

## **Gassan Visitor Center**

Gassan Visitor Center is on the southern flank of Mt. Haguro (414 m), in the former province of Dewa (which encompasses parts of today's Yamagata Prefecture and Akita Prefecture). Together with Mt. Gassan (1,984 m) and Mt. Yudono (1,500 m), Mt. Haguro has been venerated since ancient times as Dewa Sanzan, "the three mountains of Dewa." The area is one of Japan's most important centers of Shugendo, an ancient tradition of mountain asceticism incorporating elements of both Buddhism and Shinto. In the course of reforms instituted in the early part of the Meiji era (1868–1912), this esoteric belief system was incorporated into what we now know as Shinto.

The pilgrimage to the three sacred mountains is called Sankan Sando, meaning "three gates, three passages." This journey became popular during the Edo period (1603–1867), when the concept of spiritual rebirth through pilgrimages gained prevalence. Pilgrims travel from this world (Mt. Haguro), to the afterlife (Mt. Gassan), and finally to rebirth (Mt. Yudono) during the long trek. The pilgrimage is rich in symbolism related to this concept.

Nearby sites of cultural importance include Mt. Haguro's fourteenth-century five-story wooden pagoda, several ancient shrines, and Jiji-sugi, a sacred cedar tree estimated to be more than 1,000 years old.

Gassan Visitor Center offers information in English on the area's topographic formation, its ancient spiritual roots, its diverse wildlife, and its influence on Japanese literature. A notable literary work is the haiku poet Matsuo Basho's (1644–1694) *Oku no hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Deep North), which includes a collection of haiku about Dewa Sanzan.

The facility also provides practical and seasonal information about nearby sights and how to safely climb the mountains as well as real-time footage of conditions on Mt. Gassan. Visitors are advised to stop at the center before ascending the mountains to ensure they are properly prepared. The visitor center also offers opportunities for hands-on learning, including how to dye fabric using local plants.