

The Tsurube-Otoshi Pass

The Tsurube-Otoshi Pass straddles the border between Aomori and Akita prefectures. Its name, which means “well-bucket drop,” refers to the sheer 200-meter-high cliffs that travelers had to cross before the construction of Tsurube Tunnel.

From the pass, the view reveals two distinct landscapes: on the east-facing sides of each gorge, greater exposure to sunlight has led to more snowmelt, which in turn has eroded the mountain’s slopes and exposed white ridges of tuff, a volcanic rock that underlies the hillside. On the opposite sides, where there is more shade, the snow melts slowly and more plants are able to take root. The slopes nourish deciduous shrubs mingled with stands of conifers, mostly Sawara cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera*) and Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*). The warm colors of the deciduous shrubs contrasted with the green conifers have made the pass a well-known spot for viewing autumn foliage.

At the base of the gorge, an old mining road runs along the Fujikoto River. This is a remnant of historic Daira Mine, a copper mine that operated from the seventeenth century until 1958. Most traffic through the Tsurube-Otoshi Pass involved the transport of goods to and from the mine, and in the early twentieth century, the settlement around the mine housed over nine hundred people.

Another point of historical interest occurred during the upheaval at the start of the Meiji era, in 1868. As the border between the quarreling provinces of Tsugaru (now Aomori) and Kubota (now Akita), the pass was a vulnerable entry point. Knowing this, Kubota province stationed a few *matagi* hunters here, whose task it was to keep numerous torches lit—making it appear that the pass was heavily guarded.