

【Icescape Parks】

Every winter, three of Chichibu's steep-walled river valleys are transformed into breathtaking landscapes of ice. From early January until late February, the cliffs of Misotsuchi, Onouchi Hyakkei, and Ashigakubo draw over 100,000 spectators with their glittering icicle cascades. The parks are open throughout the day and for several hours at night, when they are illuminated by beams of colored light.

The Misotsuchi icescape forms naturally, but the other two locations are created with hundreds of meters of pipes and hoses that zigzag across the cliffside. High on the ridges above are large tanks of water. Gravity and siphoning action pull the water down through many small holes in the hoses, where it flows over the cliff face and freezes into fantastic shapes.

The parks and their elaborate irrigation systems are maintained by local volunteers who are affectionately known as “icicle men” (*hyochū ojisan*). Using ropes, crampons, and ice picks, the icicle men regularly scale the ice-covered cliffsides to unkink hoses, lay new pipelines, or remove blockages. A handful of men perform upkeep throughout the year, but during the icicle season, as many as 30 men are needed to maintain a single location.

Children 12 and younger can enter the icescape areas for free. Visitors can receive a stamp from each park on a special card, and the completed card can then be shown at certain local businesses such as *onsen* (hot springs) to receive discounts and other perks.

Misotsuchi

The icicles at Misotsuchi span roughly 50 meters of the southern cliff of the Arakawa riverbed near Ōtaki. Water from the heights freezes as it flows over the rocks, forming crystal curtains along the water's edge. There is a light display at Misotsuchi every night, and the park remains open later on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. Entry costs ¥200. Visitors can reach Misotsuchi by bus, a 40-minute ride from Seibu-Chichibu Station. Paid parking is also available.

Onouchi Hyakkei

The icescape at Onouchi Hyakkei is a 250-meter-long, 60-meter-high wall of ice in the Onouchi Valley near the town of Ogano. A stunning view of the ice can be seen from a suspension bridge that crosses the Onouchi Gorge high above Onouchi Creek. On five nights every winter, the icicles and bridge glow with colored lights. Food stalls with hot food are set up, and the ¥200 entry fee includes a free cup of *amazake*, a sweet, mildly

alcoholic rice drink. Free parking is available, and there is also a bus from Seibu-Chichibu Station that takes about 70 minutes to the Onouchi Keikoku Iriguchi bus stop. From there it is a 20-minute walk to Onouchi Hyakkei.

Ashigakubo

Created in 2014, the icescape at Ashigakubo is the newest of Chichibu's icicle attractions. It is located in the town of Yokoze, in a narrow gorge formed by Hyōnosawa Creek. A path flanked by pillars of ice leads beneath a *torii* gate into the gorge, where ice has transformed the trees and rocks of the hillside into bizarre and breathtaking shapes. The 200-meter-wide, 30-meter-high display is so spectacular that Laview, a luxury sightseeing train operated by Seibu Railway, slows as it passes to allow passengers a view of the icescape. Friday through Sunday nights and on holidays, the scene is lit with boldly colored lights.

The entry fee for Ashigakubo is ¥300, and it includes a free cup of either *amazake* or black tea brewed from Yokoze-grown tea leaves, which is provided by local volunteers. Because parking is limited and the access road can become quite crowded, visitors are strongly advised to come by train. The icescape is only a 12-minute walk from Ashigakubo Station. Those coming by car can park at Michi no Eki Kaju Kōen, a 10-minute walk from the icescape.