

Sharing the Beauty of the Peaks

The History of Climbing in the Minami Alps

Residents have relied on the bounty of the mountains for centuries, entering the forests to obtain timber and game for meat and fur. When entering the Minami Alps area, visitors will quickly get a feel for this long-standing relationship between humans and the natural environment.

The peaks of the mountains, however, were left unexplored until the nineteenth century. While climbing sacred mountains as an act of religious worship has been practiced in Japan for over 1,000 years, the concept of climbing mountains for pleasure or recreation was introduced by Europeans.

Englishman Ernest Satow (1843–1929) described the early days of recreational mountain climbing in Japan in his 1881 book, *A Handbook for Travelers in Central and Northern Japan*. “It is possible to ascend Notori-san and the different summits of Shirane-san,” he wrote, “but the tourist must be prepared for hard and rough work, and will find it necessary to be accompanied by a guide, as there are no regular paths, and in many places not even a mountain track.”

In 1886, Naoe Natori, the head of Ashiyasu Village, submitted a proposal to build a Shinto shrine on Mt. Kitadake and create an official mountain trail. After two years of hard work, the mountain was opened to the public. Mountaineering pioneer Walter Weston (1860–1940) climbed the peak in 1902, quickly followed by a growing number of international and domestic climbers. Residents drew on their forestry and hunting experience to create the Kai Mountaineering Association, and assisted visitors looking to scale Mt. Kitadake. They used a combination of traditional gear, such as a local version of the snowshoe with two wooden spikes, as well as European pickaxes and crampons.

During the postwar period mountain climbing and hiking became increasingly popular. While the approach roads were shortened and mountain trails were improved, allowing visitors to trek more easily, there are still many active guides to this day. These pioneers are an important part of the history of the Minami Alps and how they came to be a beloved hiking destination.