

Gassan Visitor Center: A Guide to Dewa Sanzan

What is Dewa Sanzan?

Dewa Sanzan is the collective name of three sacred peaks: Mt. Haguro (414 m), Mt. Gassan (1,984 m), and Mt. Yudono (1,500 m). These mountains have a 1,400-year history as a center of worship for Shugendo, an ancient tradition of mountain asceticism incorporating elements of both Buddhism and Shinto. For practitioners, the pilgrimage to all three mountains is symbolic of the journey from birth, to death, and finally to rebirth.

Dewa Sanzan is part of Bandai Asahi National Park, which has numerous sites of spiritual, scientific, and scenic interest. Bandai Asahi is Japan's second largest national park, spanning 1,870 square kilometers across parts of Fukushima, Yamagata, and Niigata Prefectures in northeastern Japan.

What is special about Dewa Sanzan?

Dewa Sanzan has a 1,400-year history as a spiritual site of Shugendo. The traditions of Shugendo that emerged here are thought to be the oldest in Japan. According to legend, it began with a vision Prince Hachiko had in 593, in which a three-legged crow led him to Mt. Haguro, where a deity appeared to him. This event led the prince to dedicate his life to worship of the deities of the mountain. Shugendo beliefs are animistic, centering on the idea of the divinity of nature. Natural features such as mountains are believed to be abodes of the divine.

What is the Dewa Sanzan pilgrimage?

The pilgrimage to the three Dewa Sanzan mountains, Mt. Haguro (414 m), Mt. Gassan (1,984 m), and Mt. Yudono (1,500 m), is known as Sankan Sando ("three gates, three passages"). The pilgrimage is considered symbolic of the journey toward spiritual rebirth, and each mountain represents a different stage of this journey: Mt. Haguro is symbolic of the present (this world), Mt. Gassan the past (the afterlife), and Mt. Yudono the future (rebirth).

How long does it take to complete the pilgrimage, and what do I need to plan in advance?

Hiking to all three mountains typically requires at least two days and two nights, and the mountains have seasonal schedules. It is therefore essential to plan carefully when walking the Sankan Sando.

Mt. Haguro is open year-round, but Mt. Gassan has a short season, from July 1 to September 30. Mt. Yudono is open from early May to the end of October. If you plan to visit all three mountains and complete the Sankan Sando, make sure to visit in the summer.

Conditions on Mt. Gassan are particularly variable, so you will need to be properly prepared.

Be sure to:

- Check the weather conditions of the mountains at Gassan Visitor Center before departing
- Plan your route carefully, and be sure you can finish each day's hike before sundown
- Make sure your phone is fully charged
- Bring enough food and drink
- Dress appropriately

Lodging must be arranged before your climb. Camping in the mountains is prohibited.

What will I see?

The Dewa Sanzan pilgrimage passes numerous sites of spiritual and natural importance.

One of the first sites visitors encounter, near the base of Mt. Haguro, is a five-story cedarwood pagoda. The original pagoda was built in around 940, but it was rebuilt in 1372 and restored in 1608. The 29-meter-tall structure is registered as a National Treasure.

There is a shrine at each mountain, but because Mt. Gassan and Mt. Yudono are inaccessible in winter due to heavy snowfall, the deities of all three Dewa Sanzan mountains are enshrined at Sanjin Gosaiden Shrine at the peak of Mt. Haguro. As a much lower peak, Mt. Haguro has less snowfall and is accessible year-round.

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. Notable wildflower species include *Oze kohone* (*Nuphar pumilum* var. *ozeense*), an aquatic plant with yellow blooms, and *Ezo no hakusan ichige* (*Anemone narcissiflora* var. *sachalinensis*), a flower that grows only in Hokkaido and on Mt. Gassan.

Similar alpine zones typically occur at and above 2,500 meters, but the alpine flora on Mt. Gassan flourishes at around 1,300 meters. It is therefore called a "pseudo alpine zone," a rare phenomenon that occurs when particularly harsh conditions create an environment more common at higher elevations. On Mt. Gassan, these conditions are created by strong coastal winds from the Sea of Japan and the deep snowpack covering the slopes for much of the year. The environment is thus inhospitable for the tall coniferous trees that would otherwise grow at this elevation.

Where can I stay?

A popular option for lodging is *shukubo*, where ascetics have stayed for hundreds of years. These comfortable, traditional-style lodgings serve *shojin ryori*, which is vegetarian food for religious practitioners. *Shojin ryori* is typically made from local wild plants and vegetables, including nuts, roots, bamboo shoots, flowers, and mushrooms. These dishes often feature rice, tofu, and

preserved vegetables seasoned with seaweed, vegetable oils, and miso. Historically, this was the sole diet of Dewa Sanzan's Shugendo practitioners (*shugenja*). They were self-sufficient and resourceful, using anything edible on the mountains. They would salt, pickle, and sun-dry foraged foods to provide sustenance for themselves in their mountain training.

How can I take part in a Shugendo experience?

Visitors who want to fully immerse themselves in the Shugendo experience can contact the Haguro Tourist Association for more information about training sessions.

How do I get to Dewa Sanzan?

Dewa Sanzan is conveniently accessed from Tokyo by train. The Joetsu Shinkansen reaches Niigata in about two hours. From there, take the limited express train to Tsuruoka, the closest station to Dewa Sanzan.

Alternatively, four flights a day run from Haneda Airport in Tokyo to Shonai Airport, a 40-minute drive from Gassan Visitor Center.

Where can I find more information?

The Gassan Visitor Center is on the southern flank of Mt. Haguro, the start of the ancient Dewa Sanzan pilgrimage.

Visit Gassan Visitor Center for information in English on the area's sights, ancient spiritual roots, and diverse wildlife. The facility provides practical and seasonal information about nearby sights and how to safely climb the mountains. A diorama model of the area's terrain provides a panoramic view of Dewa Sanzan. Real-time footage from Mt. Gassan aids in planning for the walk. Visitors can also participate in hands-on learning opportunities, including workshops on dyeing fabrics using local plants.