

Natagiri Pass

The great haiku poet Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) undertook a 156-day journey of roughly 2,400 kilometers from Edo (present-day Tokyo) through the northern part of Honshu Island. He traveled mostly on foot, accompanied by his disciple Kawai Sora (1649–1710). Basho used their journey as the basis for *Oku no hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Deep North), a travel narrative of poetry and prose. Along the way, they stopped in Obanazawa, where they stayed for 10 nights.

Basho and Sora made their way to Obanazawa through Natagiri Pass, a steep, winding mountain path leading from the nearby town of Mogami. Although just 3.8 kilometers long, the wild, deserted path wound through ancient beech forests and climbed to an elevation of 470 meters. Basho's descriptions of the quiet, dark forest, even during the day, suggest that the journey was quite difficult.

Basho's original route has been preserved, and an annual walk is held to celebrate his legacy. A road through Natagiri Pass was paved in 1932, so visitors can drive to a parking lot partway up the mountain and ascend the trail to the top on foot. The route passes by a small temple honoring Kodakara Jizo, a Buddhist guardian deity of children, next to a sacred cedar tree with a large opening in its trunk called the Komochisugi (literally, "child-bearing cedar"). There is a stone monument associated with Basho that is dedicated to Natagiri Pass in a clearing beyond the temple.