

## **The Yoshida Trail**

The Yoshida Trail is the most popular hiking route up the northern side of Mt. Fuji. Most visitors take the Fuji-Subaru Line bus to the fifth station of the trail (elevation 2,305 meters) and climb to the peak. For those interested in a more off-the-beaten yet historic trail, the lower half of the route, beginning at the trailhead to the rear of Kitaguchi Hongu Fuji Sengen-jinja Shrine, is a peaceful, leafy hike dotted with sites of interest.

### **Nakanochaya Teahouse: The Threshold**

The first way station, just over an hour's walk from Kitaguchi Hongu Fuji Sengen-jinja Shrine, is Nakanochaya Teahouse. Because Nakanochaya is halfway between the shrine and the beginning of the climb proper at the Umagaeshi (see below), the mountain stream that flows nearby was once compared to the legendary Sanzu River, which separates the world of the living from what lies beyond.

The teahouse serves dumplings and a famous local noodle dish called "Yoshida no udon" on weekends. It is home to a large collection of standing stones erected by Fujiko pilgrims over the centuries. Many of these commemorate someone's 33rd ascent to the peak, making them a *sendatsu*, literally "one who goes first." *Sendatsu* were respected as both spiritual leaders and mountain guides by their local Fujiko chapters.

### **The Umagaeshi: Entering the Mountain**

The next teahouse, Oishi Chaya, which is another hour up the trail, is known for its lotus azaleas. Half an hour beyond this is Umagaeshi, the "place where horses turn back." At 1,450 meters above sea level, it is the point where the mountain's grassy slopes give way to dense forest, and the incline becomes too steep for horses. Above Umagaeshi, everything had to be carried by hand.

The stone torii gate at Umagaeshi is flanked by statues of Mt. Fuji's patron animal, the monkey. No actual monkeys live on the mountain, but according to legend, Mt. Fuji first emerged from the mist and revealed itself to the world during a Year of the Metal Monkey (*kanoe saru*) long ago. Climbing Mt. Fuji in the Year of the Metal Monkey is held to be especially auspicious, and many pilgrims make the ascent then. (The next such year will be 2040.)

Just beyond the torii is the former "place of purification" (*misogijo*), where pilgrims washed away the last traces of the secular world before beginning their ascent in earnest. The wooden building succumbed to age and weather some 60 years ago, but signs indicate where it once stood.

There are many other sights along the lower section of the Yoshida Trail. Women were not officially allowed on Mt. Fuji's peak until 1872, and had to worship it from a distance. A monument at the second station (1,700 meters) marks the highest point they were allowed to climb. Hikers will pass the former site of Omuro Sengen-jinja Shrine, since moved to a lakeside location. From late April to early May, the route is brightened by

*Fujizakura* cherry blossoms and mitsuba azalea.

In total, the hike from Umagaeshi to the fifth station takes three to four hours. For those seeking an easier but longer hike, taking the bus to the fifth station and then walking all the way down to Kitaguchi Hongu Fuji Sengen-jinja Shrine is a pleasant option that takes five or six hours.