**The Daisetsuzan Mountaineering Grade System**

Daisetsuzan National Park’s 300 kilometers of hiking trails offer visitors the chance to experience the region’s unspoiled wilderness first hand. The level of difficulty between trails varies, from easily accessible boardwalks to long-distance multi-day treks that traverse steep, rocky terrain.

 A five-level grading system created by the park gives visitors a general idea of what to expect on the trails. The system takes into account a number of factors, including ease of access to the trailhead, availability of shelters and facilities, distance, and the difficulty of the climb. Routes that have a higher grade level are more rugged, as trail maintenance is limited.

 When planning your hike, be sure to choose trails that suit your fitness level and experience.

*Grade 1: Short, beginner-friendly trails*

The hike to Momijidani Falls from Momijidani Trailhead through Sounkyo Gorge (1 hour round trip) passes towering cliffs made up of thousands of interlocking geometric columns of rock. The hike is fairly flat, and well suited to beginners. Grade 1 trails typically have little or no change in elevation, and feature well-maintained stairs and boardwalks. They are easily accessible and usually begin from a hot-spring area or ropeway station. Technical skills are not needed to complete hikes at this grade, but precautions should be taken to avoid encounters with bears.

*Grade 2: Casual hikes for beginners*

Trails marked Grade 2 involve some elevation gain. They have well-maintained stairs or boardwalks, and some technical skills are required. Grade 2 trails are relatively short and easily accessible, typically starting from a hot-spring area or ropeway station. The hike to Susoaidaira Plateau from Sugatami Pond (3 hours round trip) is popular among novice hikers. The gentle route has some wooden walkways and is accessible from the Asahidake Ropeway. It offers views of Mt. Asahidake year-round, and alpine meadows filled with flowers in summer.

*Grade 3: Accessible day hikes for intermediate hikers*

The hike to the summit of Mt. Asahidake from the top station of the Asahidake Ropeway (6.5 hours round trip) offers magnificent panoramas of the Daisetsuzan mountain range. Along the way, hikers pass alpine meadows and volcanic steam vents. This trail traverses a rocky slope with some loose gravel (scree), but it is well marked and easily discernible.

Grade 3 trails such as this one have convenient access to the trailhead and can be completed in a single day. To minimize impact on the natural environment, these trails are not reinforced with artificial materials. Some hiking experience is recommended, as it is possible to get lost when visibility is poor.

*Grade 4: Trails with challenging terrain for experienced hikers*

The trail from Horoka Onsen to Mt. Nipesotsu in Higashi-Taisetsu is a tough climb that takes roughly 7 hours up and 5 hours back down. Climbers are rewarded with sweeping vistas of the Ishikari mountain range from the mountain’s rugged peak.

Grade 4 trails often require an overnight stay in the mountains, as there are long distances between trailheads and the nearest shelter, and between shelters. Sections of the trails go above the tree line, exposing hikers to sudden weather changes and strong winds. There are no stairs or boardwalks on these sections, and signage is minimal. Preserving the natural environment of these trails is a priority of the park. Technical abilities, experience, appropriate gear, and risk management skills are needed.

*Grade 5: Trails with extremely challenging terrain for experienced hikers*

Multi-day treks cover the most pristine areas of Daisetsuzan, and have no manmade infrastructure except for signposts. These trails go above the tree line, so hikers are fully exposed to sudden weather changes and strong winds. There are no evacuation routes, and it may be necessary to cross streams or scramble over rocks. Hikers should be alert to overgrowth, year-round snow patches, and brown bears. Distances between the trailhead and the nearest shelter or designated camping area are considerable. Technical abilities, adequate experience, appropriate gear, and crisis management skills are necessary for this grade.

The trail from Mt. Tokachidake to Mt. Tomuraushi via Sansendai is a three-day traverse of the Tokachi volcanic group and requires hikers to carry a tent. Dynamic vistas of the Tokachi mountain range are a highlight of the trek. It is also sometimes possible to see northern pika darting around the rocks along the route.