

The Best of Aso

Aso Geopark has over 30 “geosites,” places of special geographical interest. Here are just a few highlights visitors should not miss.

1. Daikanbo Lookout

The Daikanbo lookout offers what is often considered the best view of the caldera. Visible from this vantage point are the central volcanic cone group, the grasslands local farmers have been tending for generations, and the caldera walls on the opposite side. The five peaks of Mt. Aso in the distance are said to resemble the figure of a reclining Buddha. In autumn, a phenomenon called cloud inversion causes a “sea” of clouds to fill the caldera.

2. Futae Pass

The meaning of the Japanese word “futae” is “two layered” According to legend, the deity Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto tried to empty the Aso caldera, which at the time was a giant lake, by kicking down its walls. In spite of his efforts, he could not break through the walls because they were two layers thick.

During the Edo period (1603-1868), the lords of Aso would cross this mountain pass on their yearly procession to and from the capital of Edo (present-day Tokyo). These days, visitors can take in the views and relive that time in Aso’s history by crossing the old stone-paved road over the pass.

3. Kusasenri

This 785,000-square-meter grassland lies on the flank of Mt. Eboshidake. It is located within the crater of a 30,000-year-old inactive volcano, and houses another, younger crater that rainwater has transformed into two ponds. Steam can occasionally be seen rising from Mt. Nakadake, an active volcano to the east.

Livestock is used to maintain Aso’s grasslands, and Kusasenri has long served as a grazing ground for cows and horses. Visitors can explore Kusasenri on horseback rides around the grasslands.

4. Matoishi Teahouse Remains

The paved road on the Futae Pass leads to the former site of a teahouse once patronized by those making the long journey to Edo (present-day Tokyo). While the teahouse may no longer be standing, the exquisite garden and pond are a pleasant spot for taking a rest, particularly in autumn, when the trees turn brilliant reds and yellows.

5. Sensuikyo Gorge

Sensuikyo Gorge is surrounded by ancient lava formations. The gorge, located 900 meters above sea level, offers excellent views of the Aso caldera, and also serves as the trailhead for several hiking trails. Fifty thousand Miyama Kirishima azaleas bloom here in May and June, painting the gorge a vivid pink and purple.

6. Aso Jinja Shrine

Aso Jinja Shrine, dedicated to the deity Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto, is one of Japan's oldest shrines. The shrine hosts several seasonal festivals throughout the year, centered around rice planting and controlled field burns. During the *hifuri shinji* ritual, participants swing flaming ropes of hay to pray for a prosperous rice harvest. The Onda Matsuri is another festival dedicated to the harvest, in which a parade of women dressed entirely in white walk to the shrine carrying ornate boxes on their heads.

The shrine is currently undergoing repairs, as it was damaged during an earthquake in 2016.

7. Nakadake First Crater

Near the center of the Aso caldera is Mt. Nakadake, which is still active and has occasional small-scale eruptions. Conditions permitting, visitors can peer into the First Crater to see the emerald green acid pool steaming within.