

Mountain Lakes Hike: Lake Kirikomi and Lake Karikomi

These two mysterious lakes are among the most secluded and serene bodies of water in the Okunikko area. Lake Kirikomi and Lake Karikomi were formed when lava blocked the exit of the water flowing from the surrounding mountains many centuries ago. The two lakes are interconnected except in times of minimal rainfall, and the waters are deep, up to 15 meters in places. No streams or rivers can be seen flowing out of the lakes, so presumably they drain through underground channels.

According to legend, the local people lived in fear of a giant serpent that once called this area home. The revered Buddhist priest Shodo Shonin (735–817), founder of the temples and shrines of Nikko, heard of the harassment and confronted the serpent, slashing it to death and burying its body in the lake waters. The two lakes were named to honor this heroic act: *kiri* means to cut, *kari* means to hunt, and *komi* means to push down.

Relatively few people take this trail, and hikers who make the trek are likely to find themselves alone with the calm emerald waters, surrounded on all sides by thickly forested mountains.

The Trail

The hiking trail is moderately challenging, with trailheads at Yumoto Onsen and Kotoku Onsen. The entire route is approximately 10 kilometers long, climbing about 300 meters. The steep sections with steps near each end of the trail are the most strenuous. It takes an average of three and a half hours to hike the trail—with the lakes about one hour from Yumoto, or two and a half from Kotoku. Most hikers begin at Yumoto and either return there after reaching the lakes, or continue to Kotoku and catch a bus back to Yumoto.

Trail Highlights

The trail follows a circuitous route around Mt. Mitsudake (1,945 m). The mountain forest is primitive, with a rich variety of trees, including the Japanese elkhorn cedar, an evergreen related to the Japanese cedar. Many tree roots, forced to grow horizontally by the shallow topsoil, cross the trail. Much of the route winds along the western and northern side of the mountain and remains largely in shadow. This contributes to the many varieties of moss that can be found growing on rocks, trees, and the trail itself, adding to the mystical atmosphere of this ancient forest. In places hikers will feel cool air blowing from crevices and caves in the volcanic rock along the trail—a kind of natural air conditioning. The trail on the Kotoku side of the lakes passes Karenuma Swamp, one of the few open areas along the route. Karenuma literally means “dry swamp,” though it now appears more like a dry prairie. It is a popular rest stop for viewing alpine flowers in the early summer and colorful foliage in the fall.

Trail Tips

- It is important to make a morning start. The bus service departing from the end of the trail is limited, and hikers can be stranded if they arrive late.
- The weather in the Okunikko mountains can change quickly. Dress appropriately, wear suitable footwear, and stay hydrated.
- Benches are conveniently located along the trail.
- Please stay on the marked trails.
- Take all the photographs you want, but leave only footprints.