

## Hiking around the Fifth Station and Fuji-Subaru Line

The Ochudo, or Middle Road, was a special trail for ascetic practitioners that circled Mt. Fuji at the level of the fifth station. Above this level, the forested slopes give way to an otherworldly landscape of volcanic rock, which the Fujiko faith considered a manifestation of the paradise that awaited in the world beyond.

Unfortunately, the Ochudo trail is no longer a complete circuit due to the “Osawa Collapse” (*osawakuzure*), a still-active landslide on the west side of Mt. Fuji. This erosional valley extends more than 2 kilometers from the peak, and has widened over the centuries into an impassible ravine some 500 meters across. Parts of the Ochudo trail, however, are still open to hikers.

### The Two Gardens: Oniwa and Okuniwa

The Oniwa bus stop, one stop before the Fuji-Subaru Line’s Fifth Station terminus, offers convenient access to the Ochudo trail. The stop is within walking distance of both the Oniwa (garden) trail and the Okuniwa (inner garden) trail.

The **Okuniwa** hiking route starts from the Oniwa bus stop and leads northwest, away from Mt. Fuji. The first section is a shady downward slope lined with Japanese larches (*karamatsu*), rhododendrons, and lingonberry patches. At the base of the slope is a souvenir store whose opening hours depend on the season. Past the store, the trail opens up, leading through the Okuniwa basin and up to an observation deck on the other side. The view looking back at Mt. Fuji across the basin is satisfyingly dramatic.

The winds are strong in this part of the Okuniwa, and some of the Japanese larches grow almost horizontally. This eerie phenomenon may partly explain why the area is known as the “garden of the *tengu*.” These fierce, part-avian mythical creatures of great spiritual power are associated with high mountains. There is even a red torii gate and a monument with an image of a *tengu* along the trail.

Hiking from the parking lot to the Okuniwa viewing deck and back takes around 45 minutes.

The **Oniwa** trailhead is across the road to the south. It is clearly marked, and is the start of a 30-minute climb up stairs set into the mountainside leading to the Ochudo trail (elevation 2,400 meters). Adventurous hikers can head west to see the Osawa Collapse, but this takes several hours and is not recommended for casual visitors. A less strenuous option is to head east along the Ochudo trail to the Fuji-Subaru Fifth Station terminus, about an hour’s hike away.

Unlike the Okuniwa route, the Oniwa trail is close to Mt. Fuji’s tree line. The igneous rock and scree support only sparse numbers of Japanese larches and birch trees (*shirakaba*) interspersed with flowering rhododendrons. With so few trees, the views are spectacular, both up toward the peak or away to the north. On a clear day, you can see as far as the Minami Alps. The trail also passes several deep valleys full of greenery. These

are actually lateral craters left by the lava that flowed down the mountainside—a striking reminder of Mt. Fuji’s vast scale and the awe-inspiring power of volcanic eruptions.