

【Mt. Mitsumine and the Omotesandō (Main Approach) Trail】

Mt. Mitsumine lies at the northern edge of Chichibu Tama Kai National Park, just south of the city of Chichibu. The name “Mitsumine,” which means “three peaks,” originally referred to the three nearby summits of Mt. Myōhō (1,332 m), Mt. Shiraiwa (1,921 m), and Mt. Kumotori (2,017 m). Mitsumine Jinja Shrine was named for these peaks, as their distinctive outline can be seen from the shrine. Over time, the shrine’s location became known as Mt. Mitsumine.

Mitsumine Jinja Shrine is said to have been founded by Yamato Takeru, whose father was the legendary twelfth emperor of Japan. By the Heian period (794–1185), the shrine had become a center for Shugendō, a religion that incorporates elements of Shinto, Daoism, Buddhism, and mountain asceticism. During the Edo period (1603–1867), a steady flow of worshippers traveled to the shrine by one of two pilgrimage routes that lead from the base of the mountain. Today, these routes—the Omotesandō (“main approach”) and the Urasandō (“rear approach”)—are popular hiking trails through the national park.

The main approach to the shrine is a 3.2-kilometer trail that begins from a *torii* gate near the Ōwa bus stop. This trail leads hikers across the scarlet Tōryū Bridge, which spans the Arakawa Gorge. The path beyond is marked by stone monuments and lined with huge Japanese cedar and *hinoki* cypress trees. In spring, white deutzia blossoms appear along the route, and fallen logs and boulders are covered in vibrant green moss. Around the halfway point, hikers can rest at Seijō Falls, where worshippers once stopped to purify themselves before proceeding to the shrine.

Another half-kilometer beyond are the ruins of a shrine to Yakushi Nyorai, the Medicine Buddha, that was also a rest stop where sick or injured travelers could receive care. For centuries, this shrine was also the highest point on the mountain that women were allowed to go. This practice of treating many Shugendō sites as “barred to women” (*nyonin kekkai*) was abolished in the early years of the Meiji era (1868–1912).

Another kilometer past the shrine is the top of the ridge, where Yōhaiden Pavilion offers a magnificent view of Chichibu and the surrounding mountains. Yōhaiden was built for worshippers to pay their respects to a shrine on Mt. Myōhō without having to travel there. Just past the pavilion is a large *torii* gate that marks the side entrance to the shrine complex. The main approach continues through the gate and left, winding around to the shrine’s front entrance. The main approach trail ascends more than 600 meters, and parts of it are quite steep. With rest stops, the hike typically takes around three hours.