

Japanese 100 Great Mountains Vol.4: Episode 016-020



Originally written in Japanese and translated by Hodaka

Photographs by Hodaka

Cover design by Tanya

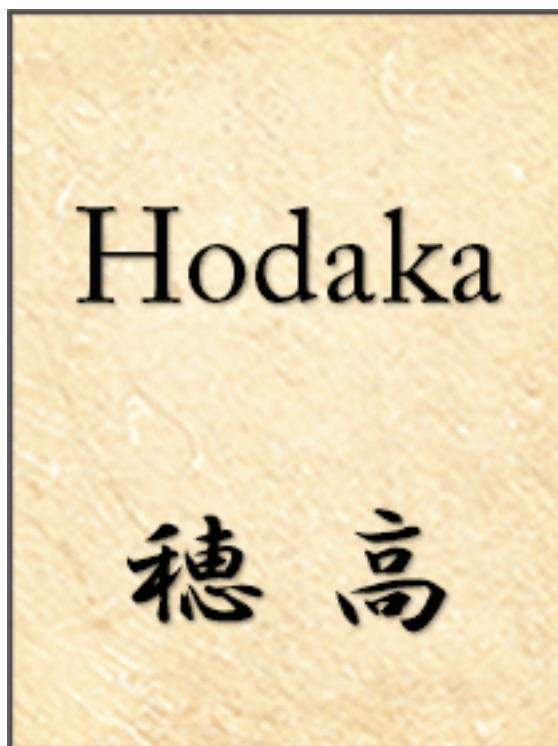
Copyright © 2019 Hodaka / The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-0-359-69763-2



The BBB website
<http://thebbb.net/>



Hodaka Author Page
<http://thebbb.net/cast/hodaka.html>

Episode 016: Mount Mizugaki



After reaching the summit of Mount Kinpu (refer to Episode 015), I have climbed down to Fujimidaira Hut, located in the middle of the mountains, at around 11:30 am. In this mountain route, you can climb Mount Mizugaki, another one of Japanese 100 Great Mountains, from the mountain hut.

Although Mount Mizugaki is standing near Mount Kinpu, the appearances are completely different from each other. Compared to the stately atmosphere of Mount Kinpu, the feature of Mount Mizugaki is its sharp rocks on the surface of the mountain.



While climbing down from Mount Kinpinu, I plan to buy a decent lunch at Fujimidaira Hut. Although I saw a manager in the morning, the hut is closed and he seems to be absent. I end up sitting a bench in front of the hut and eating some sweet rolls I have brought. I already walked so much only in the morning, I lie down on the bench to take a rest and try to alleviate physical fatigue by stretching.



It will take me about three and a half hours to reach the summit of Mount Mizugaki and get back to this hut. So I still have enough time. As I have drunk up the water I have brought, I replenish the canteen at a watering place a few minutes walk from the hut. Then, I have started climbing at around 12:30.



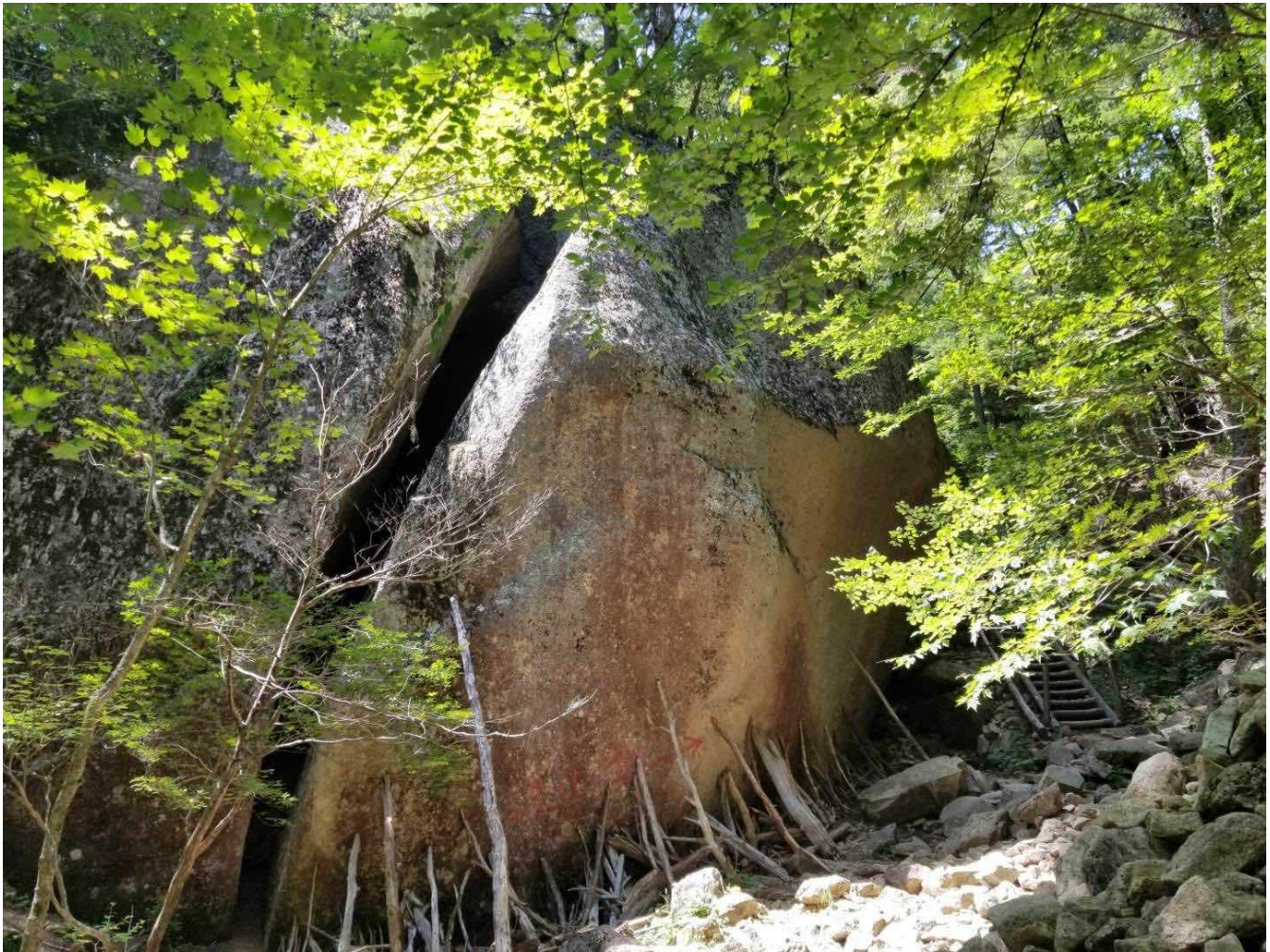
I pass each other with several pairs of mountaineers, who seem to have climbed the mountain since this morning and been descending. The sky was perfectly clear in the morning, but clouds look to be spreading. The forecast said the temperature would reach nearly 35 degrees Celsius, which means it's getting hotter in the afternoon. In a moment, I'm tempted to turn back now, go to a hot spring immediately, and postpone this mountaineering. Still, I have decided to climb up as far as possible, because the mountain is towering right in front of me.

Mount Mizugaki, with an altitude of 2,230 meters, is located in Yamanashi Prefecture. People have worshipped the mountain and ascetic hermits have climbed it to train themselves since ancient times. "Mizugaki", which was named in the Meiji era, indicates fences surrounding Shinto shrines in general. After leaving the mountain hut and climbing for a while, I have reached the ridge line overlooked by Mount Mizugaki. I can recognize some steep rocks at the higher altitude in the distance. They are the summit of Mount Mizugaki and upright rocks called "Dai Yasuri Iwa" (meaning "huge rock like a file"), which fascinate climbers. According to a guidebook, the course time would be about two hours. But it looks so tall that I don't think I can reach there by then. As Mount Mizugaki has been a place for ascetic hermits to train themselves, it gives me a strict impression that the mountain won't let people come near easily.



While walking on the ridge line, I expect uphill to continue. But I keep descending on a steep slope to a mountain stream. Jumping from stone to stone in the water, I am a bit disgusted by imagining myself ascending again as much as I have descended. The difference in elevation between here and the summit is about 400 meters.

After a while, I see a nearly 10-meter-tall huge rock. It is split in two and called "Momotaro Rock". (Momotaro or Peach Boy is an imaginary hero in a Japanese old tale, who is born from a peach.) It looks to be split exactly in half like a cut peach. Beneath it, some wooden sticks are placed as if they support the rock. In reality, they cannot support anything, of course. I understand the rock and wood sticks are liken to the peach of Momotaro. Then, I see another huge rock with wooden sticks as well. After climbing up the stairs beside "Momotaro Rock", steep rocky stretches are waiting for me.



I often exchange greetings with other climbers when we pass each other in the mountain. Usually, people climbing up can precede those who are descending through the same road, considering the risk of falling rocks. But it depends on the circumstances.

Among several parties I have met today, one group consists of elementary schoolchildren led by a teacher. I have just finished a tough uphill and wanted to take a rest to recover my breath. So, I ask them to go down first. While sitting beside the road, the dozens of students say, "Hello," to me one after another. I am so busy to reply to each of them that I cannot take enough rest. At the same time, I am impressed by watching them because the lightly dressed elementary schoolchildren have climbed a steep mountain with rocky stretches in such a high temperature.



After walking a little more, the "Dai Yasuri Iwa" standing upright towards the sky appears in my sight and I am overwhelmed by its hugeness. Before I know it, I have climbed up to these rocks I saw right after I started climbing. Due to the accumulated fatigue from the morning and the high temperature, I am really exhausted.



Taking a rest periodically, I keep climbing little by little while drinking water. I drink so quickly that I might empty all of the three 500 milliliters plastic bottles of water I have brought here. To make matters worse, I notice my blunder on the way. I seem to fail to cap one of the bottles tightly and the water has spilled out in my backpack. I know there will be no watering place in the rest of the course. I need to drink the remaining water very carefully.



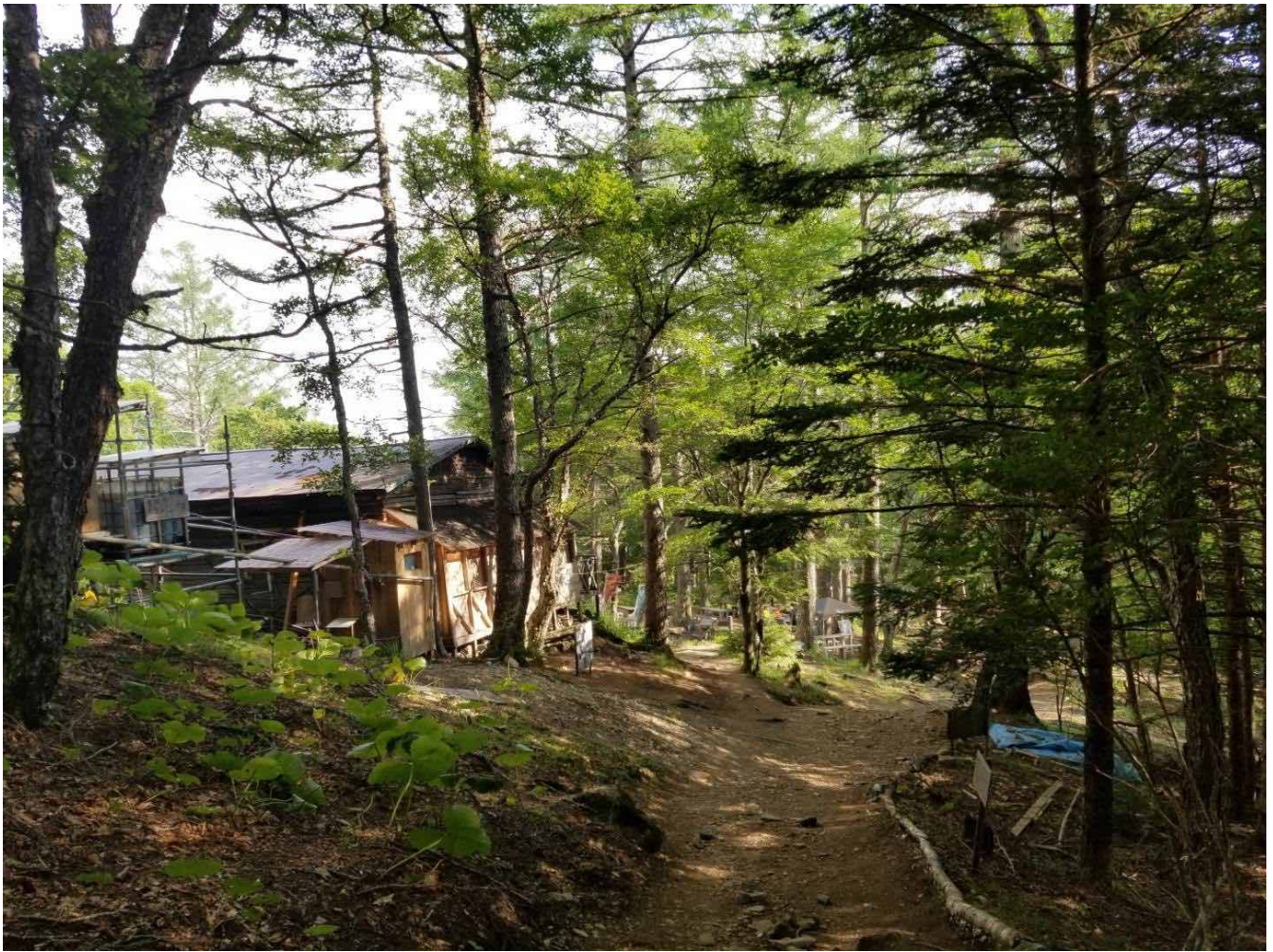
Spending a longer time than the course time, I have finally arrived at the summit. It is a rocky place like a mass of huge stones and spacious enough to enable tens of people to take a rest. Even so, the scenery sends a chill down my spine because the place is on a protruding rock and precipitous cliffs leads down to the ground.



Right after I have reached the summit, the whole sky has resounded with a loud crash of thunder. The weather looks threatening while I'm climbing. The sky in the direction of Mount Kinpu that I climbed in the morning is now covered with dark clouds. I can see the "Gojo-seki" at the summit of Mount Kinpu under the clouds. Considering I was at the summit in the morning, I am impressed by how far I have been moving since then.



The blue sky is spreading in the direction of Yatsugatake Mountains. Still, I might be caught in a sudden downpour. So, after taking photographs for a few minutes, I start climbing down immediately. Despite the accumulated fatigue, I have walked down to the mountain stream at a fast pace almost without a break. I'm relieved because I don't get rained on and still have water in a plastic bottle. After taking a rest on a bench beside the mountain stream, I have climbed up a little and come back to Fukimidaira Hut.



I am so exhausted that I lay down on a bench as if I jump onto it. Then, I have slept for about 30 minutes without moving my body. I saw other climbers at a nearby bench before the sleep, but no one is here when I wake up. After descending for about 40 minutes, I have reached the parking lot of Mizugaki Hut. It is a really tough experience for me to climb two mountains in one day in such an extremely hot day. But in the end, when I relax in a hot spring on my way home, I can feel a great sense of accomplishment and refreshment.



Episode 017: Mount Akagi



Mount Akagi is a volcano, which is towering at the northern edge of the Kanto Plain and one of the symbols of Gunma Prefecture. This time I have chosen the mountain to climb.

In fact, there is no mountain named Mount Akagi. It is a general term of the mountains around a caldera lake named Ohnuma. Mount Kurobi, with an altitude of 1,828 meters, is the highest and the main peak. Others are Mount Komagatake, Mount Jizodake, Mount Nabewari and so on.

This mountain is not far from Tokyo and has many free parking lots around it. So, it is readily accessible by car. Also, its mountain paths are well maintained and its course time is relatively short. Because of these factors, it is often regarded as one for beginners among the Japanese 100 Great Mountains.



Since it was cloudy before the dawn, honestly, I do not feel like climbing in such weather. However, the blue sky begins spreading after 6 am, I have decided to climb today. Although I do not have any plan this time, I consider which mountain to climb and have selected Mount Akagi, not far from my house and easy to access.

I exit the expressway at the Maebashi interchange and drive toward Mount Akagi through the busy streets with people commuting to their offices or schools. After a while, some red stuff appears in my sight. As I get closer, I recognize it a huge torii (sacred Shito gate). The road is gradually uphill beyond the torii and leads to the starting point for climbing.



I drop by a tourist information office on the way, where I can see the display of people and literature related to Mount Akagi. Many documents regarding the mountain are exhibited. I come to know for the first time that there is a test called Mount Akagi certificate examination. Mount Akagi is rich in nature and has lots of attractions such as history and culture, so I think it would be fun to learn them deeply. If you pass the third grade of the test, you can play a role as a guide in a bus running from a station to Mount Akagi.



I have arrived at a lake named Ohnuma, which is a foothold to climb Mount Akagi. In winter Ohnuma is crowded with people fishing *Hypomesus nipponensis* (or Wakasagi in Japanese), so it gathers lots of visitors throughout the year. This is my second time to climb Mount Akagi. Last time I only aimed to conquer the Mount Kurobi, the highest peak. This time I will traverse from Mount Komagatake to Mount Kurobi, making a round of the mountains.



I have parked my own vehicle in a parking lot, which can accommodate nearly 50 cars and is located near a starting point to climb Mount Komagatake. Maybe because of a weekday, only a few cars have been parked. Since the course time is short, I need not hurry and begin climbing at around 9:30 am, later than usual.

The mountain path starts right next to a roadway. At first, I am walking in a forest zone in the sunshine through the leaves of trees.



Iron stairs have been installed in the middle of the gentle slope. After climbing for 30 minutes, I get on a mountain ridge with a nice view. It is a spacious flat land like a park and I take pictures while having a rest. A pleasant blue sky is spreading above me and I feel an autumn atmosphere.



Climbing up a gentle uphill, I have reached the summit of Mount Komagatake in about 10 minutes. It is not spacious, but has a fine view. I can see well the Ohnuma Lake and the Akagi Shrine beside it far below me.



I meet several pairs of climbers who appear from the opposite direction. Only an hour has not yet passed since I began climbing. I feel I have just done a warm-up. Now, I am heading for the summit of Mount Kurobi, the highest peak of Mount Akagi.



Descending a gentle slope from Mount Komagatake, I have arrived at an open mountain pass. Mount Kurobi is towering right in front of me. The sign says, "To the summit: 800 meters, altitude difference: 220 meters."

Beyond that point, there is an uphill slope with well-maintained wooden stairs. I think it is easy to climb and I can get it over soon. But the steep slope makes me take so long.



When I finally see a sign indicating "To the summit: 5 minutes", I'm relieved.

Then, after a while, an open space with a Torii (sacred Shinto gate) appears. The stone monument for a god of Mount Kurobi is enshrined there. The path is joined by another route from Mount Kurobi starting point. The road leads to the top of Mount Akagi.

The summit is a flat land surrounded by trees, where even a group of many people can take a rest. The view is not good, but I see a sign, saying, "Scenic Spot: Two minutes from here."



It is an open space overlooking towns on the ground, which is perfect for climbers to have a meal. Although it is still before noon, I take a rest leisurely while eating rice balls I bought at a convenience store.



As I am climbing down from the summit, tough rocky stretches continue. If you climb up the route, it would be a hard mountaineering. In fact, not a few people are climbing up from Mount Kurobi starting point and they look fairly exhausted.

While descending, Akagi Shrine is approaching. Getting to a roadway, I have finished climbing down. Only about three hours have passed since the start of climbing. I'm a bit dissatisfied, but it is also an enjoyable experience because I could climb at ease despite the late start.



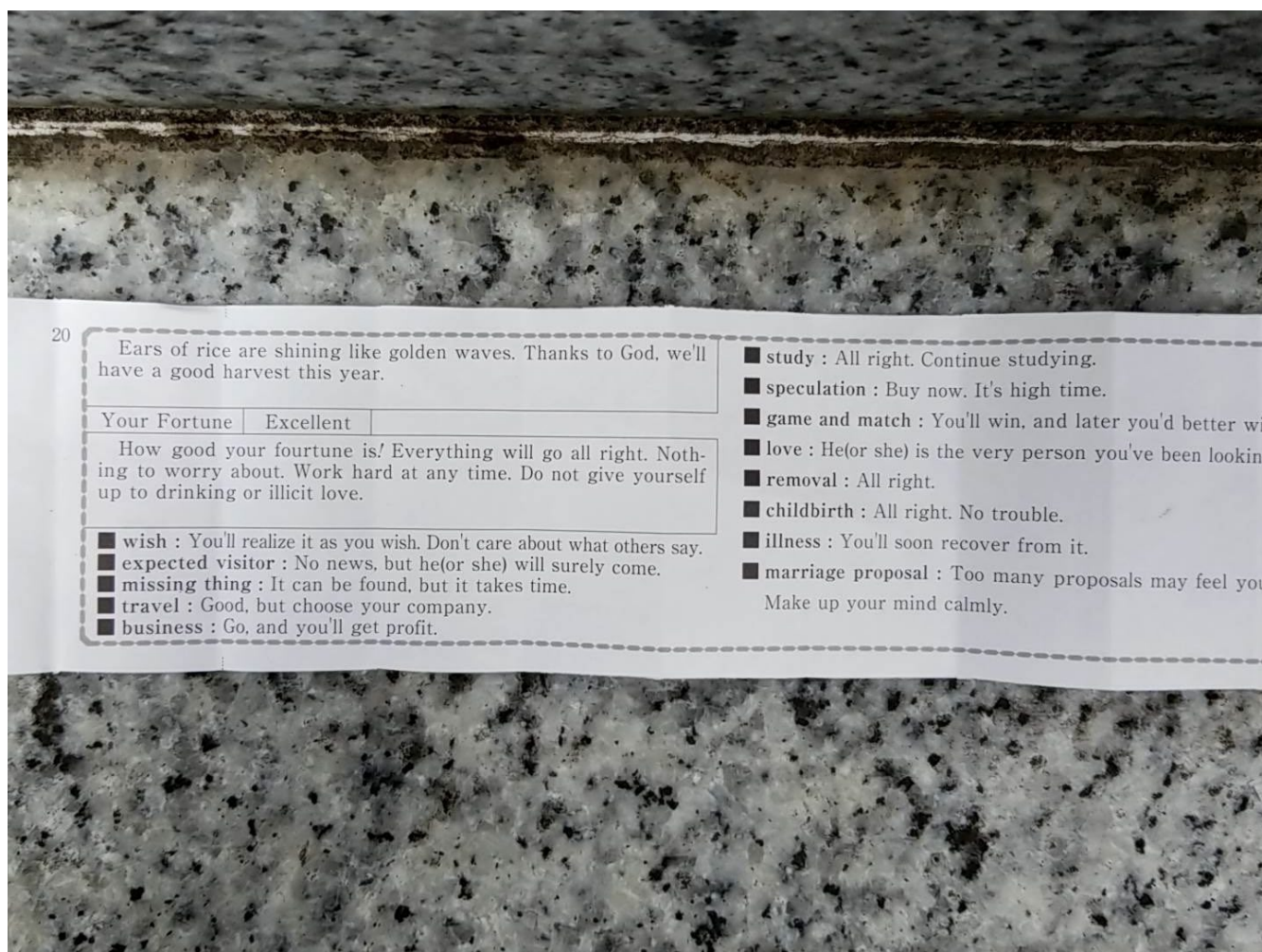
While walking on the roadway for about twenty minutes, I can get back to the parking lot where I parked my own vehicle. In the middle of that, Akagi Shrine, which I could see from the summit, is standing on the peninsula part of Lake Ohnuma.

This Shinto shrine is known to help women's wishes such as finding an ideal lover, matchmaking, and an easy delivery of a baby. It is said that you can get a beautiful daughter by praying to this god. So, we can say it is a really powerful spiritual spot for women. Since it is a good opportunity, I have decided to drop by there.



I walk on a bridge with vivid red railings and clap my hands, when carps are approaching me. Beyond the bridge and a Torii (sacred Shinto gate), the road stretches along the lakeside. After walking for a while, the splendid main building of Akagi Shrine appears.

I pray to the god and move to a shop area, where many adorable lucky charms for women are sold. At the entrance, Omikuji (fortunetelling slip) written in both English and Japanese is available. I pay 100 yen, draw one Omikuji, and get "Daickichi" (meaning "the greatest luck"). I have drawn Omikuji in English for the first time in my life. I guess many foreigners must visit here very often.



As I am leaving Akagi Shrine, it starts drizzling. The rain is getting gradually harder. At the time, I find a souvenir shop and enter it to take shelter from the rain. I buy a pin badge of Mount Akagi there and get back to my own vehicle.



This time I have climbed Mount Akagi without enough research. There are many places around Mount Akagi, where you can enjoy sightseeing and leisure besides Mount Kurobi I have conquered this time. So, I want to come back here again in the autumn season or the snowy season.

Episode 018: Mount Kaikoma



Mount Kaikoma (or Kai-Komagatake in Japanese) and Mount Senjo (or Senjogatake) are major mountains among the Southern Alps (or Akaishi Mountains). They have an altitude of around 3,000 meters and you can climb both mountains from Kitazawa Pass for two days and one night. The two mountains give us the opposite impressions. The former is said to be a manly mountain covered with granite. The latter is a famous peak of flowers, praised as the queen of the Southern Alps. I once climbed Mount Kaikoma on a day trip. This time I have planned to climb the two mountains in a row by staying in a tent at night. Naturally, if you carry your tent, backpacks will be heavier. Still, it is a great advantage to spend in my own way without any interference from others. Incidentally, staying at a mountain hut costs you about 8,000 yen (one night stay including two meals) on average, whereas sleeping in a tent about 500 yen. So, using a tent is economically attractive. Of course, staying at a mountain hut has its own appeal. I use both options, depending on the situation.



Approaching the Southern Alps by your own vehicle is restricted, so you have to use public transportation on the way. I spent the last night in my car at a rest area on a highway and arrived at Ashiyasu, where I parked my car, at around 5 am.

Originally, I planned to take a bus, departing at 5:30, to head for Hirogawara, the next destination. But you can otherwise get on a large taxi, if you have the required number of fellow passengers. I get out of the car after the preparation, when a taxi driver speaks to me and we, the party of eight passengers, can leave earlier than the bus.

The driver guides us and sometimes stops the taxi for us to take pictures of beautiful sceneries. After about 40-minute drive, we have reached Hirogawara. If you climb Mount Kita (or Kitadake), the second tallest mountain in Japan, this is your starting point. To head for Mount Kaikoma, I have to take another bus here. Because of a weekday schedule, I have more than one and a half hours until the departure. In a spacious waiting room, I kill time by reading some book or by seeing a map.



The bus, whose seats are almost all occupied, has departed at 8:00 am. While moving by bus, Mount Kaikoma can be seen beautifully under fine weather. We have arrived at Kitazawa Pass in 25 minutes. I need another about 10-minute walk from here to the place where I will stay in a tent tonight. One man is walking ahead of me in the same direction and I speak to him. The places where we will stay are different, but we keep talking while walking because our routes overlap.



We have reached the Chobe Hut, where I will set up my tent. The man says he will stay at a mountain hut up ahead, so we have parted from each other. I have signed in at the reception and walk to the tent site. To my surprise, I see no other tent yet, although the field is spacious enough to accommodate 100 tents.

While I am assembling the tent, a few groups of climbers come and start setting up their tents a bit far from mine. After finishing the preparation, I leave unnecessary items behind and depart at around 9:30 am. The weather is fine. My backpack is light. Today's climbing would be comfortable.



At first, I am walking along the river like trekking, when a beautiful emerald green pond appears. It is so clear that I am reminded of the natural water of the Southern Alps.

After climbing for about 30 minutes, I see a mountain hut and find the man, whom I talked with earlier, assembling a tent. We greet each other again.

The rocky slope called Gohro continues, where I can appreciate the unique scenery.



The view reminds me of the previous visit when I get through this place in reverse route. As I am climbing for a while, Mount Kaikoma is appearing diagonally to the left. The white peak is contrasted with the blue sky in the background.

I have arrived at Sensui Pass. Preparing for the steep uphill from here, I take plenty of rest.



With almost no other climbers, I can enjoy the quiet climbing. I'm ascending a steep uphill while taking periodic breaks. Another climber has overtaken me in the middle.

After walking from Sensui Pass for about one hour and forty-five minutes, I have reached a large space with a fine view, which is called Mount Komatsu (or Komatsu-mine in Japanese).

Although a lot of clouds are coming out, I can still see Mount Fuji and Mount Kita (or Kitadake), let alone Mount Kaikoma. The appearance of Mount Kaikoma, towering right in front of me, is gorgeous like a pyramid. The summit is outstandingly white, to the level that I could mistake it for a snow mountain even in summer.



While I'm taking a rest, the man, who set up a tent near the mountain hut earlier, appears and we greet each other again. At the time, another climber, who has been taking a rest before I come here, kindly gives us the information about which mountain around us is what. He seems to live at the foot of the mountain and climb this mountain today for the first time in 40 years.

The peak of Mount Kaikoma looks close, but I remember the steeper uphill starts from here and it was really a tough experience when I once climbed it in the past.

After walking for a while, the mountain path diverges into two routes: the one in which we have to climb the rock nearly vertically, and the other in which we have to make a detour with more safety.



I prefer rock climbing and have chosen the former option as I did in the past.

At first glance, the precipitous cliff looks very dangerous. But thanks to many firm spots to put my hands and feet on, I can enjoy clambering up with no fear, but with moderate excitement.

I have finished conquering the nearly vertical rocks, a gentler rocky stretch expands. Since the middle of that, the surface of the mountain has been covered with white sands. The ground around this area is fragile enough to crumble. Although it is hard to climb, I am ascending step by step while looking for red paints and pink tapes, the marks of this route.



About four and a half hours have passed since I left the tent site. I have finally arrived at the summit of Mount Kaikoma, with an altitude of 2,967 meters. The man, whom I have already met several times today, is sitting there to rest and we naturally smile at each other.

The sky is about to be covered with clouds. Still, the view from this summit is perfect, as the late Kyuya Fukada (a legendary climber who designated "Japanese 100 Great Mountains") once wrote in his book that the view from the summit of Mount Kaikoma would be the most beautiful among the Alps.

Especially, it is wonderful that you can see Mount Fuji, the tallest mountain in Japan, and Mount Kita, the second highest, at a time. Also, I find a stone shrine near the summit, because this mountain has been worshipped by people.



I have decided to climb down while taking a detour to enjoy walking slowly on the sandy soil part. I drop by a place called Marishiten at a lower altitude, where stone monuments, Buddha statues, and swords have been enshrined. Originally, Marishiten is a guardian of Buddhism. But in some cases, a summit itself is called Marishiten in a worshipped mountain. I think I could catch up with the man who departed a bit earlier. But due to the slippery sandy path, I cannot shorten the distance between us nor meet him again.



Then, I have finally come back to Mount Komatsu. No other climber is around here and I lay down on the ground to take a rest. I can soon come back from here to the tent site. But I have chosen another route via Kitazawa Pass, not the same path.

Getting through Mount Futago with a simple mountaintop sign, I am rapidly descending. Since a huge typhoon passed yesterday, I find split trees and fallen huge trees blocking the mountain path. The traces of the damage testify to the hugeness of the typhoon.



I am climbing down alone without meeting anyone else. Although it is gradually getting dark, I'm not worrying that I might get lost. At around 17:40, I have come back safely to Kitazawa Pass, where the bus arrived in the morning.

I drop by the mountain hut before the bus stop and find pin badges being sold there. I only purchase the pin badge of Mount Kaikoma, buy a can of highball at a vending machine outside, and get back to the tent site where it is a 10-minute walk from there.



About five tents have been set away from mine in the site and other climbers are cooking their own meals. First, I drink up the highball. Then, I start cooking with the sense of achievement. It is simple, because I just boil water and pour it onto dry food. With the hot water, I prepare instant noodles as well. Since it gets dark completely, I eat the food with the headlight on. There is no wind because it is not a summit. I can spend a comfortable time without feeling cold.



Due to bad connection, I can not use my smartphone but can barely listen to the radio. I have nothing to do after the meal, so I lay down to rest myself. There is no sound except the river flowing right beside the site. Feeling I am in the nature, I am falling asleep. During the night, I wake up several times and look outside. But It is so cloudy that I have to give up shooting the stars this time.



The local climber whom I met at Mount Komatsu said, "The weather seems to be getting bad by tomorrow". As he predicted, it starts raining during the night. I think I will decide whether to climb Mount Senjo or not, depending on the weather in the morning, and fall asleep anyway.

When I wake up, it is getting brighter outside. I am surprised that my tent has been already flooded. Last night I spread a waterproof seat beneath the tent, but my baggage except the mat, including clothes and books put around me, have gotten soaked. To make matters worse, the peg of the fly seat fell out and the front part of the tent was collapsed. The trekking shoes, which I put there, have also been drenched. It is the worst situation for me.



I first put away the wet things by squeezing and packing them in a plastic bag. Then, I put on sandals and walk to a place where climbers can cook for themselves under the roof.

I see the man who passed me in the mountain yesterday. While having a conversation like "What will you do today?" with each other, we have a meal together. This man in his 50s seems to come from Gunma Prefecture. We enjoy talking about the topics regarding mountains. When I tell him that I climbed Mount Akagi in Gunma last week, he shows me some photographs of Mount Akagi he took in a snowy day.

The rain is getting stronger and weaker by turns, but I think the weather won't improve today. I would be able to climb Mount Senjo even in a rainy day, considering the mountain is relatively easy to climb. But I have decided to give up climbing this time, because I cannot appreciate the scenery under such bad weather.



I strike the tent in the rain and walk with the man to the bus stop when the rain is getting weaker. Even with the sandals, I don't have any problem because I only have to move to the bus stop. The man will take a bus toward the opposite direction of Hirogawara, my destination. So, we have parted from each other.

I am disappointed with many things when I get rained on while staying in a tent. But the encounter with the man reminds me of the appeal of mountaineering.



Episode 019: Mount Nasu



Recently, I have wanted to go to a mountain during the autumn foliage season. After getting the information that the scarlet-tinged leaves in Mount Nasu (or Nasu-dake in Japanese) would be spectacular, I have decided to visit it in the middle of October (2018). The sightseeing spots are heavily crowded at this time of the year. So, I have planned to depart on the night before a weekday, get to the foot of the mountain, and start climbing at dawn.

I get off the Tohoku Expressway in the middle of the night and am driving through the darkness of Nasu District, Tochigi Prefecture. While gaining the altitude for the starting point, I see the sign saying “Holy Place for Lovers”. It is an observatory deck overlooking the view of the night town. As the name indicates, several couples are there, despite the late hour of 2 am.

The moon is floating low in the sky, the countless stars are blinking right above us, and the scenery of the night town can be seen in the distance. This is the perfect location. Sometimes I can even see shooting stars while looking up at the sky. As it is getting too cold, I head for the starting point called "Touge no chaya" (meaning "Teahouse at Pass"), which is a few minutes drive from the observation deck.



The parking lot is spacious enough to accommodate more than 150 automobiles. I hear it will be almost full on the night before a holiday. Despite a weekday, more vehicles than expected have been parked today. Some people are taking pictures. Others are watching the starry sky, wrapped in a blanket on a chair outside. They are spending time as they like.

I turn off the engine, open a window, and photograph the stars from inside my car. I don't feel cold so much.



After that, I lay down in a sleeping bag. Although I want to start at around 4 am, the morning air is too cold for me to get out of the car until almost 5. It is still dark and I cannot recognize where the mountain path is. But I find other climbers walking with their headlights on and start climbing while counting on it.



As I am walking on a dark road lit by my headlights, I can see the beautiful gradation in the sky toward the town behind me. It is gradually getting brighter, so I can recognize the shape of the mountain. Mount Nasu, an active volcano, has rugged rock surfaces, which makes me feel as if I were standing on another planet.

After ascending a gentle slope for a while, I see the eastern sky getting much brighter. Since I hope to see the sunrise from a mountain hut ahead, I walk at a quicker pace and get there about 50 minutes after I started climbing.

It is the best location to see the sunrise. When looking back, the sunrise is so heavenly that I am moved to tears. Struck with awe by the sunrise in the silence, I surely feel the magnificence of the great nature.



The mountain path diverges into opposite directions, each of which leads to a different mountain. Mount Nasu is a generic term for Mount Sanbonyari (1,917 meters), Mount Asahi (1,896 meters), Mount Chausu (1,915 meters), etc. This time I intend to conquer all the three mountains.

First of all, I will head for Mount Chausu. Climbers can reach the 8th station of Mount Chausu by ropeway. Once it is available, the mountain will be heavily crowded. So, I want to reach the summit before the ropeway starts operating.

Mount Chausu is the mountain that the late Junko Tabei, the first female mountaineer who conquered Mount Everest, climbed for the first time in her life. According to the article about her I once read, it was the reason why she was fascinated by mountaineering. So, I have wanted to climb it.

Other climbers seem to head for other mountains, so I am the only one who is climbing Mount Chausu. As I am ascending the roughly rocky stretches, I begin sensing the smell of sulfur, which reminds me that this mountain is an active volcano. The scenery without anyone else gives me the feeling like exploring an unknown planet.



You can walk around the crater near the summit of Mount Chausu. At a place with a mountaintop sign, I see a shrine and Torii (sacred Shinto gate), which reminds me that this mountain has been worshipped by people since the ancient times. I climb up the tallest rock in the summit and look around the 360-degree magnificent view. Especially, the sea of clouds among the mountains is picturesque.



Although it is my first attempt, I carry a wearable camera this time. I have long been interested in it, because I could take wide and impressive pictures from a higher place with its selfie stick. I can actually take pictures of the vast sceneries with its fish-eye lens. It is the pleasure that I could not get from pictures shot with usual lenses.



I plan to head for Ubagadaira, which is said to be worth seeing its scarlet-tinged leaves, after leaving Mount Chausu. On the way, I drop by the mountain top station of the ropeway. If not, I might be in trouble later today because there is no restroom in Mount Nasu except the staring point and the mountaintop station. The ropeway has yet to start operating, so the station is deserted.



I walk about 40 minutes and get to Ubagadaira. Unfortunately, almost all the leaves have already fallen and their naked branches are exposed. The trees near the foot of the mountain were beautifully red, though. I heard they were at their best at the beginning of October. I'm surprised by how soon the season in the mountain has passed.

When I turn back and reach the turning point named Ushigakibo, I see the steam gushing out from the hillside of Mount Chausu. I knew the mountain is still active as a volcano. It is right above the mountain trail and I hear a roaring sound while passing the area. Among the several fumaroles, this place's is the most overwhelming and makes me stricken with awe.



Then, I will head for Mount Asahi and Mount Sanbonyari, both of which are said to be no longer active. I get back to the mountain hut, where I saw the sunrise this morning, and am climbing up the steep rocky stretches peculiar to volcanoes in the opposite direction.

Thanks to railings and chains installed in some dangerous places, a wide range of age groups are climbing. At a place called "Asahi no kata" (literally meaning "shoulder of the morning sun"), the course forks off in two directions: for Mount Asahi and for Mount Sanbonyari.



I have decided to first climb Mount Asahi, the closer one. I can recognize some people are nearing its sharply pointed silhouette of the peak. The view from the summit is superb and I can see the parking lot below filled to capacity despite a weekday. As expected, many people seem to come here to appreciate autumn leaves regardless of what day of the week it is.



After fully enjoying the scenery from the summit of Mount Asahi, I get back to "Asahi no kata" and head for Mount Sanbonyari with an altitude of 1,917 meters, the highest peak among Mount Nasu. The name "Sanbonyari" (literally meaning "three spears") derives from the fact that in the Edo era three clans whose boundary was this mountain regularly put up their spears on the summit. Judging from the stretching gentle slope, I think the summit should not be so far. But I have to walk longer than expected. Unlike the volcanic rocky stretch I have climbed earlier today, I am walking through a forest zone, whose road is so muddy by melted frost that I have trouble in walking.

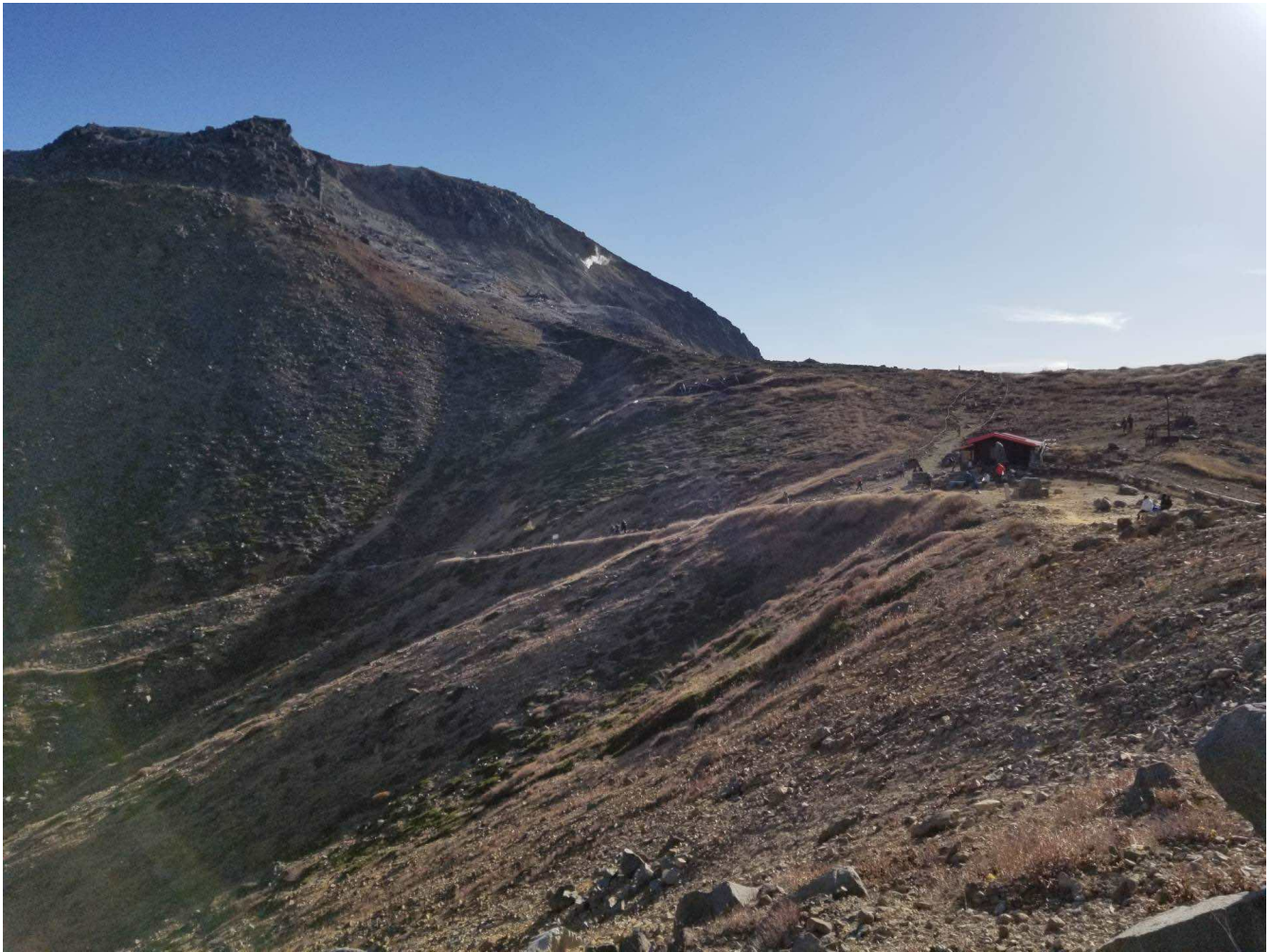


Probably because the summit is still far, I don't see many others around here. After more than one-hour walk from "Asahi no kata", I have finally arrived the summit. Although several pairs of climbers are there, it is flat and spacious enough for me to take a good rest. The scarlet-tinged leaves near the foot of the mountain is overwhelmingly beautiful and in the north direction I can even see windmills for wind power generation at Lake Inawashiro.



I have climbed down Mount Sanbonyari and returned to the first mountain hut, which is bustling with an increasing number of climbers. The slope connecting the hut and the parking lot is not steep, so one climber in light clothing even brings his dog here.

When I climbed up this morning, it was too dark to see the scenery around me. But now I can see autumn leaves, which still remain in this area and look beautiful. Even if you do not climb to the summit, it would be worth coming here to enjoy walking around, getting on a ropeway, and appreciating the autumn leaves of Mount Nasu.



This area is known as a hot spring resort. Of course, I drop by one of the "onsen" (hot springs) after mountaineering.

On the way, I find a place named "Sessho-seki" (literally meaning "killing stone") and stop in. Toxic gas spurts out around the stone, which has been known to kill birds and animals if they approach it. When the amount of the gas is increasing, it will be prohibited to enter the area.

Also, I become interested in "Sentai Jizo" (meaning "thousand stone statues of Buddhist monks") on the same premises. Matsuo Basho (the most famous poet in the Edo era) once visited here and wrote about this place in his travel record titled "Oku no Hosomichi" (meaning "the Narrow Road to the Deep North"). I find a stone monument on which Basho's Haiku (Japanese poetry) is inscribed.



Then, I enter the natural hot spring called "Shika no yu" (literally meaning "hot spring for deer"). It is a historical hot spring which was opened in the 7th century and the name derives from the fact that a hunter saw a deer healing its body wounded by an arrow in it.

The weathered wooden building is tasteful and milky white opaque hot water seems to be good for skin. Although I didn't know it, guests are not allowed to use a soap and shampoo in this facility because this sulfuric hot water does not easily froth and they make the floor slippery. So, I wash my body only with the hot water before bathing. By soaking my body in the hot water at a high temperature, I feel comfortable and relax.

During the previous mountaineering (refer to Episode 018), I had to climb down the mountain in the rain. This time I am favored with fine weather and fully enjoy a pleasant mountaineering.



Episode 020: Mount Asama



Mount Asama is an active volcano that has repeatedly erupted. The latest eruption occurred in June, 2015. The Meteorological Agency sets Volcanic Alert Levels and it affects which part of a mountain climbers are allowed to enter.

In the summer of 2018, this level was changed from Level 2 to Level 1 (the lowest level of danger), for the first time in 3 years. It enables us to climb to the summit of Mount Maekake (altitude 2,524 meters), which is within 1 kilometer of the summit of Mount Asama. If I miss this opportunity, I'm not sure when I can climb an active volcano like Mount Asama. So I have decided to climb it while the alert remains Level 1.



Mount Asama is located on the border between Nagano and Gunma Prefectures and you can go there from Tokyo and back in a day. In the morning twilight, I drive to Kurumasaka Pass, the starting point. The forecast says it will be sunny, but I'm worried about the weather because the sky is covered with clouds.

After entering the mountain path, the surroundings are filled with fog. If I cannot take photographs, I think I should stop today's mountaineering. However, I am almost there and head for the starting point anyway.



Ascending hairpin curves for a while, I am surprised because I suddenly get through the fog and see the sea of clouds spreading below me. It is so fascinating that I stop my vehicle and am absorbed in taking photographs.

Then, I drive to the parking lot of the Takamine Plateau Hotel, which commands a fine view. While the sun is rising, I enjoy seeing the color of the sea of clouds changing gradually.



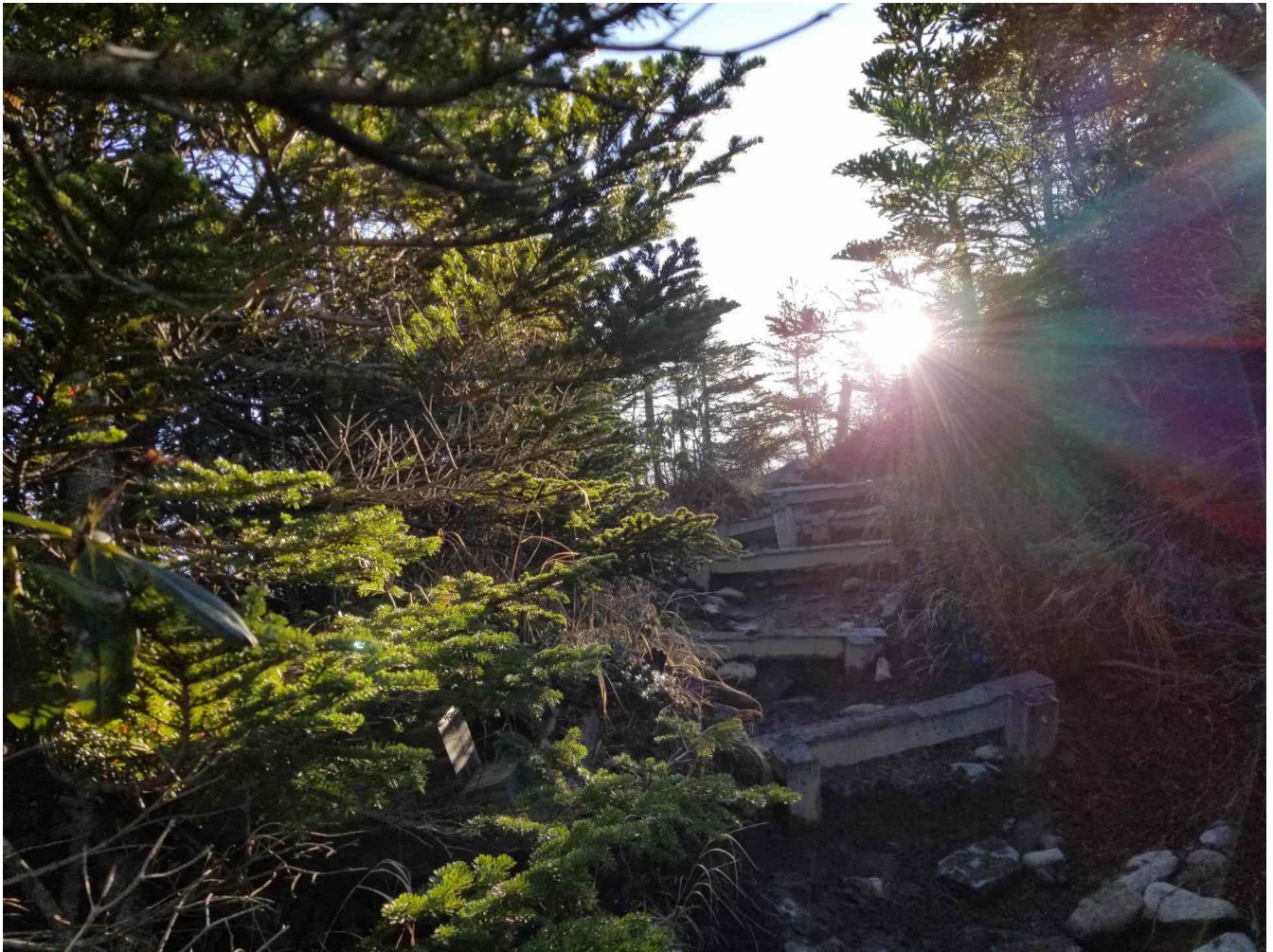
Kurumasaka Pass can be seen right in front of me. Leaving my vehicle at a spacious parking lot behind the visitor center, I head for the starting point. As the sign indicates, it is located on the border between Gunma and Nagano prefectures. A postbox to submit a climbing notification has been installed in this small square. The information about Volcanic Alert Levels (Level 1 to Level 3) is also showed on a signboard.

Level 1 is the regulation within a radius of 500 meters from the crater and allows us to climb up close to the crater. Level 2 is the regulation within a radius of 2 kilometers from the crater and allows us to climb up to the vicinity of the crater. Level 3 is the regulation within a radius of 4 kilometers from the crater and bans us from entering the mountain.



According to the sign, the current level is Level 1, which allows us to climb up to Mount Maekake, close to the summit of Mount Asama. If it is raised to Level 2, climbers will not be allowed to climb Mount Maekake. In the case, it seems to common for mountaineers to climb Mount Kurofu next to it and view the entire figure of Mount Asama instead of climbing there.

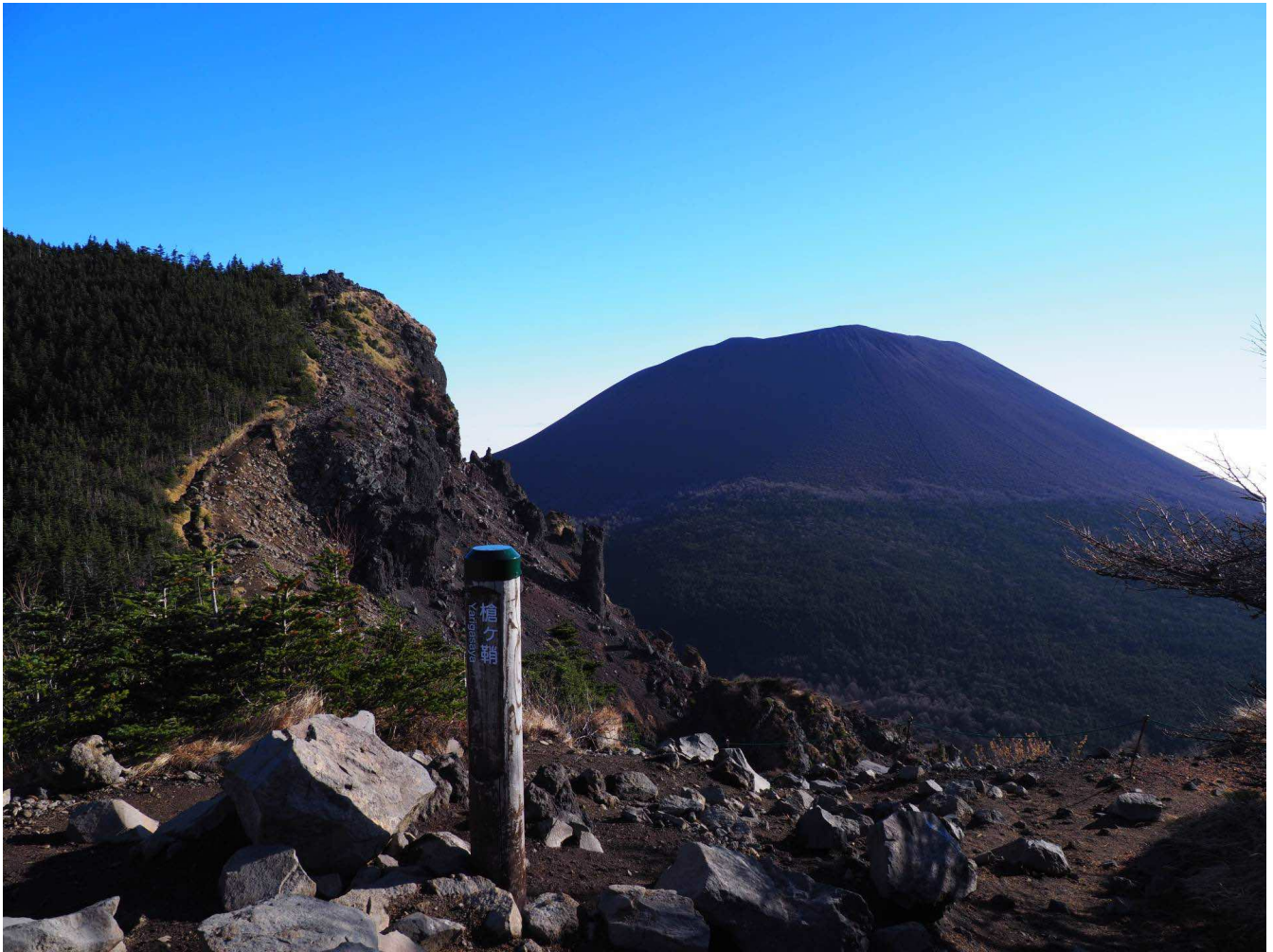
By the way, these mountains centering on Mount Kurofu are called "Gairin-zan" (meaning "the outer rim of a volcanic crater"). There seemed to be a sliding down accident in summer somewhere in Gairin-zan. Warning to prepare well and some cautionary notes are written on a signboard.



After departing before 7 am, I am favored with fine weather which enables me to climb while seeing the sea of clouds all the time. I think it might be my first time to see such a splendid sea of clouds. As I am climbing awhile, sunshine begins streaming through the trees and gives me the warmth. As the summit of Mount Asama is gradually appearing, its hugeness surprises me. Following long-lasting wooden stairs, I find a shelter whose roof is a red iron plate. It reminds me that I am now climbing an active volcano.



I have reached a place called "Yarigasaya" in about an hour. The whole view of Mount Asama, from the foot to the summit, can be seen from here. The appearance like an upside-down pudding is beautiful enough to fascinate me. I'm really glad to climb on a sunny day because I can see such a wonderful scenery.



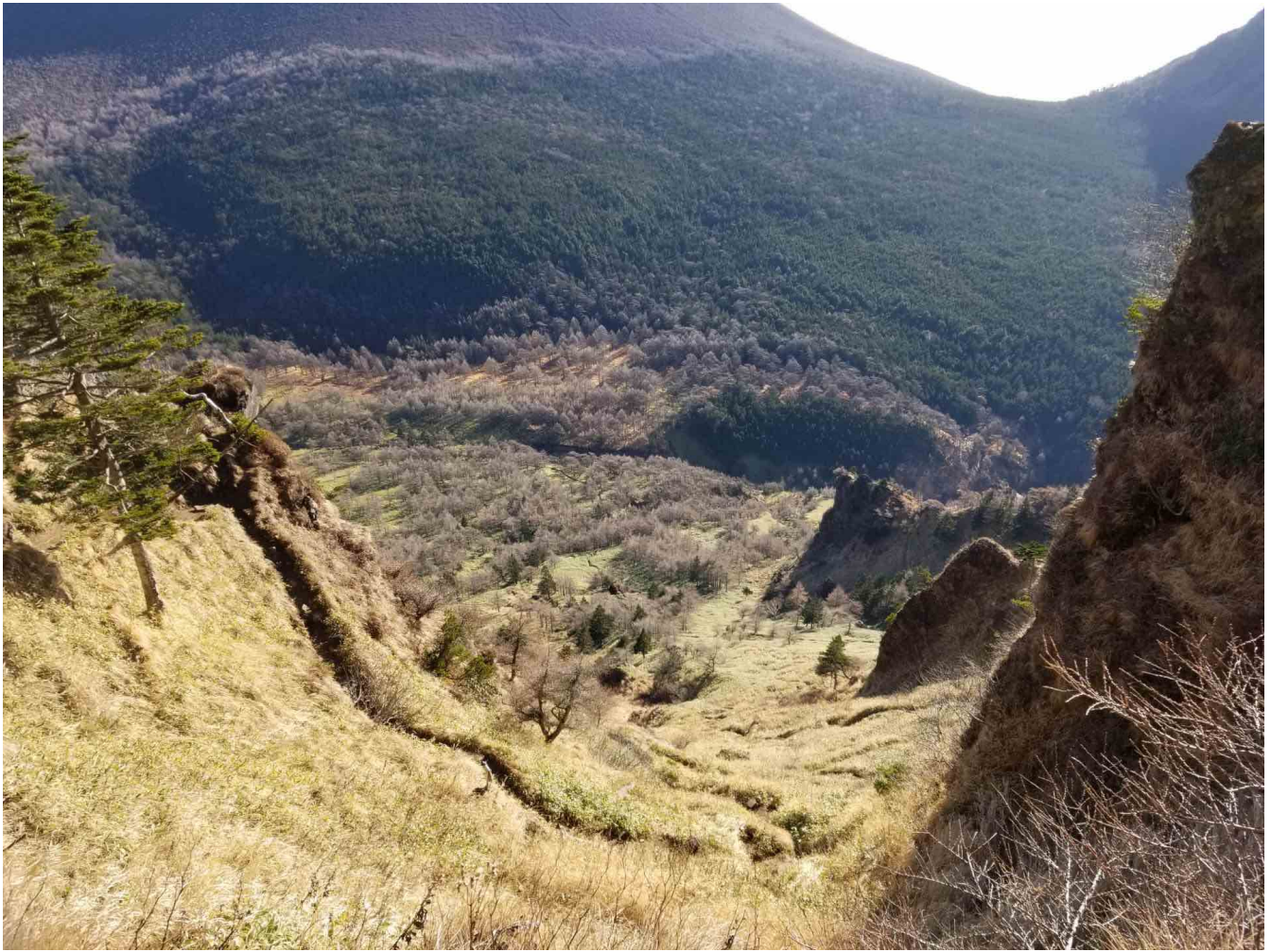
Then, I start climbing a steep uphill to the top of a sheer cliff, which is called "Tohmi no kashira" and located to the south of the Gairin-zan. Although the right side of the path is a precipice, I have no fear thanks to the mountain trail secured inside.



"Tomi no kashira" commands a vast landscape between the summit of Mount Asama and the forest spreading below. It reminds me of the world view of a famous video game "The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild". If I could not see this splendid scenery due to fog, it would have reduced the sense of fulfillment.



The course diverges into two courses; one stretches north on the rim toward the summit of Mount Kurofu, and the other on a downhill leads directly to the forest below. I see the latter downward slope continue very long and it is so narrow that only one person could barely walk on. I think it would be really tough if I will have to climb up this slope later, so I have chosen the downhill first. While watching the majestic Mount Asama in front of me, I am running down with light steps as if enjoying trail running.



Getting through the forest, I have reached a place named "Sai no Kawara" (meaning "Riverside of Styx"). This place is a turning point of the two courses; one for Mount Asama, and the other for Gairin-zan. When Volcanic Alert Levels is on and above Level 002, we will not be allowed to head for Mount Asama beyond this place. Currently, the level has been lowered to Level 001 for the first time in three years, I will go straight on toward Mount Asama.

A4 ◆ここは「湯ノ平口」



Following the end of the forest zone, I am climbing a gentle slope with volcanic stones here and there. On the way, finally, I encounter the first other climber today, who is descending from ahead of me. Then, in less than an hour, a signboard to forbid climbers from entering the vicinity of the summit appears.



As I cannot go any further in the direction of Mount Asama towering in front of me, I have turned right to head for Mount Maekake.

I see two tunnel-shaped shelters to evacuate here. If the volcano erupts within the close range, anyone would feel more dead than alive. Mount Maekake is more like a cliff rather than a mountain and its desolate scenery makes me realize the awfulness of the volcano.



In the middle of a gentle slope I am walking on, I can recognize some people taking commemorative photographs near the summit. The sky is perfectly clear and the sea of clouds spread out. Mount Asama is on my left and Gairin-zan on my right. Feeling as if I were walking in the sky, I have arrived at the summit of Mount Maekake, with an altitude of 2,524 meters.

When Volcanic Alert Levels is Level 1, this is the limit we are allowed to approach Mount Asama. You can see the crater of Mount Asama from here. I notice several people moving near the crater, who seems to be official observers of the volcano.



Other climbers are coming to the summit one after another and we exchange greetings, saying, "It's a perfect day, isn't it?" One climber tells me he comes here instead of Mount Kusatsu-shirane, whose Volcanic Alert Levels was raised after the eruption in January 2018.



I am climbing down from the summit of Mount Maekake while watching Gairin-zan on my left. The Gairin-zan, consisting of several peaks including Mount Kurofu, looks like a huge wall. I look forward to traversing on the sharp cliff from now.



After getting back to the turning point of "Sai no Kawara", I head for the cliff called "J band" in the direction of the Gairin-zan. Among divided opinion on the origin of the name, the hypothesis that the landform of the mountain trail looks like the figure of "J" seems to be the most convincing one. I see a sign indicating "Watch out for falling rocks." There was a slipping accident before at this place, so I am climbing up carefully.



From the top of the slope, I see the desolate scenery of the foot of the mountain, which is so overwhelming that I cannot believe I'm now in Japan.

After that, no steep uphill follows. Traversing for a while, I can savor the scenery to the full.

The entire route I have conquered since this morning can be seen from Gairin-zan. I have traversed several peaks of Gairin-zan (Sennin Pass, Mount Jakotsu, and Mount Kurofu) and come back to "Tomi no Kashira" again. The sea of clouds still spread out before me. This is the first time for me to climb a mountain while seeing the sea of clouds all day long.



I have returned to the parking lot at around 14:30. Then, I drop by a day hot spring in Takamine Plateau Hotel, where I saw the sea of clouds this morning. The sea of clouds and Yatsugatake can be seen through the glass wall of the bathhouse. Thanks to no other guest, I can spend a luxurious time.



Since Volcanic Alert Levels of Mount Asama was lowered, I have conquered the mountain this time. I will observe Mount Kusatsu-shirane, another volcano, to climb it when the level is lowered.

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

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

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

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>



Japanese 100 Great Mountains Vol.2: Episode 006-010
<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/japanese-100-great-mountains-vol2.html>

Hodaka Works List at The BBB



Japanese 100 Great Mountains Vol.3: Episode 011-015

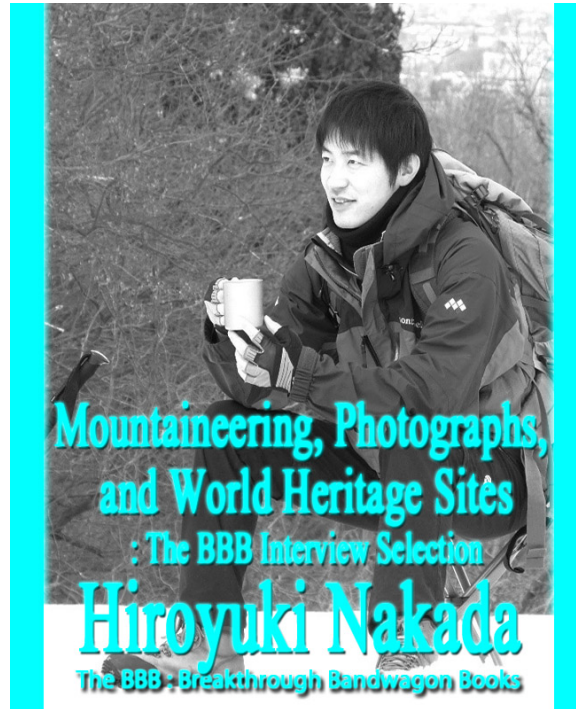
<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/japanese-100-great-mountains-vol3.html>



Cast Party 2018

<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/cast-party-2018.html>

Hodaka Works List at The BBB



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