

Hakusan

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Welcome to Mt. Hakusan, one of Japan's most sacred mountains. For centuries, these peaks have fascinated nature lovers and enlightenment seekers alike as one of the oldest natural sacred sites in the country.

History

Hakusan's history is shrouded in legend. The Buddhist priest Taicho (682–767) is credited with first summiting the towering peak in 717, establishing it as a sacred mountain. By the ninth century, three pilgrimage trails had been created for worshippers, and temples and inns catering to their needs were built along the trails.

Buddhism and Shinto coexisted peacefully for centuries, as exemplified by Taicho himself, who was a major figure in Shugendo, a religion combining mountain worship with Buddhism and Shinto. Believers from all walks of life made their way to the sacred mountain to worship.

This changed with the advent of the Meiji era (1868-1912), a time of rapid modernization in Japan. One of the most dramatic actions taken by the government was *shinbutsu bunri*, the strict separation of Shinto and Buddhism. This practice led zealots to suppress the latter.

Local people in the villages around Hakusan, however, wanted to preserve their local deities. Instead of allowing the Buddhist statues which had dotted the mountain for centuries to be destroyed, they quietly removed them and hid them in the villages below. Known as *gezan butsu* ("Buddhas who descended the mountain"), these statues are safely enshrined in two spots in the foothills of Hakusan.

As mountain climbing grew in popularity throughout the twentieth century, the trails and mountain huts in the area were improved. Hakusan National Park was established in 1962 to protect the natural environment, and in 1980 it was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Reaching the Peak

The original ninth-century trails are still in use. The trails allowed Buddhist worshippers and climbers to access the peak from three different directions. The Kaga-Zenjodo Trail starts in Ishikawa Prefecture, while the east-bound Echizen-Zenjodo Trail begins in Fukui Prefecture. The Mino-Zenjodo Trail approaches leads north from Gifu Prefecture to the mountain.

Hakusan Shrine

Trekkers will find a Hakusan Shrine at the start of each of the trails, where climbers often stop to pay their respects before starting their ascent. Shirayama-Hime Shrine, or “white mountain princess shrine,” is the starting point of the Kaga-Zenjodo. It is also the head shrine for some 2,700 Hakusan shrines across Japan. Heisenji Hakusan Shrine marks the entrance to the Echizen-Zenjodo trail, while Nagataki Hakusan Shrine welcomes hikers to the Mino-Zenjodo route.

The sacred and the snow

Religious traditions associated with Hakusan, known as *Hakusan shinko*, are alive and well, with many ceremonies held throughout the year at the shrines around the base of the mountain.

Shirayama-Hime Shrine is a popular destination for *hatsumode*, the first shrine visit of the New Year. Traditionally this is an occasion to give thanks for good health during the previous year and pray for a good harvest in the New Year.

Hakusan gets more snow than other areas around the world at the same latitude. The village of Shiramine, at the base of the mountain, receives some 6 meters of snow per year, with up to 10 meters falling at higher elevations. The snow is an obstacle to mountain climbing, agriculture, and forestry, but it is also a blessing, as it is an important water source for a vast area of Japan.

The climbing season runs from May to October, with the peak season falling around July and August. Around 50,000 people climb Hakusan every year, many of whom get up extra early to witness the sunrise from the highest peak, Gozengamine.

The blessings of Hakusan

Hakusan’s climate and topography allow many ecosystems to thrive, resulting in great biodiversity. The forests that extend up from the base of the mountain are the habitat of mammals such as macaques, serow, the Asiatic black bear and several different weasel species. The skies and treetops are filled with avian life from songbirds to raptors, including the rare golden eagle.

Wild vegetables (*sansai*), such as fern, bamboo and other early-spring shoots, grow prolifically here and are used in a variety of local dishes.

Four main rivers, along with many small streams, flow down from the mountains: the Tedorigawa River, Shogawa River, Nagaragawa River and Kuzuryugawa River. Several fish species make their home in these waterways, most notably *iwana* (*Salvelinus leucomaenis*, a landlocked char) and yamame (cherry salmon; *Oncorhynchus masou*).

The rivers supply meltwater to the rice fields on the flatlands below Hakusan, and also provide hydroelectric power for several nearby prefectures. As Hakusan is an active volcano, it heats the water in a number of hot springs (*onsen*), where local residents and visitors alike enjoy soaking in the relaxing baths.

Park Facilities

Hakusan National Park covers an area of 49,900 hectares, all of which is designated a Nature Conservation Area. About 36 percent of the park is considered a Special Zone of environmental protection.

The largest facility for hikers and climbers is the Murodo Visitor Center and Lodge, located at the foot of the lofty Gozengamine peak. The lodge is housed near the grounds of Shirayama-Hime Shrine, and has been welcoming climbers for hundreds of years. Today, Murodo is operated by the Hakusan Tourism Association, and provides visitors with a place to stay and eat within the national park.

Natural Protection

Local villagers once hunted bears for their meat and fur, and for use in traditional Japanese medicine. Since 1969, however, the Wildlife Protection and Hunting Law has banned the hunting and capture of animals throughout most of the park.

The National Hakusan Wildlife Sanctuary is a safe haven for a variety of species, and has played an important role in the revival of the serow (*kamoshika*; *Capricornis crispus*). In the postwar years, the number of serows dropped dramatically, leading to this indigenous goat-like creature being designated a strictly protected Special Natural Monument in 1955. Today, the population of serows continues to increase, and visitors may well spot one of these unusual animals while exploring the park's trails.

Hakusan Tedorigawa National Geopark was established in 2011, and encompasses the summit of Mt. Hakusan, the Tedorigawa River basin, and Tedor Gorge. Dinosaur fossils

have been discovered in one section of the park, making it an important area for paleontological research.