

## **Nita Pass: Impressive Views and Trekking Trailheads**

A short drive up a forest road east of Unzen Onsen town is Nita Pass, the gateway to Mt. Unzen, a series of volcanic peaks that offers spectacular vistas in every direction. The views from the mountain lookouts to the south stretch over the Ariake Sea and far beyond to the many islands of Amakusa. Mt. Aso and the city of Kumamoto lie to the distant east and Nagasaki to the west. Looming high to the northwest is one of the newest mountains on Earth: Mt. Heisei-shinzan is a massive lava dome 1,483 meters in height that resulted from an eruption that began on Mt. Fugen on November 17, 1990. In June 1991, a pyroclastic flow from the volcano caused the deaths of forty-three people, and thousands threatened by the route of the flow were evacuated. A ropeway takes visitors on a quick, breathtaking hop from the pass (at 1,040 meters) to the nearest peak of Mt. Myoken (1,333 meters), and trailheads for hikers can be found at both ends of the ropeway.

You do not have to climb to enjoy the natural wonders of the area. From early to late May, a variety of azaleas of all hues and blossom sizes cover many of the slopes in pink, where it is said some 100,000 bushes are found in the Nita Pass area alone. The Japanese dogwoods turn the mountains white in early summer, and the natural forest shows off with vibrant colors in the fall. Steps from the upper station of the ropeway lead to a lookout where climbers can be seen summiting the craggy peak of Mt. Fugen on the other side of the valley. An easy 25-minute walk from the lower ropeway station is a bird-watching area frequented by tits, narcissus flycatchers, blue-and-white flycatchers, and Japanese bush warblers among the local and migratory birds.

Visitors in winter might be lucky enough to catch the rare phenomenon of rime ice (sometimes called “frost flowers”), which occurs when heavy fog meets a cold wind. The resultant ice forms a thin crust on one side of tree branches, which shimmers in the sunlight, turning the mountain into a jewel-encrusted wonder.

Drinks, snacks, and souvenirs are available at two convenient locations: the parking lot and the ropeway station. The first two are a necessity for the trek to Mt. Fugen and back, which takes between three and four hours.