

Mount Unzen: A View of an Active Volcano

The four major peaks that make up Mt. Unzen, Mt. Myoken, Mt. Kunimi, and Mt. Fugen are all ancient peaks, while Mt. Heisei-shinzan is a lava dome, created by a massive eruption that saw 200 million cubic meters of lava spew out between November 1990 and 1995. The swift moving clouds of gas and volcanic matter known as pyroclastic flows reached almost five kilometers from the summit, killing some forty scientists. The damage from the avalanche of earth and rocks—as well as the volcanic ash—was extensive and heightened by rainfall. Over 11,000 residents were evacuated and some 2,500 buildings destroyed.

Though the routes taken by the pyroclastic flows are clearly visible, the forests and plant life that were overrun and destroyed are gradually returning. The recovery began with grasses, scrub forest, and azaleas, which grow even in extreme environments, and will continue as larger trees—maple and other broadleaves—get a foothold.

Today, the mountain is carefully monitored, and trekking paths are open to all the peaks except for the lava dome, whose boulder-strewn surface is still unstable. The ropeway ends on the peak of Mt. Myoken, one of the highest spots with a panoramic view of the entire peninsula. Bird watchers are encouraged to make the short trek starting to the left of the shrine, which leads to the Azamidani valley area, populated by tits, warblers, flycatchers, and other species.