

## **Nita Pass: Gateway to the Peaks**

In a stunning location at an altitude of 1,040 meters, Nita Pass is the gateway to the peninsula's highest peaks. There are a number of mountain lookouts where clear skies can mean unlimited views of the entire peninsula, and across the waters to places as distant as the Amakusa Islands, Mt. Aso, and the city of Kumamoto. But drawing most of the visual attention is the peak looming over everything else—one of the newest mountains on Earth. Mt. Heisei-shinzan is a massive lava dome 1,483 meters in height that resulted from a five-year eruption from Mt. Fugen that began on November 17, 1990. In June 1991, a pyroclastic flow from the volcano caused the deaths of forty-three people, and thousands were evacuated.

### **Paths to the summit**

The destination for most trekkers is Mt. Fugen, and a trailhead can be found at the pass. A short walk from the parking lot leads to a ropeway station, where gondolas whisk passengers up to Mt. Myoken station, an altitude of 1,333 meters, in less than three minutes. This is where many people start their hike, but it's equally interesting for non-climbers. Steps lead up to the highest lookout on the peninsula that does not require a tough climb, and included in the 360-degree view is the sight of trekkers across the valley summing the rocky peak of Mt. Fugen.

### **A broad diversity of wildlife**

From early to late May, azaleas of all hues cover many of the mountain slopes, and it is said that 100,000 bushes can be found in the Nita Pass area alone. In early summer, the Japanese dogwoods turn the mountainsides white. Birdwatchers are encouraged to make the easy 25-minute walk from the lower ropeway station to the Azamidani valley bird-watching area frequented by local and migratory birds. Among them are the narcissus flycatcher, the males of which feature a distinctive pattern of a black crown and bright orange throat, and the Japanese bush warbler, whose distinctive mating call once led it to be called the Japanese nightingale. The round trip from the upper station of the ropeway to Mt. Fugen and back is a three- to four-hour trek.