

Japanese 100 Great Mountains Vol.2: Episode 006-010



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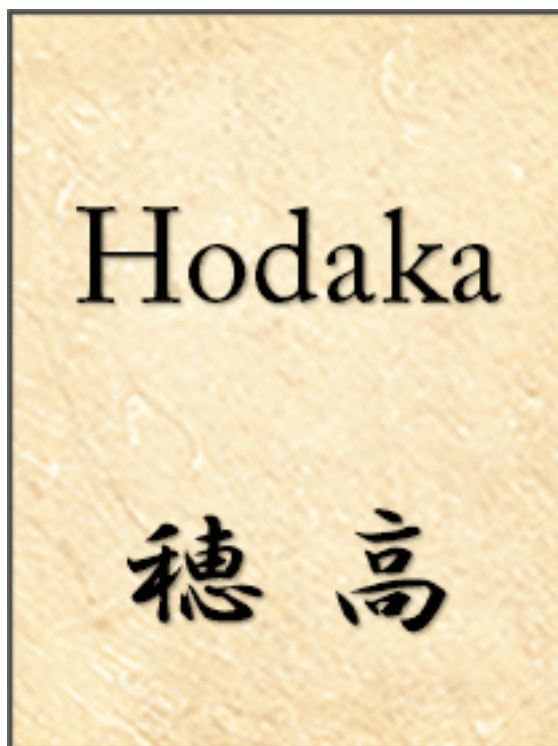
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ISBN: 978-1-387-70478-1





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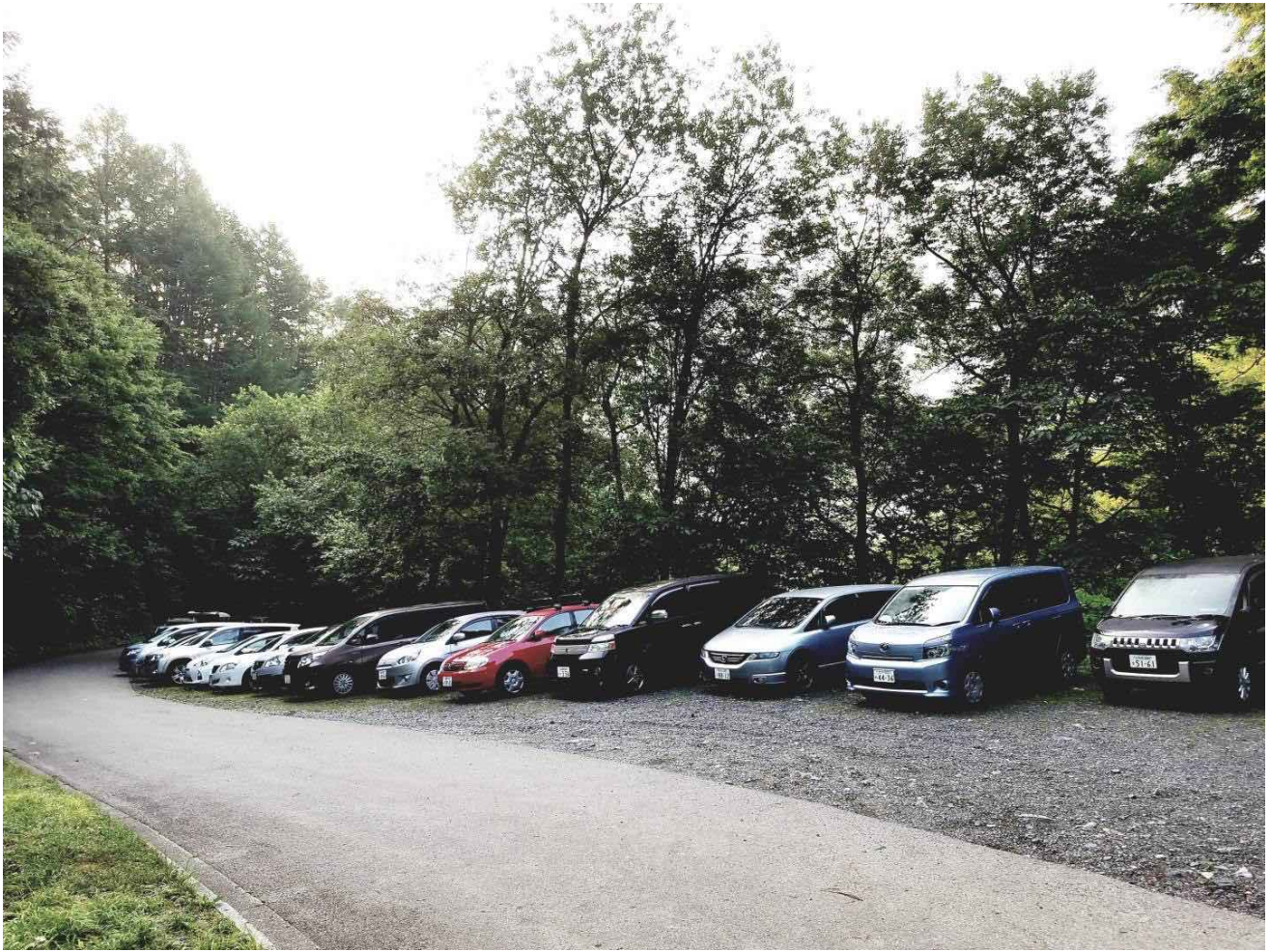
## Episode 006: Mount Aizu-Komagatake



Ten days after I climbed Mount Amagi in July 2017, I head for Mount Aizu-Komagatake with an altitude of 2,133 meters in Fukushima Prefecture. Located to the north of Oze National Park, Aizu-Komagatake is a mountain like a paradise because it has grand moors on its summit and is dotted with ponds and alpine plants. The reason for mountaineering at this timing is that the man whom I met at Mount Amagi (refer to Episode 004) said he would climb Mount Aizu-Komagatake on the day. He also said he needed 17 more mountains to conquer all of Japanese 100 Great Mountains. So, I have decided to try to take him by surprise. I come here today to present foods and drinks to him, because he said he would keep climbing in the Kanto region for a while.

Access to Mount Aizu-Komagatake is not good. The local streets after I got off the highway continued on and on. I drove two more hours on rural roads and entered Hinoemata Village, which had an atmosphere of Japanese typical hometown. Since I departed Tokyo last night and spent the night in the car, I have arrived at a parking lot beside a starting point of mountaineering before 5 am.





In spite of an early morning of a weekday, the parking lot, which can accommodate about 20 vehicles, is almost filled to capacity. I didn't expect this situation. If I cannot park here, I would have to get down the road and take much time to get back here by foot. But I'm lucky to barely park here. Once I get off the vehicle, I confirm other car's license plates but cannot find Yamaguchi's one (That man was from the prefecture). He might get here later today. So, anyway, I have decided to start climbing.

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As I could know it from the number of the parked cars, a lot of climbers are mountaineering today, many of whom are old-married couples. At the beginning, relatively steep uphill continue and the visibility is restricted, so we need some patience.

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Beyond the forest zone, the view is amazingly awesome. As I can see the summit and a lodge, my feeling is getting much better. It is as if I were walking through a meadow. Comfortable breeze, which I didn't feel in the forest zone, is naturally drying my sweat.

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After climbing about 2 hours, I have arrived at a lodge called "Koma-no-koya", which is famous for the bear's fur seen from the entrance. You can overlook a huge pond named "Koma-no-oike" and Mount Aizu-Komagatake in the background from the wide and open space in front of the lodge. It is one of the famous shooting spots at Mount Aizu-Komagatake. Although this lodge offers rooms and doesn't serve meals, guests often bring alcohol in and mingle with each other. It seems to be an appeal for some mountaineers.

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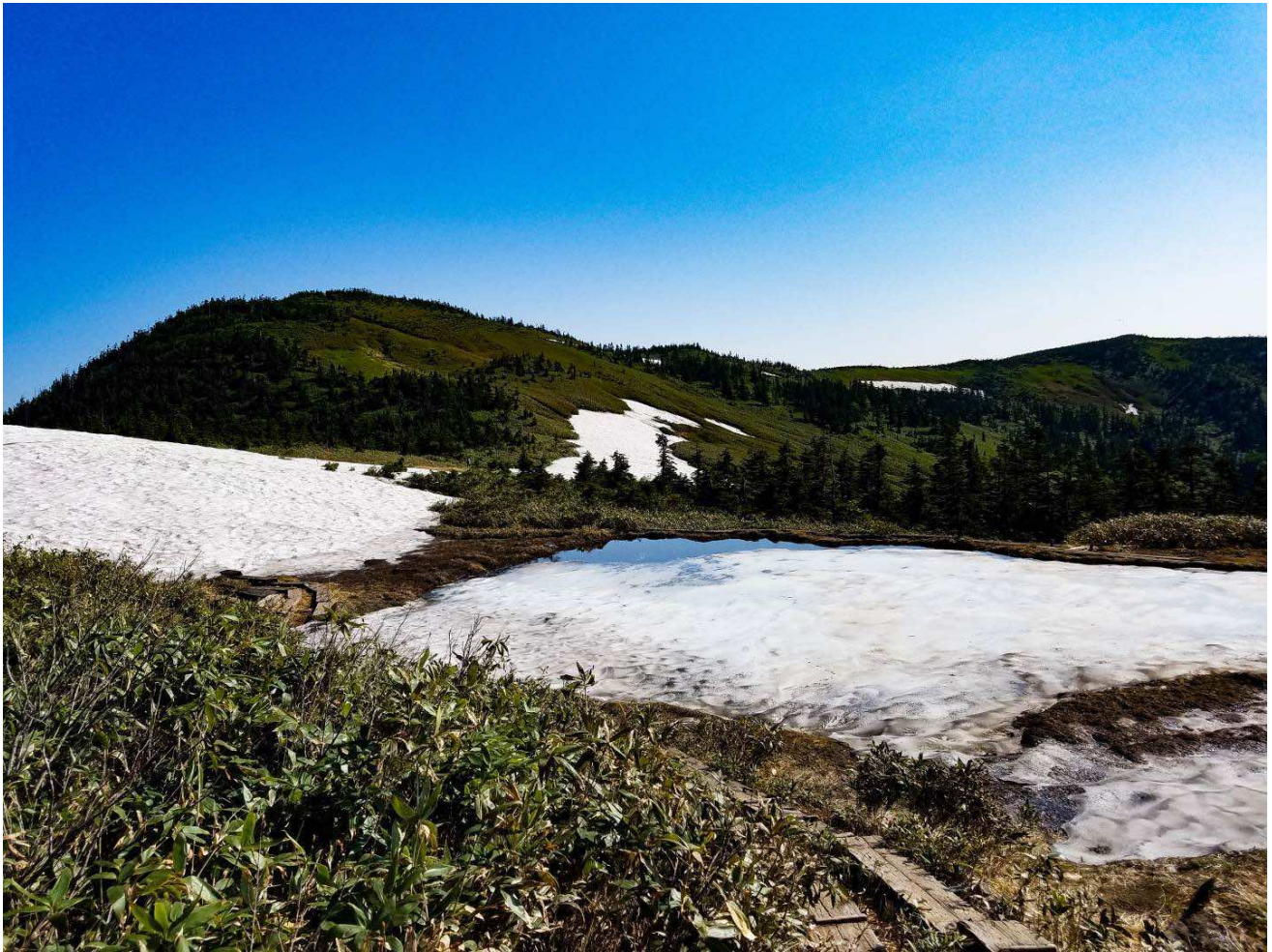




Surprisingly, a lot of snow has still been left at the area near the lodge. It has been trodden hard, so I don't need crampons. But I'm carefully stepping forward, because the snow is left here and there.

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Walking on a plank road stretching from the lodge, I have reached the summit of Mount Aizu-Komagatake in about 15 minutes. There is a splendid mountaintop sign that is far taller my height, although even the sign can be completely buried in the snowy season. The summit is not so spacious, but you can savor the panoramic view when in fine weather.

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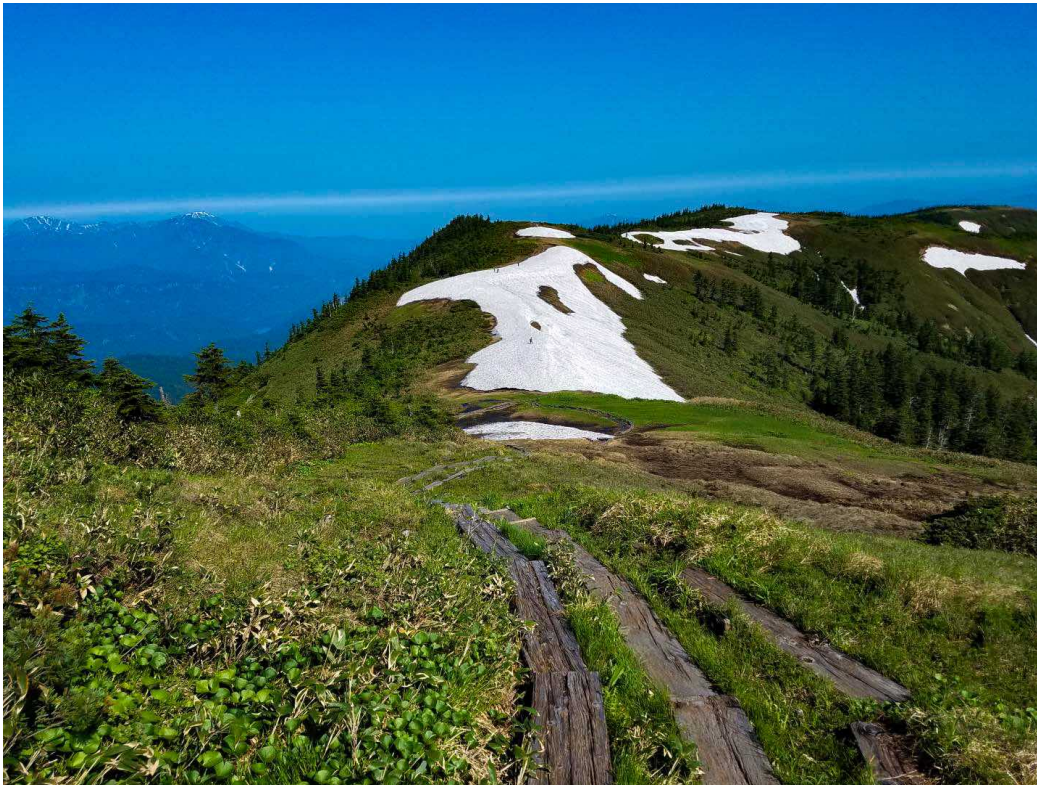




If you only aim to conquer one of Japanese 100 Great Mountains, Mount Aizu-Komagatake is the destination. However, I earnestly recommend that you extend your mountaineering to Mount Chumondake, which is about 30 minutes' walk from Mount Aizu-Komagatake. This mountain ridge has a grand moor. It is so spacious that I cannot believe I'm on the mountaintop. Countless ponds of various sizes are here and there. The ground is not so up-and-down, so you can savor the feeling as if you were walking in the sky.

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Moors spread out on the tranquil summit of Chumondake. The surrounding trees and the blue of the sky are reflecting on the surface of the pond. It's a beautiful scenery which I might be able to find in a picture book. Too flat as a mountaintop, but it is a common feature of mountains with moors on them. Many flowers are coloring around the moors. The road continues beyond Chumondake and is making a round of a small hill. The pond on the mountaintop gives me a really mysterious feeling. I can appreciate the scenery which I have never experienced during the mountaineering in the past.



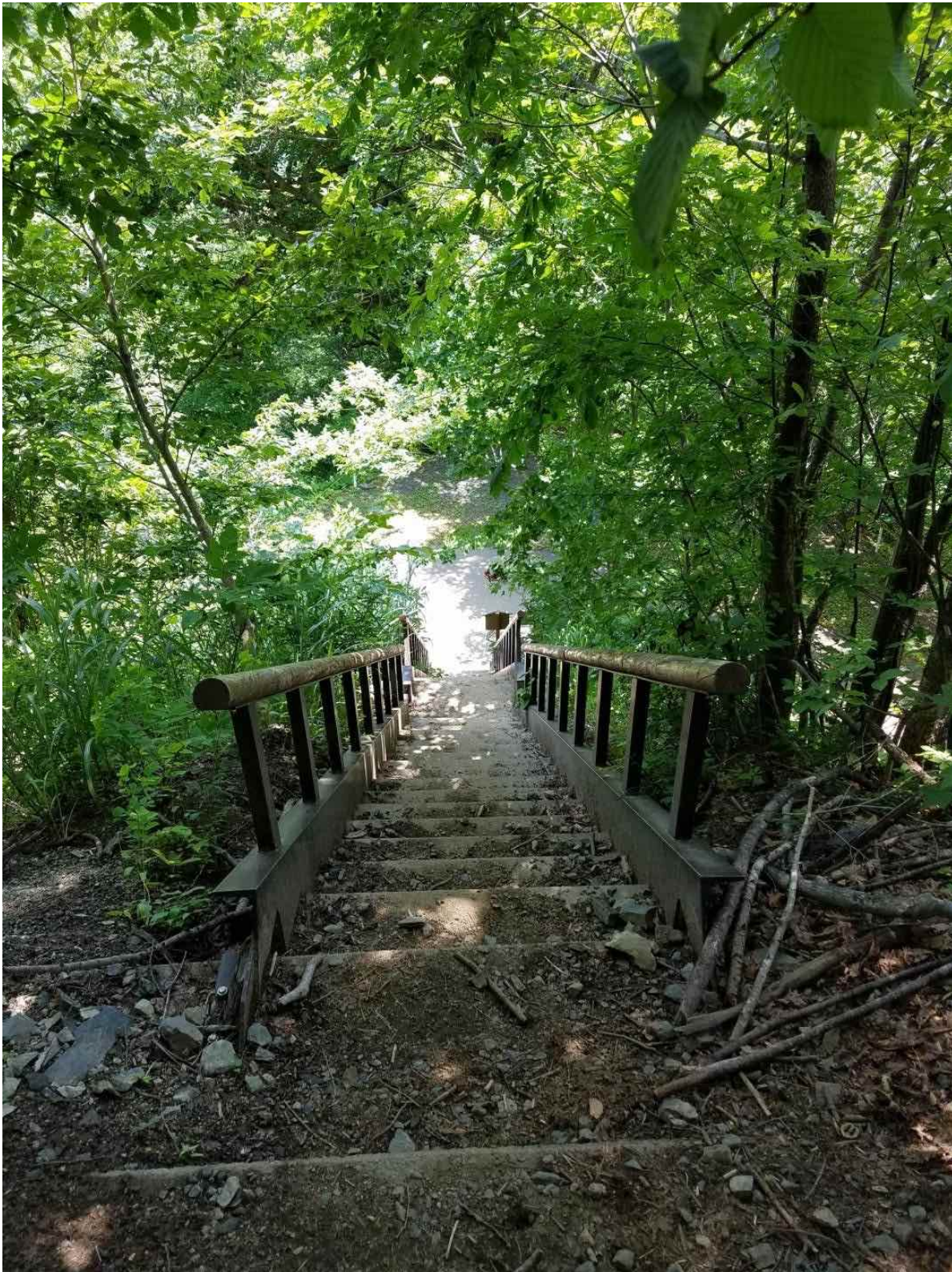


Because of the fine weather, the number of climbers is gradually increasing. Naturally, I have more conversations with them while passing each other. They ask me like, "Have you seen blooming flowers on your way?", "Have you taken good pictures?", "Do you know the name of that mountain?" They have added liveliness to my climbing.



I start descending before noon. Although I'm carefully watching the climbers coming up, I cannot meet the man whom I met in Mount Amagi. 10 days have already passed since we first met, he might have changed his schedule in the middle.

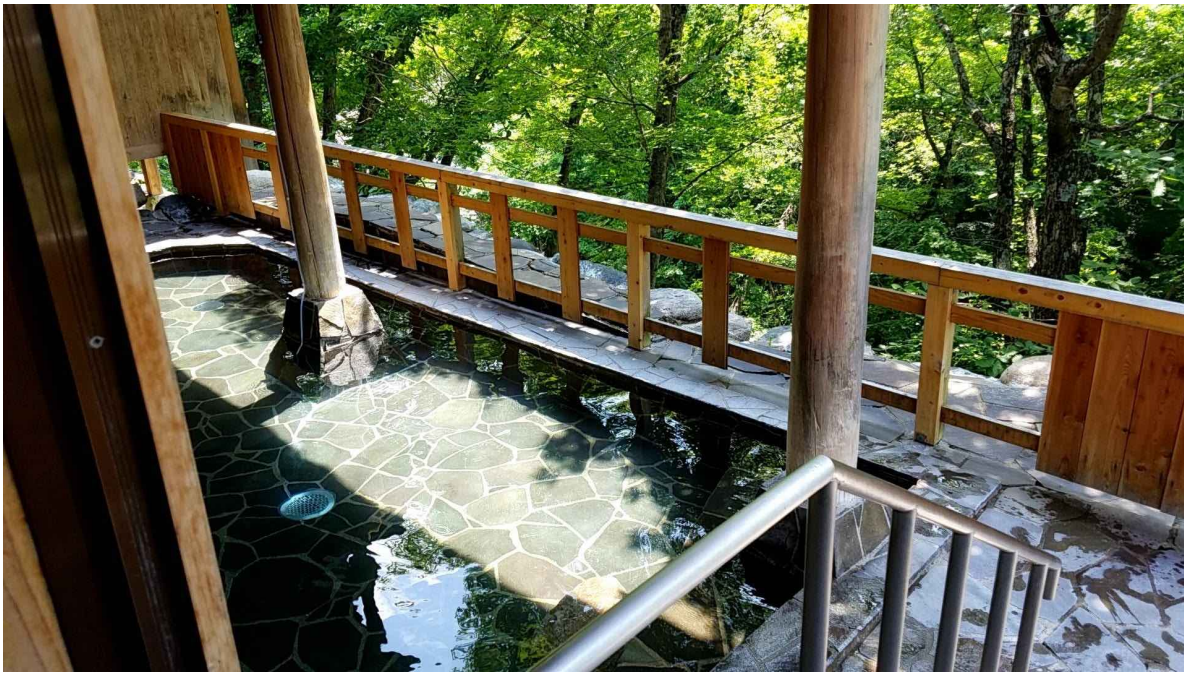




I have climbed down the mountain at a little past noon. After that, the first thing to do is to look for a hot spring. Usually, there are several hot springs near starting points, so you won't have trouble finding a place to bathe after your mountaineering. This time I choose a hot spring facility named "Hiuchi-no-yu", which is a few minutes' drive from the parking lot. I have washed away my sweat in a spacious open-air bath of the facility.

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I feel hungry and have decided to take a meal. In fact, Hinoemata Village has a specialty that I have definitely wanted to eat. It is a local cuisine called "Yamodo cuisine" (meaning mountain people cuisine). Hinoemata village, located at a high altitude, is not suitable for rice cultivation. So, people living here have developed and inherited a cuisine made with edible wild plants, mushrooms, mountain and river creatures, and soba (buckwheat is called "soba" in Japanese and it can be grown well even in cold districts). It is a dish in which women devised with limited ingredients for men working in the mountains.





There are some restaurants with signboards of "Yamodo cuisine" in the vicinity of the starting point. I have entered the one catching my eye. "Tachi Soba" is very elastic because it has been made by cutting several sheets of stretched buckwheat dough without folding them. I also savored a chewy texture confectionery named "Hattou", which is made by kneading buckwheat flour and glutinous rice, and by seasoning with perilla and soybean flour. Usually, I find myself wanting to eat a high-calorie food after each mountaineering. Still, I feel the soba with a refreshing taste is really delicious. Also, Sansho-uo (Cryptobranchioidea), living in rivers of the mountain, is a specialty and often eaten as *shioyaki* (grilled with salt), *karaage* (deep fried in oil), or *tempura* (battered and deep fried), although it is not listed as the menu of this restaurant and I cannot eat it this time.

Hinoemata Village is located in the back of Aizu (the western part of Fukushima) and has an atmosphere like an unexploded region. I feel a simple taste and warmth of people living in the mountain. Since I cannot be fully satisfied with a day trip, so I would like to come back again, using an inn next time.





## Episode 007: Mount Hotaka in Gunma



Mount Hotaka (or Hotaka-yama in Japanese) is towering in the northern part of Gunma prefecture. It is an independent active volcano with a broad base, which has several mountains centering around the main peak named Oki-hotaka. It is known for the outstanding view from the mountaintop. The Japanese Kanji characters for the name of this mountain are very difficult to read, so even Japanese cannot read it as "Hotaka" when they first see it. Many should naturally associate the name "Hotaka" with Mount Hotaka (or Mount Hotakatake) of the Northern Alps (also known as the Hida Mountains). That is the reason why the one in Gunma is often called Joshu Hotaka-yama to distinguish them.

Although there are several climbing routes on the mountain, any route is quite hard as a day climbing. In addition, you need to take a taxi or drive your own car since public transportation is not available to get here. This time I have chosen the starting point near the Hotaka Shrine because of the accessibility from the metropolitan area. A campsite is next to the starting point. If you stay there at the night before your climbing, you will have time to spare. Compared to Mount Tanigawa (or Tanigawa-dake), a famous mountain nearby, few climbers are in this mountain. So, you can enjoy quiet climbing.

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Leaving the Hotaka Shrine before 6 am and proceeding on a flat road for a while, I have arrived at the turning point of Mount Hotaka and Mount Kengamine in about 40 minutes. The road goes around and you can choose either way. I have headed for Mount Hotaka because I want to enjoy climbing the rocky mountain.

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The course has an interesting feature, for its steep slopes are equipped with chains, ropes, and ladders.

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At first sight, the course is tough and dangerous. But its foothold is firm and that shouldn't be a problem if you climb with care. You can gain the altitude in a short time and have more thrilling experience than on a simple and plain mountain path.

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The final slope is covered with a full of rhododendrons. After that, you can reach the summit with an altitude of 2,158 meters. You will be welcomed by the 360-degree panorama with a characteristic mountaintop sign in the shape of a mountain.

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Mount Hotaka has been a mountain for Shugendo (meaning ascetic mountaineering as religious training developed in ancient Japan). In the old days, women weren't allowed to enter the mountain for the religious reason. But in the first place, I think it hasn't been a mountain for general climbers because its rocky stretches are really tough and its difference in elevation is more than 1,000 meters. In this modern times, we can still encounter Shugendo monks among climbers aiming to conquer one of Japanese 100 Great Mountains. The monks are climbing while repeating the mantra called "Rokkon Shojyo". Like this, it has been a religious mountain since ancient times.





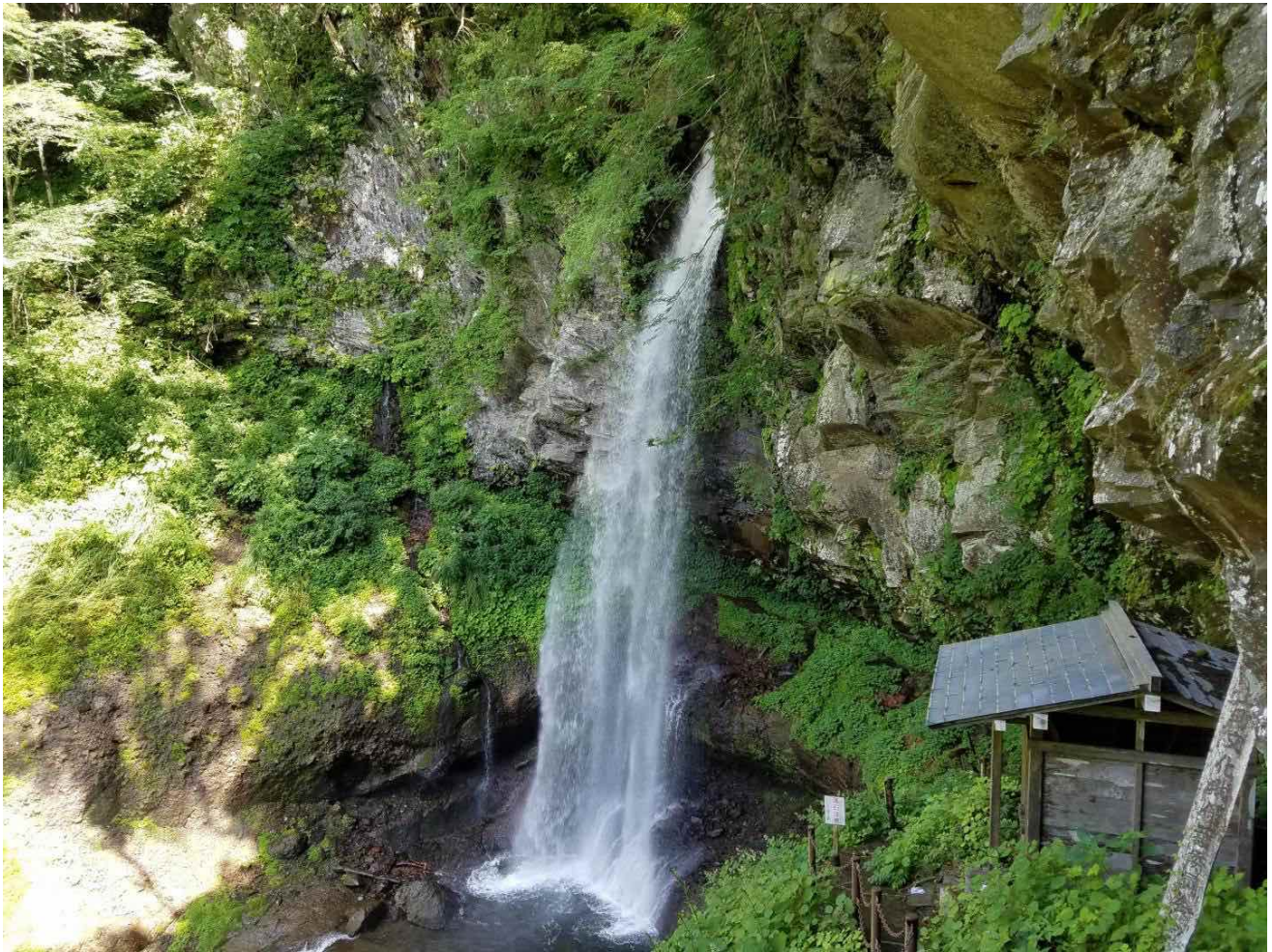
At a point little past the mountaintop stands a statue of Yamato Takeru (a legendary prince in ancient Japan). Also, you can see another, bigger statue of Yamato Takeru at Mae Hotaka where you will reach after descending for about one and a half hours.



Once upon a time, a Japanese god named Hotaka-no-mikoto seemed to be worshipped in this Mount Hotaka in Gunma. It is the same god worshipped in the Hotaka Mountains of the Northern Alps. The name of Mount Hotaka in Gunma is written with different kanji characters from those for the mountain of the Northern Alps. But it seems to have originally had the same kanji characters sometime in the past. But later, the one in Gunma was given the new kanji characters indicating (Yamato) Takeru because some legends said he dropped by this mountain in the middle of an ancient great war. No one would be able to read the name of this mountain as "Hotaka" unless he or she has the knowledge in advance.

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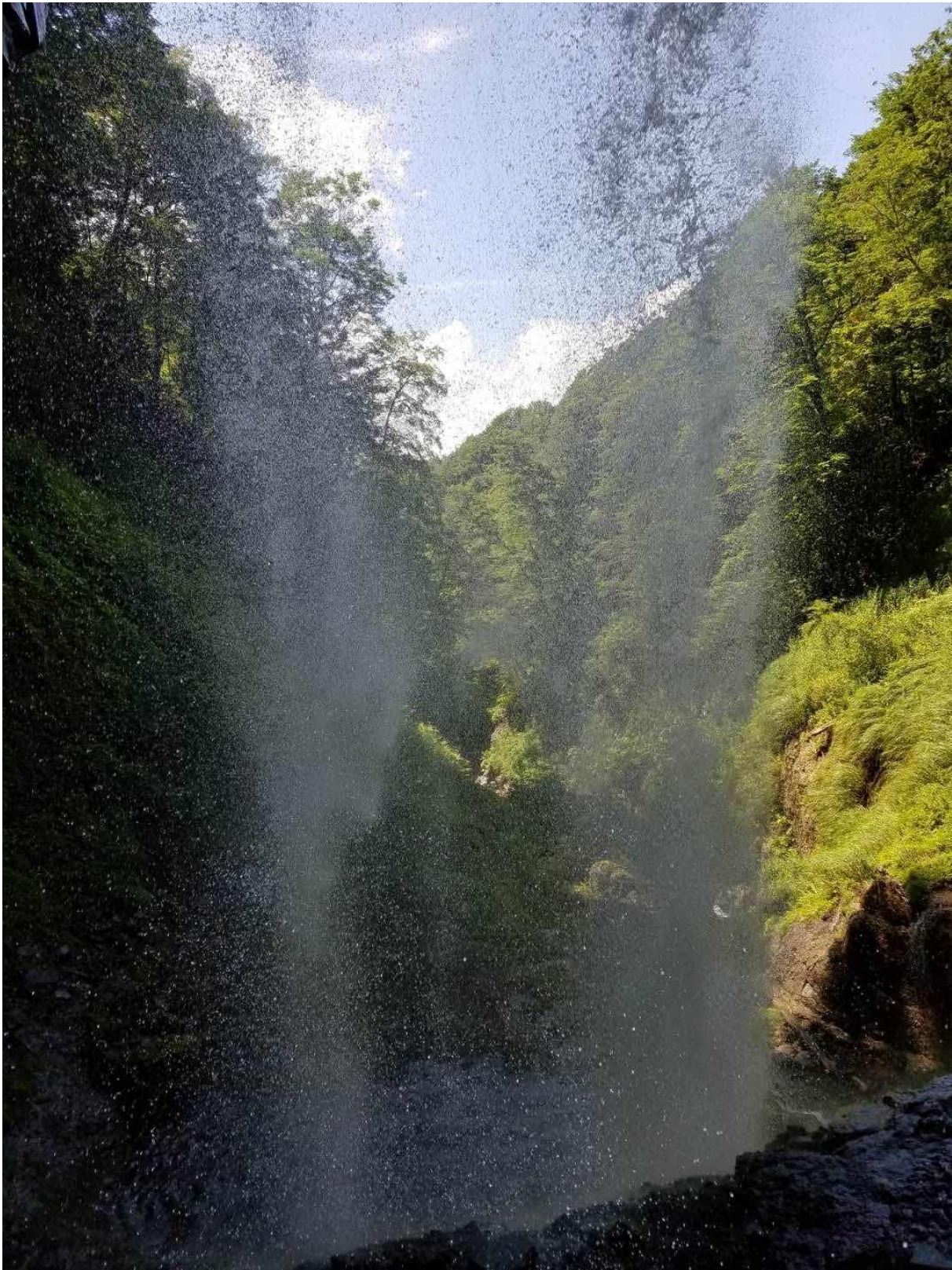




This time I used the starting point near the Hotaka Shrine, below which there is a gorgeous waterfall called "Urami-no-taki" (literally meaning "Waterfall whose back can be seen") with 80 meters in height. As its name indicates, you can walk through behind the waterfall and appreciate the unique scenery from there. There is a legend in which Yamato Takeru visited here to purify himself in the waterfall.

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You can see Mount Kengamina from the top of Oki-hotaka (the main peak of Mount Hotaka). It is protruding and clearly conspicuous, but it's so cloudy today that it is frequently hidden in the floating clouds. From the summit, I will be descending to the starting point while turning around over the Mount Kengamine.

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The slopes are not steeper than those of uphill but I need to climb down carefully. I'm getting through a narrow path between broad-leaf bamboos (or Sasa in Japanese) whose height are as tall as mine. In the meantime, I feel uneasy about some rustling sounds from the back of the bamboos. In a moment, I'm worried whether it is a bear or something, but I keep descending without caring about it too much. Then, a trail runner is coming up and has warned me with a serious look, saying, "Be careful. I have seen a bear just down the path."





I feel a chill running down my spine, even though I'm not sure whether the sound I heard earlier was made by the bear. I have never encountered a bear in any mountain before. I'm considering if I have something to make some noise. I regret not bringing a bear protective bell this time. I feel anxiety about descending without doing nothing. At the time, I'm reminded of the story I once heard from someone at Tanzawa Mountains (refer to Episode 003). He said he had nothing when encountering a bear, but he seemed to have turned it away by beating a paper back filled with air and making a loud noise. He advised me that I remember it to prepare for the occasion. So, I pick up a bag of bread for trail chow while in a condition to make a loud noise with it. It is really a thrilling experience.





How could I predict I was about to follow his advise someday in the near future? In the end, I have climbed down the mountain safely. But I have decided to always bring a bear protective bell when climbing a mountain from now on.





## Episode 008: Mount Jonen



Usually, I use my own car to go to a mountain in the Kanto region and the Southern Alps. But I sometimes take an express bus to approach the Northern Alps. You can get some advantages by using public transportation. I mean, you can spend free time while moving and traverse the mountains without worrying about getting back to the starting point for your vehicle. In other words, you can climb down the mountain in a different route and expand your journey.

This time, I'm climbing Mount Jonen (or Jonen-dake in Japanese) which is said to be an introductory course in the Northern Alps. You can traverse from Nakabusa-onsen to Mount Tsubakuro, Mount Otensho, Mount Jonen, Mount Chogatake, and Kamikochi. This route is popular and called Alps Panorama Ginza (Ginza is the most luxurious area in Asia) because of its wonderful landscape.

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I have moved to Azumino Hotaka in Nagano Prefecture after about four-hour bus ride from Busta Shinjuku, which is a gigantic bus terminal completed in 2016 and deals with nearly 1,600 buses each day. I use the facility for the first time. It is more comfortable and more convenient than the previous bus stops in the vicinity of Shinjuku. Originally, I planned to take a night bus and get to the destination in the early morning and start climbing immediately after that. But the ticket for the night buses were sold out, so I decided to take the bus departing at 15:05, stay at a hotel, and spend a leisurely night.





Many seats of the bus weren't occupied and I could relax. Although the weather was nationwide bad until yesterday, but it seems to improve tomorrow. In fact, the sky I can see from the bus is all clear. During the bus trip, I see the mountain map and consider the time required and also enjoy reading. After taking breaks at two service areas on the way, I have arrived at Azumino Hotaka around 19:00. While taking a walk in the unknown town, I'm heading for the hotel.



I have left the hotel much earlier than the departure time (6:40 am) of the bus heading for Nakabusa-onsen, the starting point of mountaineering. In fact, I want to visit the Hotaka Shrine. I have a special feeling because the shrine has the same name as mine.

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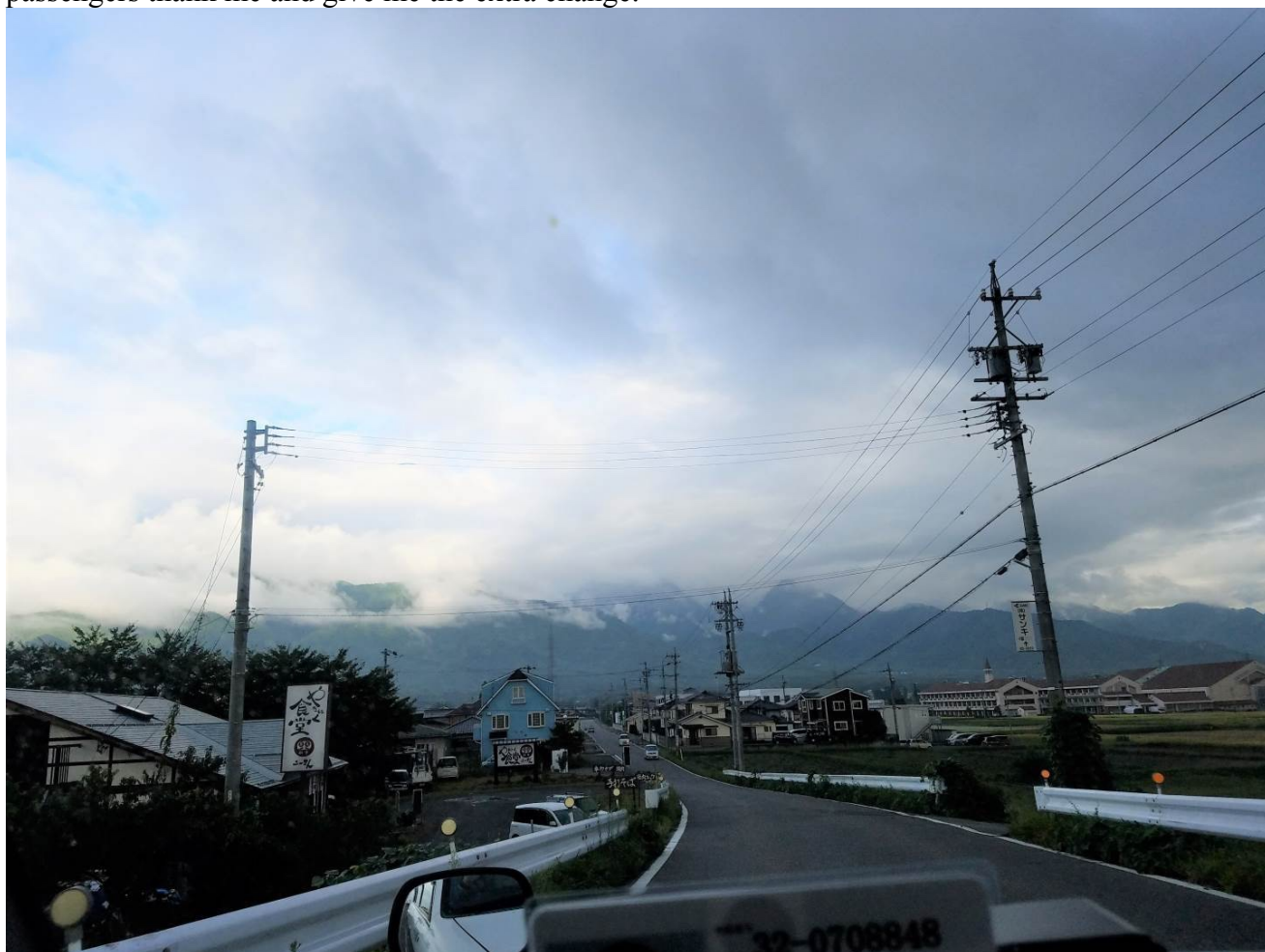
After photographing the shrine at leisure, I have come to the bus stop in front of the station and found many climbers already making a long line there. More climbers are getting out of the station and joining the line, which is becoming longer and longer. Although the bus has come on time, it is filled to capacity and I cannot get in.





The driver says, "An extra bus will come soon." But I don't want to wait for it because I think I'm wasting my time by then. At the time, I notice one taxi parking in front of the station. I propose to the three climbers before and after me, "Why don't we carpool?" Immediately, all of them nodded willingly and we come to talk with the taxi driver. Splitting the bill by the four of us, the fare won't differ much from that of the bus. Then, we have come to the starting point nonstop. Even more, the driver guides the area while driving. I'm sure we have made the right decision.

According to the driver, the weather was bad until yesterday, yet it is improving from today and the climbers would be increasing. The more we are approaching Nakabusa-onsen, the more we are able to smell the scent of sulfur. We have reached the destination much earlier than using the bus. The other passengers thank me and give me the extra change.



The parking lot of the starting point is nearly full and it is crowded with a lot of climbers. I part from the three passengers here. I do light warm-up exercises, put a climbing notification into a post, and then start climbing.

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To begin with, I'm heading for Mount Tsubakuro, the first peak of the mountain range. It is not selected in Japanese 100 Great Mountains, but very popular among the Northern Alps with its nick name "Queen of the Northern Alps".

The climbing route from the Nakabusa-Onsen is called "Kassen Ridge" (meaning "ridges like battles") and considered to be one of the three steepest courses in the Northern Alps. Surely steep, but well-maintained, and not so hard to climb thanks to benches placed regularly.

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After finishing about seventy percent of the route, you will arrive at a mountain hut named "Kassen Goya" (meaning "Hut for battles"), which works as a rest station for climbers. During the period between summer and autumn, watermelon is sold in the hut as speciality. It costs 800 yen for each slice, which is large enough to satisfy several persons. In many cases, goods are usually carried by professional carriers called Bokka (refer to Episode 003). But people at this mountain hut seems to use a cable to convey articles.





It takes about four hours to complete the tough "Kassen Ridge" and reach the lodge named Enzanso, standing on the ridge. This lodge can accommodate no less than 600 people and boasts its elaborate meals with cakes and horn concerts at nights. Enzanso is really popular to the level that it once got the first place in a questionnaire of a mountain magazine to ask climbers, "What mountain lodge do you want to stay?"



The summit of Mount Tsubakuro with an altitude of 2,763 meters is about 30 minutes from the lodge. Although you can enjoy the great view of the Northern Alps from Enzanso, many climbers leave their big backpacks behind and make a round trip to the peak with only minimal baggage. This mountain has rock surface of white granite and features strange shaped rocks. Among them, dolphin rocks are very popular because many people like to post them on SNS. You can climb up to the summit while savoring the artistic rocks created by the nature. At the narrow summit, you can take photographs with a small rock there. It is crowded with many climbers.

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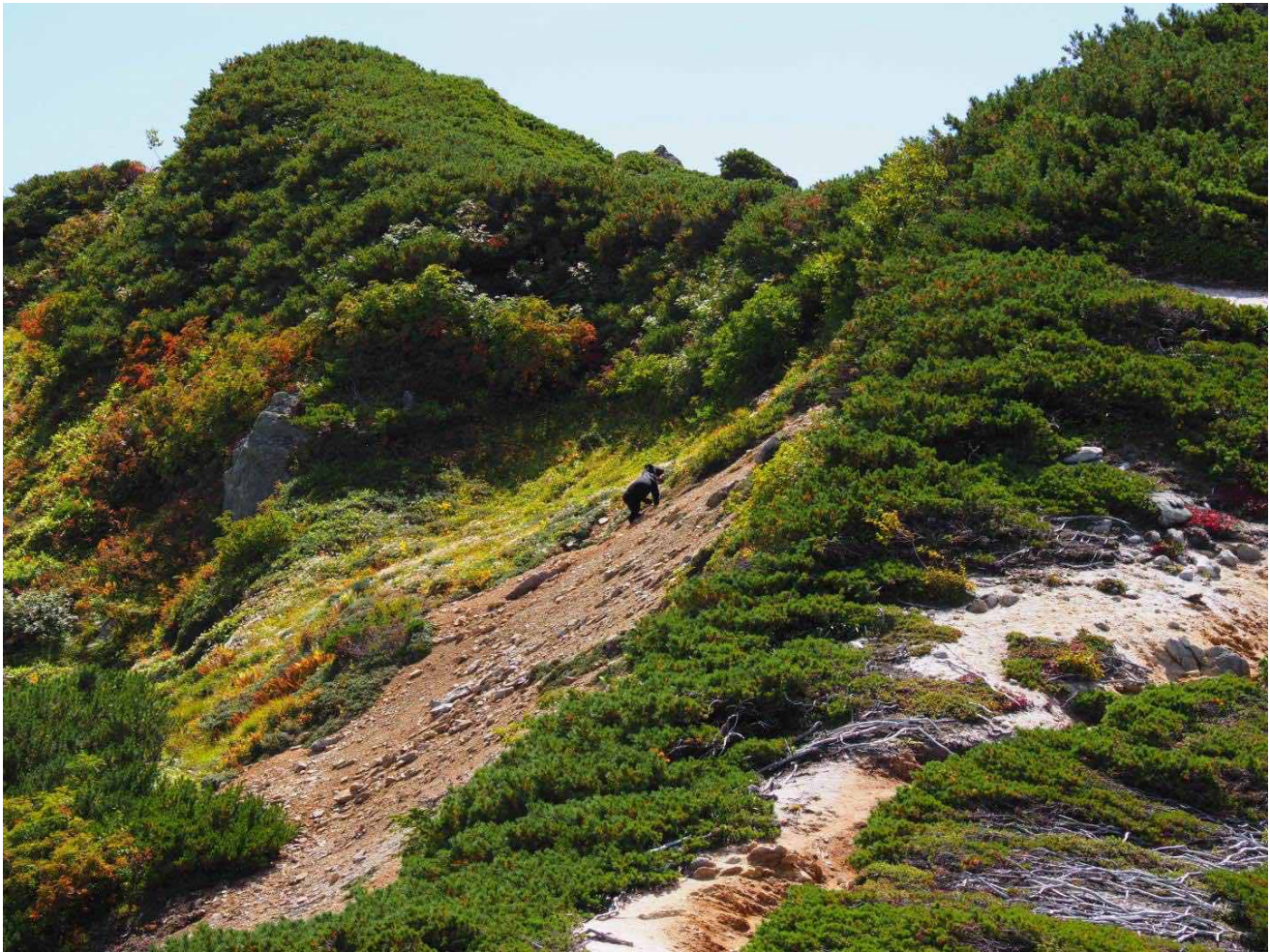




The mountain ridge that stretches from Enzanso to Mount Otensho and Mount Jonen is the best course to traverse while watching the mountains between Mount Yarigatake and Mount Okuhotaka on your right. Even though I saw many guests in Enzanso, only a few can be seen after I start walking on the mountain ridge. I guess the majority should climb down after staying at Enzanso or they make day trips.

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There is no steep slope from here, so you will be walking comfortably with the large panorama of the Northern Alps. After walking alone without meeting other climbers for a while, I see a baby rock ptarmigan. Its lovely appearance heals me, but I see a black object moving 30 meters ahead when I start walking again. Looking closer, it appears to be a little bear. Although I hastily take photographs, it disappears into bushes of trees. They say it is dangerous if you encounter a little bear because a parent bear should be nearby. I'm a little worried about that because it is just beside a mountain path. But since I bring a bear protective bell this time, I can attach it to my backpack just in case. I once nearly met a bear at Mount Hotaka (refer to Episode 007). Today I have a valuable experience to witness a bear for the first time.

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At a hut named Daitenso, I meet again the two climbers with whom I got on the taxi this morning. We have a dinner together and make a toast with beer. After the meal, I get outside and take photographs during the magic hour after the sunset. The scenery is so fantastic and beautiful that I don't feel cold. I just keep watching the sunset and the silhouette of Mount Yarigatake until it gets dark.





On the second day of my traverse, the fine weather still continues. I have climbed for about 10 minutes from the hut to the summit of Mount Otensho and savored the sunrise.



I expect today to be tough because the course time to the hut I will stay at tonight is about 8 hours. Since yesterday I have seen the line of the mountain ridge, from Mount Yarigatake to Mount Hotakadake. It has a challenging route called "Daikiretto Ridge", which I climbed several years ago. I remember well the overwhelming scale and the thrill and I'm emotionally moved by seeing the route as a ridge from the distance.

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After climbing down a gentle slope, I have reached Jonen Hut. Although this hut is located at the foot of Mount Jonen, a view of Mount Yarigatake is very fine. In front of the hut, the rubble field spread over and the tent site is separately designated. I take a rest on a bench beside the hut, replenishing carbohydrate. I need to recover stamina preparing for going up to the summit. Entering Jonen Hut and purchasing a pin badge of Mount Jonen, I resume climbing.

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Mount Jonen has a beautiful shape like a pyramid. Its slope is not so steep, but has a large difference of elevation. Also, since it is a scree-covered slope, in which large and small rocks and stones are scattered, I have to step carefully. I climb and climb on the winding mountain path, but the summit is seen so distantly that I feel as if it continued endlessly. I repeatedly take a rest on the way and make a wryly smile each time I pass each other with climbers. Spending nearly one and a half hours, I have reached the summit of Mount Jonen, one of the Japanese 100 Great Mountains with an altitude of 2,857 meters. In this traverse, I'm getting through several mountain peaks, but among them Mount Jonen is the only one belonging to the Japanese 100 Great Mountains.

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I originally planned to climb down from the summit of Mount Jonen to Chogatake Hut, where I will stay tonight. But it was too optimistic. I'm getting through the route lying in a forest zone, followed by steep uphill. The mountain ridge continues into the distance. I feel a little depressed, only by thinking I have to climb over there. By the time I arrive at Chogatake Hut, I have been seriously worn out.

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In order to reduce the food I'm carrying, I have decided to cook my own meals tonight. I boil some water on a table to prepare a cup noodle and simple food, when two mountain girls sitting next to me say, "Why don't you join us?" I'm surprised at the amount and variety of the food they have. Retort-packed *sukiyaki*, *udon* noodle, and French bread. We heat a canned ajillo with a gas burner and eat it with some bread dipped. Considering we are at the top of a mountain, they are unbelievably gorgeous dishes.





After the meal, we go out and rejoice to see the stars in the heavens. Although I could see stars last night, but they were seen less clearly than tonight because of the clouds. The sky is so serene that I can sometimes see even shooting stars by gazing. I have tried to take pictures of stars during this summer, but I haven't been able to see them due to bad weather conditions. Finally, I can see the beautiful stars. It is really cold under the starlit sky. Still, we invite a university student, who is climbing alone, and the four of us enjoy chatting while sitting around a table.



While I'm drinking coffee after the breakfast at Chogatake Hut, a deafening sound is suddenly roaring from outside. Then, the climbers in the hut are rushing out hastily. Following them, I'm beaten with gusts of wind and gravel. The wind pressure is caused by a helicopter coming here to lift loads.





We see the helicopter hovering just beside the hut and hanging loads. Then, a man with a helmet on the ground is exchanging the contents of the loads. He has taken the delivered things out and put the disused matters in very swiftly. In a moment, the helicopter starts flying away toward the morning sun. The scene like a movie has impressed me a lot.

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I guess some people knew the sound was of the helicopter, so they could run out immediately. I hear that only experienced pilots can handle the transport in mountains with the unstable air current and volatile climate. The more it gets altitude, the less hovering performance falls off. It is really risky. The transport by helicopter can carry up to about one ton per flight. Its expensive charter fee is the reason of high prices at mountain lodges.

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Today is the last day of this mountaineering. After passing the summit of Mount Chogatake, I have climbed down to a place named Tokusawaen. I walk on a flat road for about two hours to get to Kamikochi, where the return bus is leaving. I have some time until 15:00, the departure time, and buy souvenirs. Surprisingly, I see a person who carpooled with me on the first day. He seems to come from the Kansai (western Japan) region. We report our respective achievements and part from each other. I have had fine weather during the days of this mountaineering. I have seen memorable, marvelous sceneries and met good persons. I think it has become an unforgettable experience.





## Episode 009: Mount Utsukushi-ga-hara



Mount Utsukushi-ga-hara is located in the east of the Matsumoto Basin in Nagano Prefecture. With an altitude of about 2,000 meters, the volcanic plateau extends over about 5 kilometers from east to west. You can climb up to an altitude of nearly 2,000 meters by your own vehicle. Then, after walking on a mountain path, you will arrive at Mount Ogato, the highest peak. There are few differences in height of the route, so even beginners can walk with ease while enjoying magnificent scenery. It's like hiking rather than climbing. You can get to the summit surprisingly easily among Japanese 100 Great Mountains.

This time, on the day before visiting Mount Utsukushi-ga-hara, I leisurely saw the sights of Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture, known as a beautiful castle town with the scenery of the Northern Alps. Matsumoto is historic as a castle town and the cultural center of the Chushin area (the western area of Nagano Prefecture). Japanese modern atmospheres can be felt here and there in the town. Old-fashioned shops on Nawate Street. Warehouses on Nakamachi Street. This town is filled with rich cultures and histories.

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Matsumoto Castle, one of the symbols of Matsumoto City, is about 420 years old. The interior remains that of the Sengoku period and its Tenshu (the highest tower of the castle) is designated as a national treasure. Matsumoto Castle is equipped with lacquered boards and its black color is outstanding. The samurai named Ishikawa who built Matsumoto Castle was a loyal retainer of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. The black color of Matsumoto Castle is the proof of Ishikawa's loyalty to Hideyoshi because Hideyoshi's Osaka Castle is all in black.

In modern times, the vicinity of the castle is maintained as a park and the castle is lit up at nights. You can savor the atmosphere while walking there. Also, various events are held on the premises throughout the year.





After departing from Matsumoto by car and gaining the altitude in a short time, I have parked my vehicle beside Yamamoto Hut with an altitude of 1,940 meters. I have started walking toward the summit. It has a gentle uphill slope, but its difference in elevation is less than 100 meters. Radio towers to be a goal mark can be seen in the distance.



The cattle are put out to Mount Utsukushi-ga-hara from spring to autumn. Its pasture has been since the Meiji era (the latter half of the 19th century) and the grazing land spread tranquilly. After walking for about 20 minutes, I see six-meter-high "Utukushi-no-to" (literally meaning the Tower of Beauty), the symbol of Mount Utsukushi-ga-hara. The tower was originally built to give hikers the direction in a dense fog by ringing the bell. Surely, I believe its role would be definitely important because we cannot see anything in a dense fog.

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Passing the area named "Shio Kure ba" (literally meaning "place to get salt"), where the cattle are provided with salt, I have arrived at Ogato Hotel equipped with several radio towers. Beside the hotel, the stone monument indicating the summit of Mount Ogato with an altitude of 2,034 meters, the highest point of Mount Utsukushi-ga-hara, has been installed.





With a good weather, you can savor a 360-degree panorama that includes no less than 41 mountains out of Japanese 100 Great Mountains. By walking for about 20 minutes from Mount Ogato, you will reach Mount Ogahana, where you can overlook the Northern Alps and Matsumoto City. There are Stone Buddhas at the summit of Mount Ogahana and all of them are facing towards the direction of Mount Ontake. It is said that Mount Utsukushi-ga-hara has once been a place to worship Mount Ontake and these statues have been built based on the faith.



When I once stayed at a mountain hut in Northern Yatsugatake, I became familiar with a married couple climber. They said they ran a restaurant in Gunma Prefecture, so I visited it several months after finishing the mountaineering. We were happy to meet again and enjoyed talking about mountains. Mount Utsukushi-ga-hara was a topic at the time and they gave me information on Ogato Hotel. Despite the fact it is located at the summit, guests can stay at the hotel comfortably. It is so popular that I might not be able to make a reservation easily. Still, they recommended me to stay at the hotel.

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When we visited Mount Utsukushi-ga-hara last time, it was a day trip. But because I remember the recommendation, I have planned to stay at Ogato Hotel this time. Luckily, I have been able to make a reservation and experience the hotel. As they said, it is a wonderful hotel. The great view, delicious meals, and open-air baths. I can spend a blissful moment here. The hospitality of the staff is excellent, which makes me feel comfortable. It would be difficult to find another hotel like this with fantastic facilities and hospitality, among those located at an altitude of more than 2,000 meters.

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A tour to observe the starry sky is held after dinner. Participants are moved by bus to a square after a few minutes ride. A hotel staff explains some stars while turning the laser beam to them. Due to a bit cloudy sky, we cannot see the whole sky. But the explanation is interesting enough to entertain me. By the way, deer seems to be active in this area during the night. We see several appearing in the light of the bus while moving.

I can understand that many guests repeatedly stay at this hotel. It is so wonderful that I want to come again in another season.





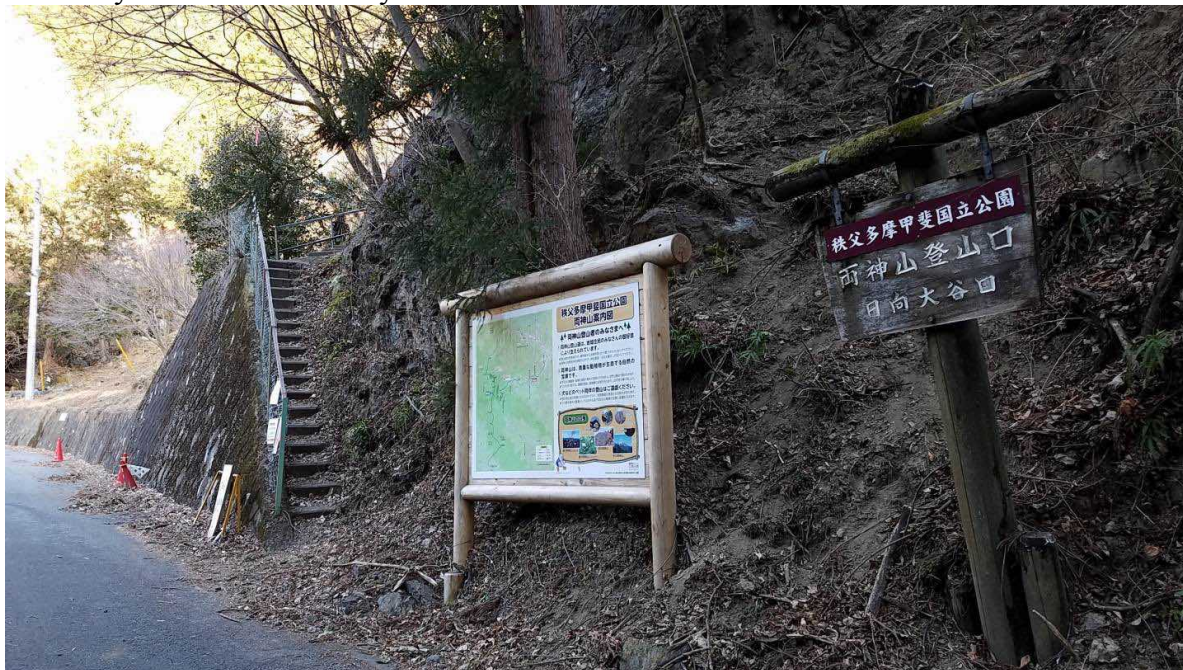
## Episode 010: Mount Ryokami



Mount Ryokami with an altitude of 1,723 meters is one of the Japanese 100 Great Mountains. It is located in the northeast of Chichibu Mountains in Saitama Prefecture. Many mountains of Chichibu are covered with forests, whereas Mount Ryokami is characteristic of serrated mountain and their ridge lines can be easily recognized even from a distance.

Since I'm climbing it in January (2018), I have checked the snow conditions through the Internet and SNS. It seems that it hasn't had a lot of snow. Still, I carry crampons with 6 blades just in case.

According to the weather forecast, it'll be sunny. Originally, I planned to depart during the night and start climbing from dawn, but I overslept and ended up leaving my house at 5:30 am. Until I have reached the starting point after about two-hour drive, it has been bright already totally. The mountain trail from Hinata Oya is called Omote Tozando (meaning Front Climbing Route) and very popular because you can come here by bus.





At first, I walk on a path running along a stream with cliffs. The slope is gentle. Not tough. After a while, I have found one of someone's gloves and put it on an easily noticeable place. Then, one man is coming back from ahead of me while searching something. I speak to and tell him about the glove. After that, we meet several times during the climbing and talk with each other.

The more I advance, the thicker the snow is getting. I don't need crampons, though. I'm climbing the slope, which is gradually getting steeper. Even after I have passed the sign indicating 0.8 kilometers to Kiyotaki Hut, a landmark, I have yet to get the destination. The feeling of the distance during the mountaineering might be unreliable.



Finally arriving at Kiyotaki Hut, I take a rest. This hut is currently unattended and not open for business. But it is partly open to the climbers as a shelter. Spacious and clean. A table with a sunshade and benches have been placed outside, where I can talk with other climbers.



Then, there are a few chain places. Not so dangerous, though. After about three hours and a half mountaineering, I can see the sign of the summit and I have conquered.

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The summit is narrow. A small stone shrine is standing. The 360-degree panorama without any obstacles. I can see the Southern Alps, Mount Yatsugatake, the Northern Alps in the distance. Their summits are covered with snow. Since there is no other climber, I'm taking pictures as many as I like before others come.

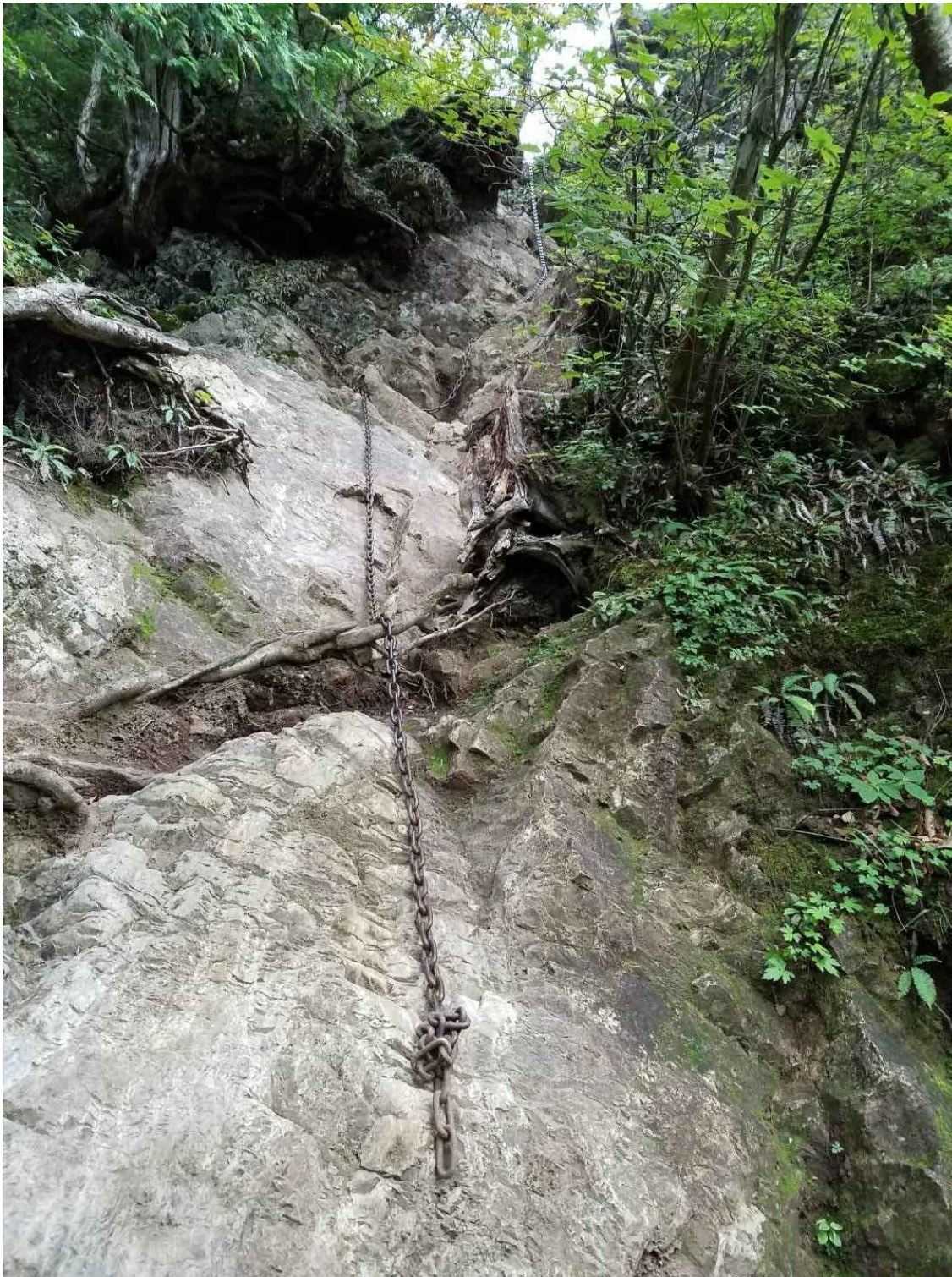


Besides the course of Hinata Oya in which I have climbed this time, there is another more thrilling route in which you can go over the Haccho Pass with about 30 chain places. In fact, I chose it last time. In the route, you can enjoy a series of rock climbing. Also, because you will walk on its mountain ridges, panoramic views will appear in each place. You can experience different types of mountaineering in one mountain.

The starting point which I have used this time has more than 500 meters difference in elevation. So, the course time is short. I definitely recommend the course to people who want to enjoy easy rock climbing. However, since steep ups and downs come one after another, you need the skills and physical fitness for rock climbing. Anyway, I can say it is a course for experts who want to enjoy thrill.

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Mount Ryokami is one of sacred mountains in Japan. Especially, it is called "Chichibu Three Mountains", along with Mount Mitumine and Mount Buko. About the origin of the name, people believe several legends. For example, because two gods (Izanagi and Izanami) are enshrined, it is called "Mount Ryokami" ("ryokami" literally meaning "two gods"). Because Yamato Takeru (a legendary prince in ancient Japan) saw the mountain for eight days during his expedition, it is originally named "Mount Yokami" ("yokami" literally meaning "see for eight days"). Or, because ancient people worshipped Ryujin (dragon-shaped gods), it is first called "Mount for Ryujin", then "Mount Ryokami" (the kanji characters of "ryokami" can also be read as "ryojin", very similar sound).

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Since ancient times, Mount Ryokami has been a mountain worshipped by people. Stone monuments and stone Buddhism images can still be seen along the climbing route from Hinata Oya, which is regarded as Omote Tozando (front approach). Especially in the Edo period (from the 17th to 19th centuries), it was considered a greatly sacred mountain in the Kanto region. So, many ascetic hermits seemed to visit here in the course of their Shugendo training. Women used to be forbidden to climb Mount Ryokami. It was in the 20th century when a woman climbed this mountain for the first time.

Mount Ryokami's Kenzoku (sacred animal serving for god) has been a mountain dog since ancient times. It is said that it actually indicates a Japanese wolf. So, at the Ryokami shrine, stone statues of wolves are placed instead of Koma-inu (statue of guard dogs at Shinto shrines). We can see the influence of the Mitumine Shrine in which wolves has been regarded as a messenger of a god.



After climbing for about two and a half hours from the starting point of Hinata Oya, I can see the main building of the Ryokami shrine, located at an altitude of 1,630 meters. In front of the Torii (Shinto gate), a pair of wolves are facing each other with a humorous look. This is the main building and the inner building is placed at the summit of Mount Ryokami, with an altitude of 1,723 meters.

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When I was reading a mountain magazine a few days after I had conquered Mount Ryokami, I found an article featuring the mountain. Written by a writer loving outdoor activities, the article introduced a restaurant that was famous for its Katsudon (a bowl of rice with a deep-fried pork cutlet) near the starting point. It was not an ordinary one, but a big cutlet called Waraji-katsu (meaning cutlets like straw sandals). The photos I saw on the Internet looked delicious and the dish got many favorable reviews. So, I had decided to revisit the foot of Mount Ryokami only to eat it.



The restaurant is so popular that it has a long line at weekends. But I can easily get in this time because I visit there in the evening of a weekday. Founded in 1960, it has a stylish appearance of age and inside the restaurant has a nostalgic at-home atmosphere. I see several autographs of celebrities, so it seems to be often introduced through the media.

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You can choose the number of cutlets: from 1 to 3. I choose 2, but the volume has surprised me. The cutlets are huge enough to stick out from the lid of the bowl. Its savory smell stimulates my appetite. The cutlets that has been just fried has a crispy texture and matches the sweet sauce. I have eaten it satisfactorily. At first, I'm worried about if I can eat up. But I can finish it more easily than expected. While I am eating, a person living nearby comes to pick up only cutlets he ordered. You can take out the cutlets at this restaurant.

I am satisfied enough to think it is worth coming to eat it. It is the restaurant where I can recommend you drop by after climbing down the mountain.





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The Japanese version of this article with more photographs can be read at the author's blog.

<http://hodakaclimber.blog.fc2.com>

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**This work was exclusively written as one of the made-in-Japan contents belonging to The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.**

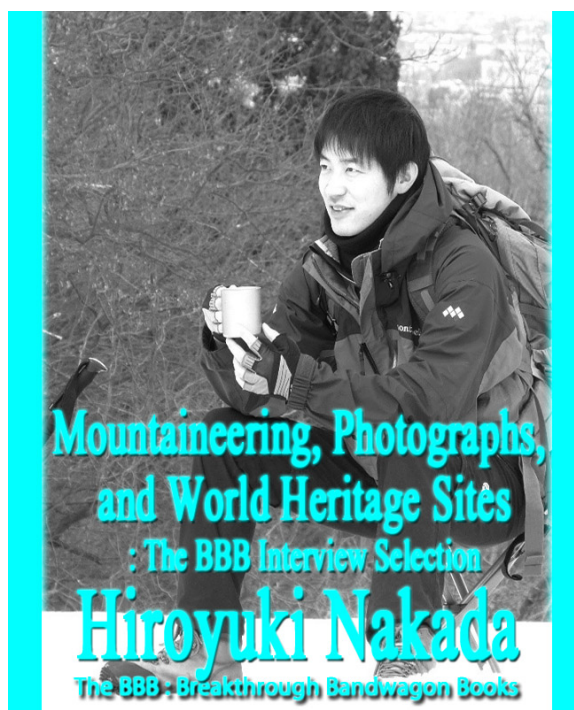
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## Hodaka Works List at The BBB



Japanese 100 Great Mountains Vol.1: Episode 001-005  
<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/japanese-100-great-mountains-vol1.html>



Mountaineering, Photographs, and World Heritage Sites (Under the name of Hiroyuki Nakada)  
<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/mountaineering-photographs-and-world-heritage-sites.html>

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