

Mt. Kitadake

The Apex of the Alps

While many people are familiar with Japan's highest peak, 3,776-meter Mt. Fuji, the country's second-highest mountain is nearly as high. At 3,193 meters, Mt. Kitadake, the "north peak," is a hidden gem just waiting to be explored by hikers and nature lovers alike.

Beloved by English Adventurers

Japan has three mountain ranges known as the Northern (Kita), Southern (Minami), and Central (Chuo) Alps, collectively called the Japanese Alps. British engineer and archeologist William Gowland (1842–1922) climbed the Hida Mountains—also known as the Northern Alps—in the late 1800s. The rugged peaks reminded him of the European mountains, so he dubbed them the "Japanese Alps," a name further popularized by missionary Walter Weston (1860–1940), considered the father of recreational mountaineering in Japan. In 1902, Weston climbed five peaks in the Minami Alps, including Mt. Kitadake.

The Kita and Chuo Alps have many sacred mountains that tower over the surrounding landscape and were the sites of religious pilgrimages for centuries. These easily spotted peaks were some of the first to be conquered by both Japanese and European climbers. In comparison, as the tallest peaks of the Minami Alps are hidden by the folding terrain and valleys of this tectonically shaped mountain range, they were not climbed or mapped until the nineteenth century.

Hidden Gem of a Peak

There are no extant records of Mt. Kitadake being climbed before 1880. The "hidden mountain" was finally put on the map during the Meiji era (1868–1912) when international specialists brought in by the government started exploring the mountains in Japan. Of course, local inhabitants had been crisscrossing the lower slopes of the Minami Alps for centuries, particularly those engaged in forestry in its dense woodlands. However, it appears that the deep valleys and steep trails discouraged would-be adventurers from exploring farther afield.

Despite being a relative newcomer on the hiking scene, Mt. Kitadake is now a firm favorite among mountain lovers. According to Fukada Kyuya, author of the seminal guide *One Hundred Mountains of Japan*, "With its clean-cut lines, Kitadake is the all-surpassing aristocrat of the Shirane Sanzan (the three highest peaks of the Minami Alps). Fuji is there for everybody, but this is a mountain for philosophers." The spire-like summit rising into the sky and challenging trails have gained Mt. Kitadake a spot on the

list of the 100 most famous mountains in Japan.

On the mountain's east side is the Kitadake Buttress, a massive 600-meter-high rock face that reaches up to the summit. The southeastern slope hosts a variety of endemic alpine plants, and in late June lucky climbers may spot the delicate white *Kitadake-so* (*Callianthemum hondoense*), which is named after the peak.

Climbing Mt. Kitadake is best done as a two-day trek, overnighting at one of the mountain lodges or at a camping site. Although, compared to the Kita Alps, the Minami Alps do not receive heavy snowfall, the safest season for climbing is from late June to late October.