

Mt. Takaiwa Hiking Trail

This is the path to Mt. Takaiwa (881 m), the southernmost peak in the Unzen volcano cluster. Mt. Takaiwa is covered in cedar forest, and the summit commands spectacular vistas of the southern half of the Shimabara Peninsula and the Amakusa Islands across the Ariake Sea.

As you begin your hike up the mountain, you will pass countless torii gates erected along the path—some brand new, some falling apart with age. Most of the gates were built by families in Minami-Shimabara to the south. The people of Minami-Shimabara worship a deity of agriculture, Ukemochi no Kami, at the summit of Mt. Takaiwa. Each torii represents the prayer of a family, a community, or a company asking Ukemochi no Kami for some benefit, such as a bountiful harvest or success in business.

Farther up, you will notice many large boulders. The Westerners who vacationed in Unzen in the early twentieth century nicknamed the mountain “Rocky Hill” for this reason. At the summit is a shrine to the deity Ukemochi no Kami and a statue of Misogorō, a legendary giant who liked to eat miso. Stories about Misogorō are told all over Unzen and Amakusa. He used to sit on top of Mt. Takaiwa and look out over the sea, and he would help the local farmers with their harvests and the fishermen with their catch.

Hōbaru Azalea Garden

Here at the foot of Mt. Takaiwa is the Hōbaru Azalea Garden. The *miyama-kirishima*, or Kyushu azalea, one of Unzen’s greatest natural treasures, bursts with reddish-purple flowers in May. These Azaleas are native to Unzen and can be commonly seen on the mountain, but the concentration seen here is unusually high.

The ecosystem here is adapted to volcanic activity, and land quickly returns to its natural state after volcanic devastation. This change happens in stages: grasses come first, followed by shrubs, and then trees and forest. However, this area is carefully kept clear of other plants to ensure that the beautiful azaleas do not become overgrown.