

Introducing Oze

Oze is the familiar name for the expansive area of mountains and marshland that makes up Oze National Park. It is located in the center of Japan's largest island of Honshu, and straddles four prefectures: Gunma, Fukushima, Niigata, and Tochigi.

Oze's natural environment shows little sign of human interference. Thanks to some of Japan's strongest environmental protection programs, the area's topography and wildlife have retained many physical and ecological characteristics that have developed over the millennia.

The marshlands of Oze, which are one Japan's largest high moors, cover two basins, the western Ozegahara marsh and the Lake Ozenuma area to the east. The Ozegahara marsh covers an area 6 kilometers long and 2 kilometers wide, where the average altitude is 1,400 meters. Lake Ozenuma, which lies at an altitude of 1,660 meters, has a circumference of 9 kilometers. The plateau was formed after lava from volcanic eruptions some two million years ago created an independent depression. This gradually evolved into the peat moor that is now home to expansive fields of marsh plants, including a variety of colorful wildflowers.

The Ozegahara marsh is surrounded by mountains in the 2,000-meter range, with the highest, Mt. Hiuchi, reaching 2,356 meters. All but the peak of Mt. Shibutsu are volcanic in origin and covered in thick forest. Mt. Shibutsu's mineral makeup is less compatible with plant growth, so it has a lower tree line than the other peaks, giving hikers panoramic views of the marshes spreading out to the east.

There are no roads in the national park. The only entrances to the park are forest trails from several mountain passes that lead up to the surrounding mountain peaks or down to the marsh area. The Hatomachi-toge Pass on the Gunma Prefecture side of the park is the most popular entrance. The hiking trails in the mountains are clearly marked and well maintained, as are the protective boardwalks that crisscross the marshland. The routes are varied, from courses that can be covered on a day trip to longer routes that require staying overnight in the park.

Oze National Park is open from early May to late October. Even over this relatively short season, Oze shows many different faces, as the altitude and weather patterns result

in constantly changing conditions. Watching the early morning fog over the peat moors slowly lift to reveal the silhouette of the surrounding mountains is an unforgettable experience. Rainbows occur often, and sunny days can quickly turn cloudy, and vice versa. Many visitors are enthusiastic photographers, who come to capture Oze in its many manifestations.

The park is closed in the winter due to massive amounts of snow and bitter cold temperatures that reach as low as -10°C . Because of the high altitude, summer temperatures rarely reach 30°C , and nights can become quite chilly.

There are two Visitor Centers where knowledgeable staff are on hand to help guests learn about the park, its natural environment, animal life, and other characteristics. They can also help with practical and logistical advice about the mountain trails, boardwalk routes, and recommended clothing and equipment. There are three campsites and over 20 lodges around the park, offering accommodation, meals, and hot baths for hikers.

For many years, Oze has been the focus of preservation efforts by conservation activists, mountain lodge operators, park administrators, and, of course, visitors. The national park continues to protect the environment while sharing its natural beauty with visitors.