

Echigo Hillside Park

The Echigo Hillside Park is a national government park on the western edge of Nagaoka with a vast recreational area that contains carefully landscaped gardens, nature trails, and an abundance of indoor and outdoor attractions. The park's sprawling 340 hectares are split into two main areas, the northern Kenko (Health Promotion) Zone and the southern Satoyama Field Museum. The Kenko Zone is mostly dedicated to recreational activities and includes a large rose garden, a fountain pond, and several playgrounds. In contrast, the Satoyama Field Museum primarily consists of natural landscapes with extensive areas for hiking and exploring. Numerous trails, attractions, and exhibits make it possible for visitors of all ages to enjoy the park year-round.

Admission, Services, and Amenities

A one-day pass is 450 yen for adults, 210 yen for those aged 65 and older, and free for children in junior high school and younger. Two-day passes cost 500 yen and 250 yen, respectively. Admission is free from December to March. Ample paid parking is available in front of the main gate.

Strollers, wheelchairs, tarps, walkers, and tents can be borrowed free of charge at the main gate. During weekends and national holidays, visitors can use free shuttle buses to easily access different areas of the park. Small shops and cafés, a restaurant, and several rest areas provide comfortable indoor spaces to relax and recharge. Coin lockers, accessible restrooms, nursing rooms, first-aid facilities, and smoking areas are also available.

Kenko Zone

One of the most popular attractions in the Kenko Zone is the Fragrant Rose Garden, where winding paths allow for a leisurely stroll among 2,400 colorful rose bushes representing around 800 species. The garden is divided into eight main areas featuring native and non-native rose species. For example, the Fragrance Area groups roses by scent type, such as fruity or spicy, and the Color Area showcases the roses through a gradation of hues.

The nearby Flower Garden is a large, 3,000-square-meter space dedicated to seasonal flowers. From April to May, it is covered with 180,000 brightly colored tulips, and during August, tall, vibrant sunflowers herald the end of summer. In September and October, approximately 300,000 pink, purple, and white cosmos flowers bloom on the grounds.

The park's iconic, cloud-shaped “fluffy dome” trampolines, slides, ziplines, and the grass sledding area are popular with children. A big water-themed playground with spouting water tunnels, fountains, and water-pumping cannons is perfect for families and helps to stave off summer heat. A musical fountain show occurs every 30 minutes at the nearby pond's Fantasy Fountain; on summer evenings, the streams of water are illuminated by colorful lights. Some of the winter pastimes are skiing, sledding, and a snowshoe course through the forest.

Other areas in the Kenko Zone include a space for outdoor activities, an observatory that offers a 360-degree view of the park, and picnic spaces with barbecue equipment available for rent.

A special land plot located on the way to the observatory is dedicated to *yukiwariso* (literally “flower that breaks through the snow”), also known as hepatica or bird's-eye primrose. These flowers, a symbol of Nagaoka, are among the first to appear as the snow melts, blooming in pink, white, and bluish-purple hues. *Yukiwariso* primroses have become rarer due to habitat loss and overpicking, but they are carefully cultivated in the Echigo Hillside Park. The dedicated area contains approximately 200,000 plants, and about 10,000 more are added every year.

Satoyama Field Museum Area

Satoyama (literally “village mountains”) were mountainous areas where people used to farm, forage, and gather firewood, using the natural resources in a sustainable way that helped conserve the local ecosystems. In the center of the Satoyama Field Museum, two traditional houses stand beside a rice field, reminiscent of a village from the past. The smaller house is a restored thatched-roof building from the Edo period (1603–1867). It retains the layout and appearance of a rural home, complete with old furnishings, and provides a sense of what everyday life may have been like in Echigo Province (present-day Niigata Prefecture). The larger house was constructed using materials recovered from a Meiji-period (1868–1912) building. The exhibits include items typically used in *satoyama*, such as agricultural equipment and straw outerwear, as well as displays related to silk production.

On the nature trails, leisurely walks or longer hikes across the forests and fields are a great chance to encounter the many birds, tanuki racoon dogs, hares, and other wildlife that inhabit the area. Along the Flower Forest trail, wild grasses and flowers abound from

spring to autumn, and over a million dogtooth violets bloom shortly after winter's end. The trail leads to an observation point with a panoramic view of the surrounding landscape and the Three Mountains of Echigo (Mt. Hakkai, Mt. Echigo-Komagatake, and Mt. Nakanodake).

Two wetlands provide habitat for various aquatic plants, insects, and amphibians, including the Japanese black salamander, and serve as important conservation sites for several endangered species. The dirt trails, wooden bridges, and boardwalks ensure easy passage around the wetlands and closeup views of the bountiful flora and fauna.

Other activities in this zone include “park golf” (a cross between croquet and golf) with free equipment and a playground with a small obstacle course designed for younger children.