

## Gassan Visitor Center: A Guide to Dewa Sanzan

### *Welcome to Dewa Sanzan*

Dewa Sanzan is the collective name for three mountains of great spiritual importance: Mt. Haguro (414 m), Mt. Gassan (1,984 m), and Mt. Yudono (1,500 m).

Shugendo, an ancient tradition of mountain asceticism incorporating elements of elements of both Buddhism and Shinto, is thought to have emerged here in 593. Its beliefs and practices center on the reverence for nature and understanding of features of the landscape, such as rocks, rivers, and mountains, as abodes of the divine. During the Meiji era (1868–1912), this esoteric belief system was incorporated into what we know today as Shinto.

Dewa Sanzan is part of Bandai Asahi National Park, where there are numerous sites of spiritual, scientific, and scenic interest.

### *Gassan Visitor Center*

Gassan Visitor Center is on the southern flank of Mt. Haguro, at the start of an ancient pilgrimage route to the three mountains of Dewa Sanzan. The facility provides practical and seasonal information about nearby cultural and natural landmarks. It also advises visitors on how to safely climb the mountains and presents real-time video feed from Mt. Gassan to aid in planning for a hike. All visitors are encouraged to stop at the center before hiking. The visitor center also offers opportunities for hands-on learning, including workshops on fabric dyeing using local plants.

### *Sankan Sando pilgrimage*

Followers of Shugendo (*shugenja*) make the Sankan Sando pilgrimage to the three Dewa Sanzan mountains. For Shugendo practitioners, wandering among these peaks is a way of communing with the presence of the divine in the mountains and landscape. The pilgrimage is symbolic of the journey toward rebirth, with each mountain representing part of this journey of life. Mt. Haguro is symbolic of the present (this world), Mt. Gassan the past (the afterlife), and Mt. Yudono the future (rebirth). Pilgrims undergo this journey by visiting the three mountains with the aim of achieving spiritual rebirth when they emerge from the multiday walk.

### *Flora and fauna*

An abundance of alpine flora grows on Mt. Gassan (1,984 m) in the Midagahara High Moor, a meadow along the ridgeline at around 1,400 meters. Plants such as daylilies (*Hemerocallis dumortieri*), *hina-zakura* (*Primula nipponica Yatabe*), and round-leaved sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia* L.) thrive here in the warm months of the year.

A wide variety of mammals live in the mountains, including Asiatic black bears, Japanese giant flying squirrels, and the Japanese serow (*Capricornis crispus*), a symbol of Japan and protected as a Special Natural Monument. Both native and migratory birds inhabit Dewa Sanzan. Mt. Haguro is one of Japan's few breeding grounds of the ruddy kingfisher (*amagoidori*). This

striking bird is easy to recognize for its long, red beak and beautiful song. Other notable birds are golden eagles, Japanese nightingales, Hodgson's hawk eagles, goshawks, ospreys, and mandarin ducks.

### *Walking safety*

The mountains have a relatively low elevation, but the terrain can be deceptive and is often difficult. Mt. Haguro is accessible year-round, but all three mountains can be climbed only between July and mid-September. Extreme weather conditions prevent access to the other mountains for the remaining months.

Mt. Gassan is particularly prone to variable weather. Its steep western side faces the Sea of Japan, and is frequently buffeted by strong winds. The mountain's gentle eastern slopes are covered with deep snowfields in winter, and the snow can cover part of the mountain until the middle of summer. These harsh conditions make it necessary to plan walks carefully.

A live feed from cameras at several points on the trail allow visitors to observe the weather conditions from the Gassan Visitor Center and prepare appropriately. Hikers should dress in layers of clothing, including warm, fast-drying items, and waterproof outerwear, and wear hiking boots. Be sure to take a fully charged phone and plenty of food and drink for the journey.

Camping in the mountains is prohibited, but there is plentiful accommodation nearby. A popular option is *shukubo* lodgings, where pilgrims have stayed for hundreds of years.

Those ascending the mountain should be careful to avoid Asiatic black bears. Carrying a bear bell alerts them of a human presence, and they will typically keep away. In the unexpected event of encountering a bear, avoid running, shouting, getting close, or taking their photo, which will startle the animal. Instead, try to move cautiously away, without turning your back.