

Greeting the Rising Sun

Since before recorded history, mountain ascetics, monks, and devoted laypeople have climbed Japan's high peaks to meditate, pray, and witness that most uplifting and spiritual of sights: the morning sun rising above the clouds in a flash of golden light.

Viewing the sunrise from a high mountaintop holds significance in both Japanese spiritual belief and the national consciousness. In Shinto, the sun is revered as Amaterasu Ōmikami, ruler of the heavenly realm and ancestress of the imperial family. In Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, the sun is associated with Dainichi Nyorai, the Cosmic Buddha, whose name means "Great Sun." Furthermore, Japan's well-known moniker "Land of the Rising Sun" has a surprisingly ancient history. As early as 607 CE, ruling regent Prince Shōtoku (574–622) wrote to the Chinese imperial court using the salutation "From the Sovereign of the Land of the Rising Sun." Fourteen centuries later, veneration of the rising sun remains a part of the country's cultural, historical, and spiritual identity.

Today, visitors can experience a mountaintop sunrise from the highest point of Mt. Norikura without facing the dangers or hardships experienced by early climbers. Sunrise shuttle buses run from late July to mid-September, departing well before daybreak from bus stations in both Nagano and Gifu Prefectures. The ride to Tatamidaira Bus Terminal near the summit takes between 50 and 60 minutes from either prefecture. From Tatamidaira, a comparatively easy hike to the mountain's highest point (Mt. Kengamine, 3,026 m) takes about 90 minutes. Trips are timed so visitors can arrive by sunrise.

English-language announcements on the bus offer advice on mountain safety and tips on which items to carry to the summit. (Unneeded gear can be left in coin lockers at the Tatamidaira Bus Terminal.) When packing for the experience, visitors should note that mountaintop conditions can be quite chilly even in midsummer.