

## Hiruzen Highland Attractions

Located on a rolling plateau in northern Okayama Prefecture, the Hiruzen Highlands is one of Japan's premier resort locations for nature lovers.

The Highlands' elevation of 500 to 600 meters makes for comfortable summer temperatures ideal for hiking, cycling, and other outdoor activities. Area trails afford sweeping views of southern Daisen-Oki National Park, with Mt. Daisen—the highest peak in the Chūgoku region—clearly visible to the north. The Hiruzen slopes are blanketed with oaks and other broadleaf trees that shelter remote ecosystems like the Orogatawa wetlands. In spring and early summer, the trail connecting the impressive triple peaks of the Hiruzen Sanza—Mt. Kami-Hiruzen, Mt. Naka-Hiruzen, and Mt. Shimo-Hiruzen—winds through open woods where fawn lilies (*katakuri*) and bamboo lilies bloom in season. The fawn lily bulbs, which contain starch, were traditionally harvested to make a thickener used in Japanese cooking (*katakuriko*). (The starch more commonly used today is derived from potatoes, as the flower is now on the endangered species list.) Japanese pincushion flowers also bloom here in late summer, and the landscape viewed from the peaks is particularly striking in autumn.

Near the trailhead to Mt. Naka-Hiruzen is a newly built campground called Hiruzen Shiogama Camping Village. It provides comfortable outdoor accommodations ranging from grassy plots for tents to luxurious glamping pods suspended from the trees. The onsite shop rents everything a camper might need, from sleeping bags to cooking gear, and even lawn toys for children. Visitors can lounge by a campfire, try a treetop obstacle course, or tackle the 2.7-kilometer climb to the summit of Mt. Naka-Hiruzen.

The Highlands is also a fine destination for cycling. A nearly 30-kilometer cycling path encircles the Hiruzen Basin, offering panoramic views of the surrounding mountains and farmland. The path follows both bike-exclusive roads and local streets with light traffic, and has numerous shaded rest areas and public toilets, making it suitable for families and casual cyclists. Other fine-weather pursuits in the Hiruzen area include “river trekking” (walking in the bed of a rocky mountain stream) and horseback riding. Come winter, visitors can ski, go snowboarding, or even try snowshoeing.

Hiruzen is the largest breeding area for Jersey cows in Japan and is famous for its dairy products. Jersey cattle were first imported from New Zealand in 1954 to make use of semi-natural grasslands deemed unsuitable for farming. Since then, Jersey products have become a major local industry; cheese, milk, soft-serve ice cream, yogurt, and other dairy foods are all produced and sold in the area. At the agriculturally themed attraction called Hiruzen Jersey Land, visitors can try milking a cow or making cheese. Local dairies also

produce the fresh clotted cream that is served with afternoon tea at another popular attraction: Hiruzen Herb Garden Herbill. Diners here are surrounded by extensive grounds planted with 250 different varieties of herbs, including 20,000 lavender plants that bloom in July and August.

No resort area in Japan is complete without hot springs, and the waters of Hiruzen are particularly welcome as a muscle-soothing end to an active day. The baths of some traditional-style inns are open for day use, and the Hiruzen Yatsuka Onsen Kaiyukan is a public facility where bathers can enjoy views of the Hiruzen landscape from outdoor natural-stone baths.