

## **Mt. Ontake**

Mt. Ontake is the second highest volcano in Japan. It has an elevation of 3,067 meters and is located at the border of Gifu and Nagano Prefectures. It is a popular destination for hot springs and outdoor activities such as “shower climbing” and hiking. The mountain is considered sacred and has a network of ancient pilgrimage trails known collectively as the Ontake Kodo. The trails connect shrines and training grounds used by mountain ascetics.

Mt. Ontake has long been revered in Shugendo, a Japanese faith centered on mountain worship. Prior to the Edo period (1603–1867), the mountain was an exclusive domain for Shugendo ascetic practice and was off-limits to the general public. In the late eighteenth century, two ascetics named Fukan and Kakumei established climbing routes to popularize the faith and encourage people to visit the mountain. These are used today by hikers and Shugendo devotees and include sections of the ancient pilgrimage paths.

Along the trails and all over the mountain are more than 20,000 stone monuments called *reijin-hi*, or “spirit monuments.” According to the Mt. Ontake Shugendo faith, people’s spirits are born from and return to the mountain, and these monuments are erected to appease the spirits of the deceased and guide them back to Mt. Ontake.

One of several trailheads leading to the mountaintop is in the Nigorigo Onsen area of Gero. From the trailhead, it takes around 3 and a half hours to reach the summit. The route passes through a moss-covered coniferous forest that provides a habitat for squirrels, short-tailed weasels, and many other animals. As the trail rises into higher elevations, the scenery includes wetlands and ponds and abundant alpine vegetation.