

Climbing Mount Fugen: Unzen's Highest Accessible Summit

Climbers who want to make a full day of climbing Mt. Fugen, a moderate to advanced-level hike, should begin in the town of Unzen Onsen. Shorter routes, however, begin at the Nita Pass Unzen Ropeway station (1,080 meters) or at the upper ropeway station on Mt. Myoken (1,300 meters). The highest point on the peninsula, the lava dome from the 1990 eruption, is still off-limits to climbers, but the routes to Mt. Kunimi and Mt. Fugen are open and offer a wide range of terrain. The trail passes across narrow ridges, through mossy valleys, up and down rugged rocky steps, and past cave openings and the boulder-strewn dome. In some places it could be called “Ghibli World,” for its resemblance to the landscape that appears in the beloved animations of Miyazaki Hayao.

Broad vistas and volcanic formations

The weather is very fickle at altitude and the peaks are often swept with banks of fog, hampering visibility, but when clear, the views along the way are spectacular. One highlight is the up-close look at the formidable dome. Keep an eye out also for the stone ruins of buildings that were once connected with lava caves and used for storing silkworm eggs during the Meiji period (1868–1912). Equally fascinating are the many strange volcanic formations and rocks, including “breadcrust bombs”—stones with a cracked surface that were tossed out in the recent eruption. The summit of Mt Fugen, at 1,359 meters, has a number of photogenic rocky outcrops. On a clear day, climbers can experience a panoramic view that extends as far as Mt Aso, sometimes even as far as Mt. Sakurajima, some 140 kilometers away in Kagoshima!

The route that leads from the top of the ropeway to Mt. Fugen and back to the bottom of the ropeway takes between three and four hours.