

Trekking Dewa Sanzan

Together with Mt. Gassan (1,984 m) and Mt. Yudono (1,500 m), Mt. Haguro (414 m) has been venerated since ancient times as Dewa Sanzan, “the three mountains of Dewa.” These mountains are connected by multiple trails, ranging from easy hikes that can be completed in an hour or two to challenging multiday walks.

Sankan Sando, the Dewa Sanzan pilgrimage, is one of the region’s most popular activities. It is a symbolic journey of rebirth undertaken by followers of Shugendo, an ancient tradition of mountain asceticism incorporating elements of Buddhism and Shinto. The mountains along the Sankan Sando are relatively low in elevation, but walking all three can be difficult. The entire pilgrimage usually takes two days to complete, so many people hike only a section of it.

The walk to the summit of Mt. Haguro from Zuishinmon Gate, near Gassan Visitor Center, is a 90-minute hike accessible for most people. The trail features numerous small Shinto shrines and an ancient cedarwood pagoda. Before the Meiji era (1868–1912), there were many more Buddhist structures on the mountain. This changed soon after the Meiji government was established: it declared Shinto the national religion and instituted reforms to separate Buddhism from Shinto. In the process, Shugendo was incorporated into Shinto, and most Buddhist structures on Mt. Haguro were destroyed or removed. Mt. Haguro’s pagoda and Zuishinmon Gate are two of the few remaining Buddhist relics.

Mt. Gassan is a more challenging walk, taking around three hours to ascend from the Gassan Eighth Station trailhead. The trail’s highlight is Midagahara High Moor, a meadow along the ridgeline at about 1,400 meters. The marsh is dotted with ponds, and alpine plants such as daylilies (*Hemerocallis dumortieri*), *hina-zakura* (*Primula nipponica Yatabe*), and round-leaved sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia L.*) thrive here in summer.

As with any mountain hike, climbing the Dewa Sanzan mountains requires planning and preparation. The summit of Mt. Haguro is accessible year-round, but hiking all three mountains is possible only between July and mid-September because of extreme weather conditions during the remaining months. Planning is especially important when climbing Mt. Gassan, which is particularly prone to variable weather. Its steep western side, which faces the Sea of Japan, is often buffeted by strong winds. The eastern slopes are covered with deep snowpack, and snow covers part of the mountain until the middle of summer. Gassan Visitor Center has several live

feeds from cameras at various points on the trail. Visitors should use this information to observe and prepare appropriately for weather conditions before departing.

To protect against wind and chill, wear multiple layers, including warm, fast-drying clothing, waterproof outerwear, and hiking boots. Also, bring a fully charged phone and plenty of food and drink for the journey.

Camping in the mountains is prohibited, but there is plentiful accommodation along the route. A popular option are the *shukubo*, hostel-like lodgings where pilgrims have stayed for centuries.

Hikers should take precautions to avoid encounters with the area's Asiatic black bears. Carrying a bear bell alerts them of a human presence and typically keeps them away. In the unexpected event of encountering a bear, avoid startling them: do not run, shout, get close, or take a photo. Instead, move cautiously away from them, without turning your back.