

Mt. Norikura

In the southwest corner of Chubusangaku National Park stands Mt. Norikura, a massive volcanic mountain that straddles the border between Gifu and Nagano prefectures. Its name means “riding saddle,” befitting the swooping shape of its peaks and plateaus.

Visitors can experience alpine altitudes and the cooler temperatures found there with a minimum of fuss and exertion. Not only is it one of the easiest summits over 3,000 meters to climb, but bus and taxi services make the ascent on the Norikura Skyline/Norikura Echo Line, Japan’s highest road. The road climbs through birch forests and beyond the tree line to the Norikura Tatamidaira bus terminal—which, at 2,702 meters, also happens to be Japan’s highest bus stop. (The restriction on private cars has gone a long way toward protecting the fragile alpine environment.)

From there, hikers can choose from among several trails of varying distances and levels of difficulty. The classic route, a three-hour round trip, leads to the very top of Mt. Kengamine, at 3,026 meters the highest peak on the mountain. But even the 15-minute hike to the top of Mt. Mao, one of Norikura’s minor peaks, offers superb views in all directions, especially of the Northern Alps. The trails pass through fields of granite boulders and dwarf Siberian pine, the habitat for the *raicho*, a rare, nationally protected species of rock ptarmigan. Lucky visitors might catch a glimpse of these alpine birds, descendants of a population left behind when the glaciers retreated during the last ice age. Their mating season is from late May to early June, and they change their coloration three times throughout the year, turning almost completely white in winter.

There are seven bodies of water on Mt. Norikura, many of them offering reflections of the 23 peaks that make up this range.

For visitors who wish to stay at altitude, several lodges around the bus terminal’s parking lot offer accommodation during periods when the road is open.