pond, there's an observation platform nearby on the way to [Aosuzudai](#) (青スズ台). After the highlight of the trail, we continued on our way to the old Amagi tunnel.



Hatcho pond from the observatory. Credit:@mallmartin

You can follow the main path, but at some point it diverged so we took the right and continued walking parallel to the gorge. On the way, we've met various signs of destruction and abandonment, such as a toppled wooden bridge and an old wooden cabin. The cabin used to be a himuro (氷室), an ice cabin of sorts that extends underground, used to store ice throughout the year, commonly used prior to the invention of the refrigerator. There are also benches to rest and a small parking ground, marking the start of the mountain road, the first bastion of civilization in a while.



Credit:@mallmartin

Actually, there are two Amagi tunnels, the old and the new one. The Old Amagi Tunnel, Japan's first stone road tunnel entirely constructed of cut stone, holds the distinction of being the country's longest existing stone road tunnel. Recognized as one of Japan's 100 best roads, the tunnel was designated as a national registered as a national important cultural property in 2001, named the "Amagi Mountain Tunnel." The tunnel makes its appearance in Kawabata's novel, as well as many movies, due to its cool atmosphere. By many, it is being considered haunted, but this makes it an even more delightful sightseeing spot. Finally, we took the bus back to Izu from the nearby [Suiseichishita \(水生地下 \(バス\) \) bus stop](#).

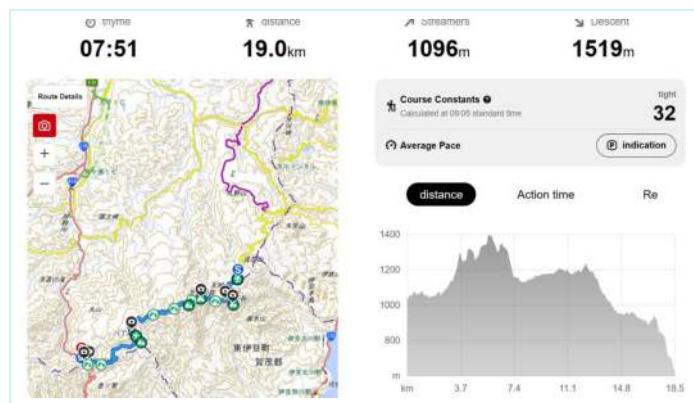


The old Amagi tunnel. Credit:@mallmartin

Unwillingly, we had to take the train to return to Tokyo. However, we did this while passing through Shuzenji (修禅寺), an onsen town, and spending the night there. Shuzenji is actually the hometown of one of my professors, so I had wanted to visit there. The Zen master Kobo Daishi founded a temple here and created the most prominent hot spring, the Tokko-no-yu (独鉢の湯). We indulged in a well deserved hot bath at the public bath [Hakoyu](#)(簞湯), to relax our tired bodies. When in Izu, make sure to enjoy their local produce, fresh fish and fresh wasabi.



If you want to check out the details of this hike, you can follow the route in [Yamap](#).



The route of today's hike

27

Hiking Trip in Beppu: Kyushu's Tallest Mountain

DATE: 11.3.2022[Click here to view original post](#)

[Visited in August 2022]

Everyone seems to adore Kyushu, especially the vibrant Fukuoka and the stricken-by-fate Nagasaki. This large island is a favorite for natural disasters, like volcanoes, earthquakes and typhoons. You've probably marveled at the sight of the hot springs in Beppu, but have you ever considered how do their volcanic sources look like?



View of Mt. Yufu from the national road

Beppu prefecture is incontestably the onsen capital of Japan (probably also of the world). Sulfuric gases and smoke vapors are coming out of every nook and cranny in the earth. This smelly blessing comes mainly from Mt. Yufu (由布岳), a stratovolcano with a prominent shape visible from the highway. However, if you head a bit to the south-west, you are going to meet the tallest mountain in Kyushu. Guest star for this hike: my brother.



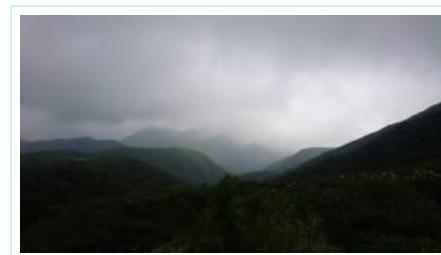
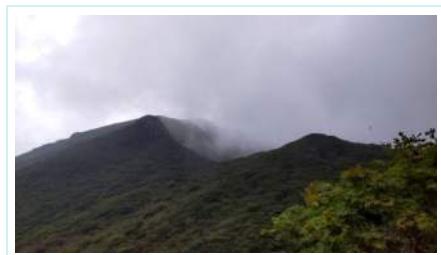
Views on top of Mt. Kuju

The Kuju mountain (九重山) range is a group of volcanic peaks, out of which Mt. Nakadake (中岳) is the tallest at 1,791 m. The homonymous Mt. Kuju is just 2 meters lower and fell short of this great title. Together with Mt. Aso, the most famous volcano in Kyushu, they form the Aso-Kuju national park. Of course, they belong both in the list of the 100 best mountains of Japan. Apart from a couple difficult points, it is generally an easy hike which offers spectacular views of the surrounding mountains and the autumn foliage. Its other attraction is a small crater lake close to the mountain top. Assume that your hike will take five to six hours and don't let this chance pass by if you happen to be around.



An observatory deck above Makinoto pass

We are going to start this hike from Makinoto pass (牧ノ戸峠), which has a large parking lot and a small shop for last minute provisions. The start of the path is a relatively steep slope covered with cement. On the day that I visited the area everything was covered with thick clouds. On such a gloomy morning, I could not enjoy the view from the observatory.



Hiking along the ridgeline • A first set of peaks are visible in a distance • View of the mountains from a vantage point near Kutsukadake (沓掛山)

Soon, the terrain becomes rocky. You have to use your hands to assist climbing up and down the ridge. The Kuju peaks are hardly visible in the distance, partly obscured by clouds. Mud from the morning rain is making balance trickier. A few inexperienced people with full hiking gear seemed already tired by now. But fear not, the path does not stay constantly like this.



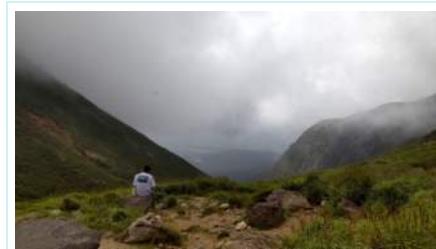
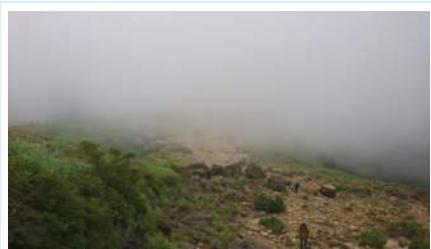
The path flattens after a while at Nishichirigahama

After a while, rock gives its place to reddish volcanic dust. On the left of the flat plateau, there is an intersection towards Mt. Hoshozan (星生山) with marshlands scattered around. I opted to skip this peak and continued in the direction of Mt. Kuju. A few meters forward there is an unusual “beach”, the Nishichirigahama (西千里ヶ浜). In spring, this area is fully covered with beautiful purple flowers. Then, comes Hoshozaki (星生崎), the “cape” of Mt. Hoshozan. It consists of a group of tall rocks, which look like a castle of sorts. If you are experienced in rock climbing, you can try it out.



The cape of Hoshozaki • An area to rest and find shelter at Kuju split • Kuju split with Hoshozaki hovering above

The next checkpoint is Kuju split (久住分れ), another flat section with a toilet and a shelter, in case of an eruption. A few people have stopped to catch a breath here. After this point, the path becomes steep again. There are two options to continue from here on: you can either take a right and climb right on top of volcanic rocks, using some ropes for assistance, or you can take a left and walk on a longer but smoother path. I opted for the first and got ready to get myself covered with yellowish dust.



The shortest way to the top is the steep rocky slope on the right • A view to the valley bellow • Remnants of a caldera on the left side of the path

The path becomes green again and the silhouette of Mt. Kuju is finally visible behind the clouds. There is again an intersection, but I take a left to go towards Mt. Nakadake, instead of Mt. Kuju on the right. You will pass by Karaike (空池), a volcanic lake that used to be full of water, but not anymore, hence the name. The path looks amazing, the ridge is flowing like spikes on a dragon's back. (For the original dragon's back hike, you have to check out Hong Kong).



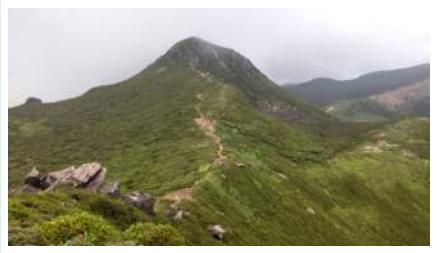
The silhouette of Mt. Kuju • Karaike, an empty volcanic lake

Again, the path splits to many options. We planned to do a loop, from Mt. Tengu-no-jo, then Mt. Nakadake and finally lake Miike. So, we start climbing the rocks to Mt. Tengu-no-jo (天狗ヶ城), a 1,790-meter peak. It is steep and the rocks are sharp, so it is better to climb it up than down. Bright yellow marks on the rocks are showing the way. This peak got its name for a reason: a Tengu's castle. The rocks make the peak look like the perfect nest for a bird. And Tengus are originally the greatest of birds, the winged messengers of the gods. Lake Miike (御池) looks magnificent from above. It is not round, looking more like a diamond.



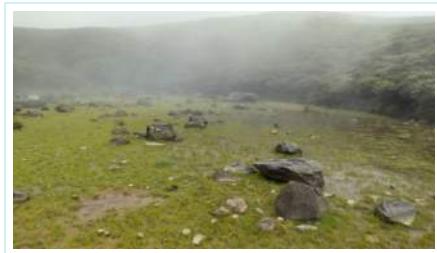
View to the lake from just below Tengu-no-jo • Part of the caldera • The top of Tengu-no-jo • Lake Miike

There are no benches or anything at the peak, so we continue to the next, Mt. Nakadake (中岳) at 1,791 meters. It is the innermost peak and offers a great view of the lake with Mt. Kuju behind. This is the tallest point on the whole island. The peak is again full of rocks and there is no place to sit. The ridge probably looks magnificent from here during autumn. The area on the left appears to be off-limits because of the intense amount of volcanic gas coming out of the ground. Mt. Kuju is rich in geothermal energy.



The ridge to Mt. Nakadake • The top of Mt. Nakadake • The backside of Tengu-no-jo • View to the lake and Mt. Kuju when climbing down Mt. Nakadake

The loop continues by going down from Nakadake, passing a section that looks like it could be a marsh and moving between tall grass to the right, in order to reach another evacuation shelter (池ノ小屋避難小屋) made of stone. From here it is easier to access the lake. We stopped to have lunch and enjoy the view. We also dipped our toes in the water to rest a bit. The water was lukewarm at this time of the year.



The volcanic shelter next to lake Miike • Marshlands next to the shelter • Closeup of lake Miike

On the way back, the loop took us back to the point where we started climbing Mt. Tengu-no-jo. We considered climbing one more peak, Mt. Kuju itself, but decided to call it a day. We took the same way back, with the exception that we took a right on the greener path to skip the rocky slope to Kuju split. Going down was easy and fast, apart from the occasional climbing. The total length of the route was about 10km with a 600m elevation gain. It took us a bit more than four hours to finish, including resting and taking a TON of photos.



Mt. Tengu-no-jo and the ridge to Mt. Kuju meet at the lake

A couple of wonderful [onsens](#) are located in the vicinity to wash up and relax, so we opted for Akagawa onsen (赤川温泉赤川荘). I especially liked the outdoor pools that look directly to a small waterfall. The smell of Sulphur is intense, so be prepared.



The pools of Akagawa onsen • A tunnel to Takachiho gorge • View to Beppu onsen from the road

If you want to check out the details of this hike, you can follow the route [here](#). After the hike, we got back to Beppu and continued our road trip.

28 Thoughts on climbing Mt. Fuji (富士登山)

DATE: 9.3.2017

[Click here to view original post](#)



Hey there! How was your summer vacation? Mine was quite floppy, as it was inconveniently interrupted by my entrance exams.



Nevertheless, end of August is a relatively good time to visit Mt. Fuji. Considering that the main paths are open to the public only 2months in the summer, it's a shame not to arrange a plan to visit. As a matter of fact, it turns out that climbing to Mt. Fuji summit is some kind of pilgrimage, sought after both by Japanese people and foreign tourists. Almost half of the climbing crowd was short term staying foreigners, some of them awfully under-prepared for the weather conditions and the mountainous/volcanic ground.



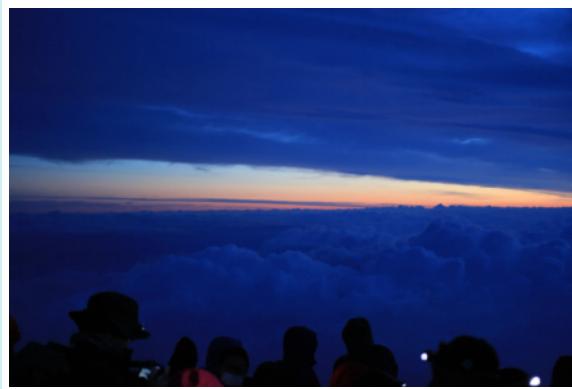
On the other hand, I met a lot of old Japanese people who are recurring visitors every summer for an impressive number of years.



So, the big question is, how was it? I'll be honest, not bad –but not as good as I expected. The natural beauty was breathtaking, the sunset and sunrise sky colors, the red and black volcanic dirt, the clouds riding on the mountain slopes.. but the experience as a whole left me unsatisfied.



Surprisingly, I can pinpoint the reason why quite clearly: too many people up there. Having a huge crowd is good for events like parties and concerts and parades, but for nature appreciation? Ehm, not so much, to say the least. Fuji is imposing and inspiring, but not unmatched in terms of natural beauty. Add up the huge, noisy, smelly, annoying crowd, and there you have it; a magnificently unique experience for all the wrong reasons.



Time for tips: Going there on the weekend may have contributed a lot to my not-so-good experience, so I strongly suggest weekdays at the beginning or end of the visiting seasons to anyone who is interested in getting there. Don't worry too much about food; the higher you climb, the higher the cup noodles price climbs, but the overall provision prices are not prohibitive to buy. Bring an awful lot of warm and waterproof clothes. If you go for the sunrise, it means you'll climb during nighttime. When you are moving, everything is fine, but when you decide to sit and rest, the low temperature hits you –HARD. Patches like kairo (カイロ) can keep you warm, and usually you can buy at the huts, if need be. Extra socks, so that you can change your sweaty wet ones and spare your feet of some chilliness, is a wise idea. Headlight: useful. Hiking sticks: necessary for going down – the ground is slippery and knee-hurting. Oxygen can: did nothing for me.



As a 2 decades long Japanese path guide told me: 'Don't hurry to get up, walk slowly with a steady pace, don't take a break, just move with small steps and always choose small inclination slopes instead of stair steps. Stretch your legs and body minimally, and you'll be surprised when you see that you arrived to the summit before all the rushed youngsters.' That being said, a path guide is absolutely not necessary. The mountain paths are properly signed, and just following the crowd will suffice. There are not many places to go on a bald mountain side. When you see big organized groups about to set out, set out before them, some parts of the path are narrow, and the last thing you want is to be trapped in one of them. Be prepared for a lingering smell of human byproducts near the toilets –you can't expect a pine tree fragrance when you have a toilet in the middle of nowhere with nothing but lava rocks around you. Also, by witnessing both sunset and sunrise, I recommend going for the sunset. The reddish colors are stunning, more impressive than the sunrise orange ones, and the hike will all-in-all be easier. Climbing from the easily accessible Yoshida trail is of moderate difficulty, so even inexperienced, hiking first-timers will be just fine, with only some leg discomfort in the following days. Think about the 7oyo Japanese security guards, climbing up and down around 3 a.m., controlling the crowd flow at 3.400m by lively yelling '5 minutes more to the top, guys, 10 if you do it slowly, move on move on, you can do it!'. If the super genki ojiisans can do that without breaking a sweat, you can at least reach the top, right?

Conclusion

29

Climbing Mt. Fuji: The Sequel No One Asked For

DATE: 9.15.2022

[Click here to view original post](#)



[Visited on August 3rd, 2022]

Last week officially marks the end of the 2022 hiking season for climbing Mt. Fuji. Yeah, that one, the volcanic giant of 3.776 meters, which hovers above Tokyo, threatening mass extinction with its next eruption. The lucky ones have seen Fuji on their way from or to one of Tokyo's airports. The even luckier ones have observed it up-close, from Gotemba or lake Kawaguchi. But how many have actually observed it intimately close, let's say at the top of its crater? Turns out, quite a few. And yours truly, managed to do it twice!

Quick Update (2024/07/05): Some rules about the logistics of climbing the mountains have changed, so make sure to check the [official site](#). Key changes:

- 1000JPY preservation fee (old) + 2000JPY entrance fee (new)
- 4000 entry permits/day (new)
- entrance gates for checks (new)
- can't enter after 4p.m. and can't do bullet hike (new)
- everything (buses, huts, permits) is booked insanely fast (new)



Mt. Fuji with all its glory as seen from the Fuji Subaru Line 5th station

Mt. Fuji is one of the most popular hiking destinations during the summer. Every year, it's accessible from July 10th to September 10th. Thousands of people attempt the hike every year, and a large percentage manages to reach the top. For many, it's a religious pilgrimage due to Fuji's status as a sacred mountain. For others, it's a test to their limits. The saying goes "Every wise man has climbed Mt. Fuji once, but only a fool climbs it twice". Well, I'm the fool and I'm here to talk to you about it.



Hikers climbing Mt. Fuji in the mist

As you may remember, I have already been on the top of [Fuji in 2017](#), just 4 months after I arrived in Japan. From my description in that post, it is evident that my experience was not that satisfactory. I was in a rough body shape due to not exercising much, I was accompanied by a group of people unaccustomed to mountains and cold weather, and we had also peaked a super crowded weekend for our hike. Because we opted for a bullet hike during the night, while only resting on benches when available, I got myself a nice panic attack at the top. The elevation gain from sea level in Tokyo to 3.776 m was too much for me to handle in a span of a few hours. I started heading down to lower elevation as soon as I reached the top, in order to feel better. This meant that I didn't get to explore around the crater or reach the true top, half a kilometer away on the other side of the crater. I was proud that I managed to do it, but sad that I didn't do it properly. Soon, I forgot about it and life moved on.



Shops at the 5th station

Fast forward 5 years later, four days after my final presentation for the PhD degree, I'm again on my way to Fuji. Three of my best friends are with me; all doctoral students, all tired from the hard work we've put towards our degrees, all still unable to wind down after months of continuous stress. Everyone is there on their first attempt, apart from me. We decided to follow the Yoshida trail again, the one closest to Tokyo. Because hiking Mt Fuji once has made me *wiser*, I arranged the schedule so that we would avoid the mistakes I've made last time. So, we booked a bus from Shinjuku (the [Fuji 5 lakes](#) line from Keio highway buses) and reserved futon beds at a mountain hut at the 8th station (the main path starts from the Fuji Subaru line 5th station and the top is technically the 10th). The plan is to sleep for a few hours in the hut and hike the last kilometers to the top just on time to catch the sunrise. Spending the night at 3400m, instead of moving continuously, is supposedly going to help adjust to the altitude.



View towards the mountains in Yamanashi

It was a sunny day in early August, pretty hot in Tokyo and still hot enough by the time we arrived at the 5th station, around 10:30 in the morning. The altitude at this point is 2305m. A lot of tourists visit the 5th station just to enjoy a close up view of Fuji. It looks reddish from here, the true color of its dirt. While most people imagine Mt Fuji as blue, this is just the effect of light scattering in the atmosphere. Also, it's characteristic snow cap has melted, that's why the top is accessible to the hikers. However, even the 5th station is not as crowded as it used to be a few years ago during the high season.



The 5th station is located at 2305 meters • Fujisan Komitake shrine at the 5th station

We walked a bit around the shrine and the shops. My friends picked up wooden hiking poles from the shop, in order to fill them up with commemorative heat stamps from the mountain huts along the way. Since I had already done this last time, I used my normal hiking poles. After getting a nice bowl of soba noodles for breakfast, we headed to the start of the path. There were anti-covid measures in place, so every hiker who entered the checkpoint had to get a temperature measurement and confirm that they didn't have any symptoms. Additionally, everyone is asked to pay a 1000JPY fee towards the environmental preservation of the mountain. An engraved wooden amulet is given as thanks, with a different design every year.



The end of the forest zone at Mt. Fuji

The first part of the path is covered with forest, it is the last part of the forest zone at around 2500m. There were a few people coming down the mountain at that time. They all looked exhausted. Horses are allowed to carry passengers at this first part of the path. Most of the time, foreign tourists are the ones who use the horses. Apart from that, they are helpful when there is a need to carry down people who are injured or exhausted. The horses can reach up until a little after the 6th station, at the parts where the path is like a dirt road. A safety guidance center is also located at the 6th station, with explanations of the safety protocols in case of an eruption.



Horses carrying down customers • Mt. Fuji safety guidance center at the 6th station

After a series of kind slopes, the path became rocky from lava flows. The number of people going up was gradually reducing, since many were stopping to rest or sleep at the mountain huts between the 7th and 8th station. There are 15 mountain huts along the Yoshida trail, quite a large number. They all serve overpriced cup-ramen and water. They also offer heat stamps, applied with a metal marking tool at an irori fire place. You can spot the irori as the fish-shaped metal object hanging from the ceiling. A fish is a creature of water; therefore, it is believed to protect the building from fire accidents.



The path moves on top of past lava flows • A hut employee is putting a heat stamp on a hiking pole next to an irori • The price of stamps ranges from 300 to 500 JPY

We moved upwards and the mist did the same. If you looked down, you could see the shadow of low hanging clouds above the plains of the five lakes and lake Kawaguchiko. If you looked towards the top, there was only a thick block of mist that reduced the visibility. Some people started to put on heavier clothing, because it was getting cold fast, despite being still noon. We tried to avoid resting at the benches outside the huts, because our hut accepts people only until 8 pm. Any later than that and you would be left outside at the cold.



Low-hanging clouds drop their shadow above the Fuji five lakes • A red torii at a hut on the 7th station • One of the mountain huts • The path is completely red and occasionally scattered with low weeds

At the 8th station around 3100m, we could see some hikers experiencing altitude sickness. The elevation is brutal for kids, but there are surprisingly a lot of them climbing up with their families. One of the huts in the

8th station is called Taishikan, to commemorate the ascend of prince Shotoku, known as Shotoku Taishi, some 1500 years ago. Prince Shotoku is an important legendary figure, mostly because he introduced Buddhism to Japan.



The Taishikan hut at the 8th station

We were also going to spend the night at the 8th station, but at its higher end. Suddenly, the mists started turning into rain. We hastily prepared our rain gear and moved fast. The hut informs that they will not host customers if they are wet. The reasoning is that if any water enters the building, it can't evaporate because of the low temperatures. Because we move and elevate fast, this last kilometer is hard to finish.



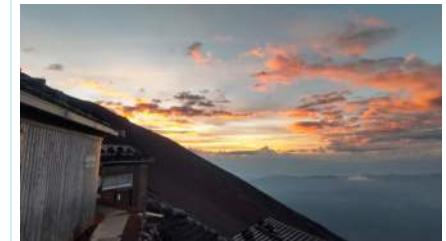
A hiker looking at the cup ramen • Mists start turning into rain

Finally, I could see the large name board of the 8th station Tomoekan, our mountain hut, at 3400 meters. The staff was waiting for us with large blow dryers and handkerchiefs in both hands to pat us dry. They sat us down and helped us take off our hiking boots and rain jackets. It was the first time that I received such a service in such a humble place. The directed us to a plastic sheet, to leave our bags and change to dry clothes. Then, they showed us our room, basically a loft with space for exactly four futon beds and just a meter of space until the ceiling. From the window, the view was excellent. I could see lake Kawaguchiko clearly during the sunset.



Our room in the hut • The corridor is full of the bags of the customers • View from the window next to the beds

We rested for a bit, and then headed downstairs at the main hall for dinner. In this case, dinner means a burger patty, curry and some rice at a plastic container. The hall is decorated with a shrine to Hi-no-Miko (日の御子), the protector of safe climbing and business prosperity. The original statue was said to be enshrined in Tokyo's Zozoji temple (next to Tokyo tower), but was lost during the anti-Buddhism movements of the early Meiji era. It was miraculously discovered at Kitaguchi Hongu Fuji Sengen Shrine, near lake Kawaguchiko.



Dinner with curry and rice • The shrine to Hi-no-miko inside Tomoekan • The sunset from the hut

Soon, the rain and clouds cleared up. From the hut's balcony, I could see the lights of the single hut above us, but also the head lights from people climbing during the night. Across the horizon, behind lake Kawaguchiko and the city of Kofu, I could see a thunderstorm going on. The staff at the hut informed me that there was a firework show at the lake yesterday, perfectly visible from the mountain. It was a such a shame that I missed it.



Sunset view to lake Kawaguchi • Thunderstorms behind Kawaguchiko

The staff advised against sleeping after eating, in order to avoid altitude sickness. So we waited for two hours and went to bed around 9 p.m. Almost everyone else was already asleep. You could hear every noise from the rest of the hikers, since our beds were separated from the rest only by a curtain. I didn't sleep at all, because I my head and body were feeling uncomfortable from the altitude. Thankfully, I still managed to rest a bit from being warm and lying down. Around 2 a.m., people started waking up and getting ready for the final bit of the ascent. The sunrise was expected at 4:52 a.m. and everyone was looking forward to the last 400 meters of elevation to the top. We got a variety of sweet breads and instant coffee as breakfast from the hut. Then, we put on our headlamps and started walking again.



The lights to the top of the mountain • Night view to the top of the mountain

Security guards and volunteers were positioned at the last few meters to the top, shouting encouraging words to the hikers. After reaching the white torii gate and the two komainu statues, we basically arrived at the top. Thankfully, it was not crowded and we could easily find a nice place to sit and enjoy the sunrise. I was feeling refreshed and happy. My mistake last time was sleeping immediately after reaching the top, that's what most probably caused my altitude sickness and panic attack.



The white torii that marks the end of the path • People waiting for the sunrise • Sunrise from the top of Mt. Fuji • A group of Shugendo pilgrims

Indeed, everyone was so refreshed, that we walked another one and a half hour around the crater. The tallest point of the mountain is actually located on the opposite side from Yoshida trail, towards the Shizuoka side. At Kengamine, a weather station is set up, to monitor weather and volcanic activity. A few other peculiarities can be found along the ohashimeguri trail around the crater: two shrines, the inner shrine of Shengen Taisha and the Kusushi shrine, a fresh water spring, a post office and public toilets. The post office at the top is actually a twin sibling to the one at the tallest point of the Swiss Alps in Europe. A large number of hikers send postcards back home, so that they contain the postmark of the top of Japan.





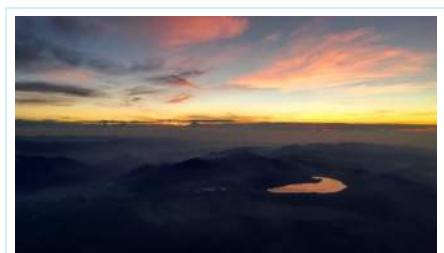
The crater and the weather station in the back • View to Shizuoka • The post office at the top of Mt. Fuji • View to Yamazaki • The inner Shingen Taisha shrine

The insane volume of mail and other materials is moved to the bottom by bulldozers going up and down on the flat Subashiri trail. This is the trail we also take to go down, so I met two of them transferring provisions to the top. They are noise and fill the air with dust, making me cough. The descending trails is much faster than the ascending trail, probably because it's so slippery that you can literally tumble down. There are almost no huts, apart from an intersection to our Tomoekan, an evacuation shelter at the 7th station and toilets the 6th station. Passing in front of Tomoekan, we saw dozens of soldiers from the Japanese self-defense force going up. I guess it's an essential work out for them.



The winding path of the descent • A group of soldiers going up

This time, I was lucky that the weather was clear during sunrise and I could see the landscape under the mountain with every detail. I could also see the pyramidal shadow of Mt. Fuji spreading above Shizuoka against the sunrise. As the sun was getting higher, a sea of clouds started appearing, obscuring the view of the plains. Last time, I could see only the sea of clouds and no lakes underneath. This alone, made me feel so satisfied that I decided to climb Mt. Fuji once more. With a bit better planning, I managed to enjoy the trip to the fullest. It took away some of my exhaustion from studying so hard and made me feel excited for new beginnings.



A sea of clouds • A hiker looking towards lake Kawaguchi • Just before the sun rises

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