

Norikura Echo Line

The Norikura Echo Line is the highest drivable road in Japan. This alpine highway winds its way up the Nagano Prefecture side of Mt. Norikura from Norikura Kōgen to the country's highest-elevation bus stop (2,716 m) before reaching the terminus at Tatamidaira (2,702 m). Travelers ascending the Echo Line pass above the timberline at around 2,500 meters, and the sudden and stunning views that open up draw many visitors every year. Visitors can also enjoy the distinctive Sanbondaki and Zengorōnotaki waterfalls that lie along the route.

In order to preserve the mountain's natural ecology, the Echo Line is closed to private motor vehicles above the Sanbondaki entrance gate. Hikers can climb the route year-round, and in summer and autumn visitors can travel it by bus, taxi, or bicycle. Buses depart from the Norikura Kōgen Tourist Information Center every day from July through October, though the service may end earlier if the weather turns severe. The buses take around 50 minutes to reach Tatamidaira.

From late April to late June, a Snow Wall Bus runs from the bus station at Norikura Kōgen Tourist Information Center (N29) to the terminus at Kuraigahara Sansō (N38). The Snow Wall Bus is so named for its route, which is carved each winter through vertical banks of snow that may reach 10 meters in height.

The Echo Line has also become a magnet for recreational cyclists. Its hairpin bends and beautiful scenery are reminiscent of those that thrill a global audience for the annual Tour de France. Since 1986 the Norikura Hill Climb, held the last weekend of August, has attracted top cyclists from across the country. The victor on this "Road to the Sky" usually takes around 54 minutes to complete the full route, which ascends 1,260 meters with an average gradient of 6.1 percent. In 2019, 4,475 people took part.

The idea to build a road to the summit of Mt. Norikura first arose on the Nagano Prefecture side of the mountain. Initial construction was aided by the Matsumoto unit of the Japan Self Defense Force, which still holds Telemark Nordic skiing practice on the mountain's slopes. However, Gifu Prefecture completed a similar alpine road, the Norikura Skyline, in 1948—six years before the Echo Line could be finished.

Visitors to Mt. Norikura need not worry about playing favorites. The two highways meet at Tatamidaira, and it is easy to travel up one and down the other, enjoying both the Gifu and Nagano sides of this spectacular mountain.