

Japanese 100 Great Mountains Vol.5: Episode 021-025



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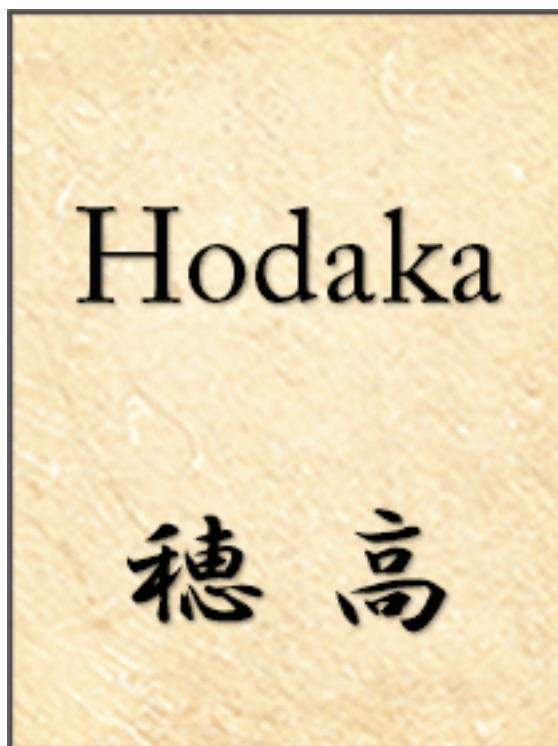
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ISBN: 978-1-79480-938-3



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## Episode 021: Mount Tanigawa



I wanted to climb a snowy mountain for the first target in 2019 and frequently checked the weather forecast and snow conditions of possible dates. I first considered a mountain in Yamanashi Prefecture, close to Tokyo. But it did not seem to have a lot of snow at the beginning of January. In the end, I decided to climb Mount Tanigawa, which is easy for me to access.

The altitude of Mount Tanigawa is less than 2,000 meters. Still, there is an accumulation of snow since about November every year and it becomes an authentic snowy mountain until January. In fact, each time I climbed Mount Tanigawa in the past, the weather was always bad. But this time the weather forecast said it would be sunny for days and I thought I could expect a fine weather.

Departing in yesterday evening, I drive on the Kan-Etsu Expressway to Gunma Prefecture. Since I have enough time, I drop by an outdoor store at around Maebashi near the destination. Then, I drive on local roads, getting through the foot of Mount Akagi.

The night sky is clear and I am looking for a good place to take photographs of the twinkling stars. I find a spot where I can overlook the night view of a city below me.

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I have parked my car beside a road along a field and taken some pictures in the darkness.

Driving for a while, I get to a convenience store, whose parking lot is spacious with few lights around it. I take some more pictures there. Then, I find another good location where I can photograph the scenery of the night town and starlit sky.

Then, I have entered the Kan-Etsu Expressway again from Akagi Interchange and decided to spend the night in my car at the Akagi Kogen Rest Area (or Service Area in Japanese).

After I stop the engine, the air conditioner doesn't work and it is getting quite chilly. Even though I put on many layers of clothes, it is so cold that I wake up several times during the night. I start driving at dawn and have arrived at the Tanigawa Base Plaza, the starting point of the ropeway, at around 5:30.

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It is common to climb Mount Tanigawa by ropeway. The ropeway station is on the sixth floor of the Tanigawa Base Plaza, which is a gigantic multistory parking structure to accommodate more than 1,000 vehicles. We are allowed to park our automobiles only in the first floor during the early morning. When I get there, several other vehicles have already been parked. I have some time until the ropeway starts its operation, so I take a nap again.

At around 6:30 am, I change clothes for snowy mountain and prepare for climbing. I put gaiters on my knees to prevent snow from soaking into, keep crampons in the baggage, and equip ice axes on the backpack.

When some climbers start moving at around 7:00, I follow them. Although I expected the ropeway to start its operation at 7:00, it seems to begin since 8:30 in this season. Still, several backpacks have already been placed in front of the ticket office.

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As I need to wait for a while, I kill time by taking photographs outside the building and charging the smartphone in my car. In the meantime, the line which people form is gradually getting longer. Mount Tanigawa have ski slopes at Tenjin-daira, the terminal of the ropeway. So, I see people who have skis and snowboards. I have an impression that 60 to 70 percent of them are skiers. The ticket office has opened a little before 8:30. I buy a ticket and head for the ropeway station. A gondola of the ropeway departs every three minutes and about 10 people can get on it each time.





I get to Tenjin-daira in about 15 minutes. I have visited this place several times, but not in the snowy season. Fascinated by beautiful snowy mountains, I am absorbed in taking photographs. After getting off the ropeway, skiers head for the ski lift and we mountaineers equip ourselves with crampons, snowshoes, or *wakan* (Japanese-style rackets) to prepare for the climbing. Since I don't have *wakan* nor snowshoe, I put on only crampons and start ascending.

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If I stray off the traces, my legs would be buried deep in the snow. So, I am walking on trodden parts as carefully as possible. The trace barely allows one person to walk on. Some party consists of more than 10 persons, which makes it congested like a procession of ants. With the fine weather and little wind, I begin feeling hot soon after the departure. Taking off the clothes, I am climbing up.

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The scenery of the snowy mountains around me is so beautiful that I find myself taking a lot of photographs. I reach a relatively slanted slope and view the gigantic snowy mountain with the blue sky in the background. Suddenly, I have a nostalgic feeling for the scene. I notice it reminds me of the scenery that once made me interested in mountains.

When I was an elementary school student, one summer day I mistook a cumulonimbus cloud for a snowy mountain and wished to climb such a mountain sometime in the future.

What I see right now has overlapped the scenery in the past and given me a flashback. I still remember the scenery of the sky on the day. While climbing it, I think, “Ah, this is what I have long been waiting for.” I started mountaineering because I wanted to see the very scenery. I am really moved emotionally and mysteriously.

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The higher altitude I am reaching, the stronger the wind is getting. I put on the outerwear to keep off the cold. Because of the steepness of the snowy slope, I have to stick the ice axes into the ground while ascending.

Finally, I recognize the sign in front of a mountain hut. The mist that seems to have twined the signboard is frozen in the shape of floating toward the lee. It is often called “shrimp tails” among mountaineers.

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The nearby hut is buried in the snow so deep that we cannot enter it.

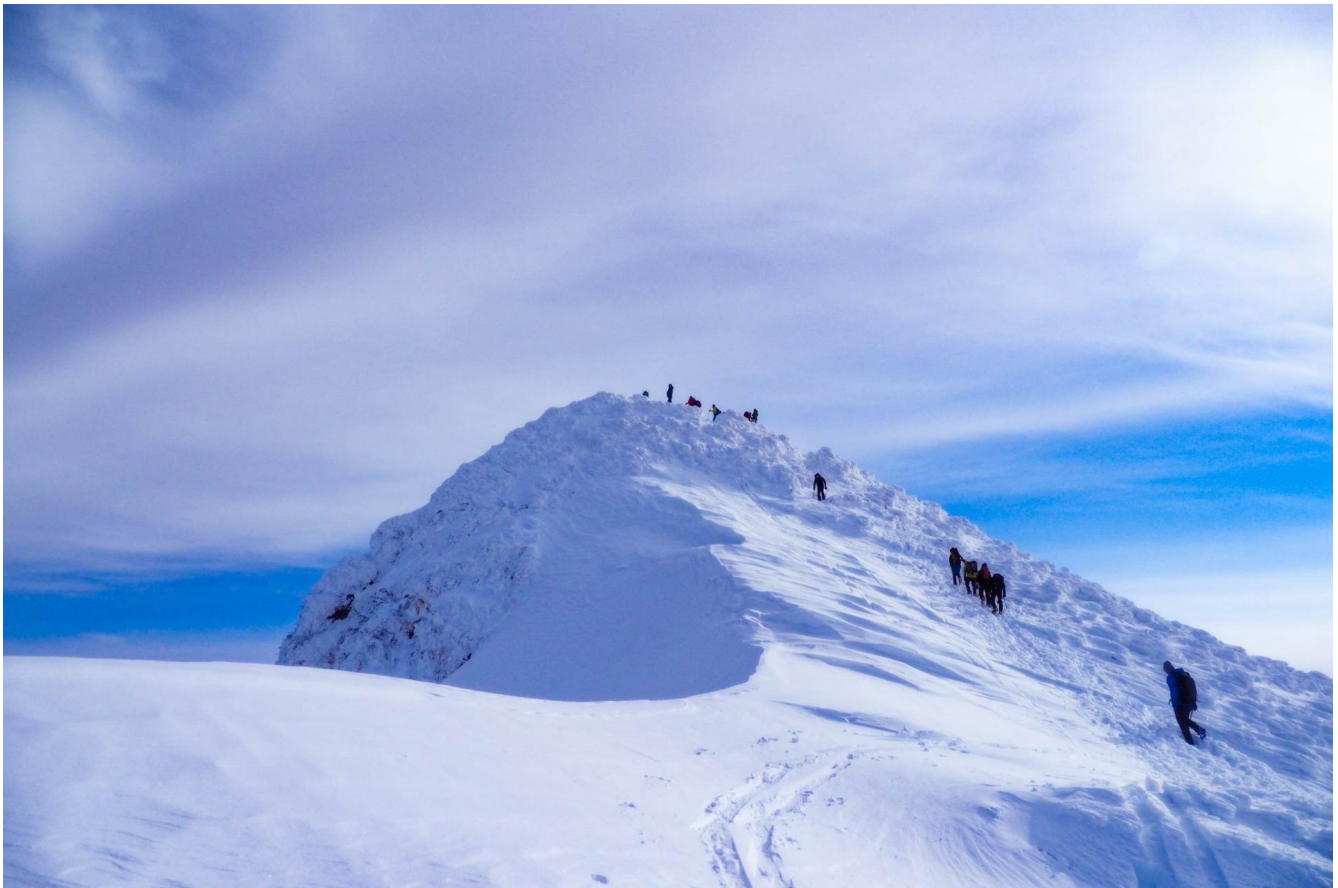
After climbing for about 15 minutes, I have reached a summit called “Toma-no-Mimi” (literally meaning “the ear closer to us”), with an altitude of 1,963 meters.

As the word “Sojiho” (meaning “peaks like twin ears”) indicates, Mount Tanigawa is known for its twin peaks standing side-by-side. The other summit is called “Oki-no-Mimi” (meaning “the ear distant from us”), with an altitude of 1,977 meters.

A fine snowman has been placed on the signboard of “Toma-no-Mimi”.

From this viewpoint, “Oki-no-Mimi”, the highest peak of Mount Tanigawa, looks really magnificent. I can see a lot of climbers forming a line at around the peak.

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We need to first climb down on a steep slope and then ascend a gentle uphill from “Toma-no-Mimi” to “Oki-no-Mimi”. The final part of the uphill is so tough and I cannot ascend as smoothly as I wish because I get cramps in my leg. Still, I manage to move my legs slowly.

By the time I am approaching the summit, only one climber is there. I guess the others would climb down early not to miss the last gondola of the ropeway.

Luckily, I can monopolize the summit. I have enough time to take pictures after sticking the ice axes into the ground beside the mountaintop sign and even record a movie. Since I cannot do that with other climbers, It is quite timely.

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After I fully enjoy the experience at the highest peak of Mount Tanigawa, I return to “Toma-no-Mimi”. I do not have enough time to stay here leisurely. But because of the accumulated fatigue, I need to take a rest here for a while.

In the meantime, suddenly a great cheer arises behind me. I look back and find three foreigners flying a drone and other Japanese giving a shout of joy with surprise.





Since I have never seen a drone in person, I join the people watching it. When they let the drone fly from the ground to the sky high, I find myself giving a shout, “Wow, it’s so cool!”

After hovering for a while, it is rapidly flying away so far that we cannot recognize it. Clear image of snow mountains is displayed on the screen of the remote control that the foreigner is holding. I’m so impressed because they fly it among the deep mountains, even though they could not retrieve it if it falls somewhere.

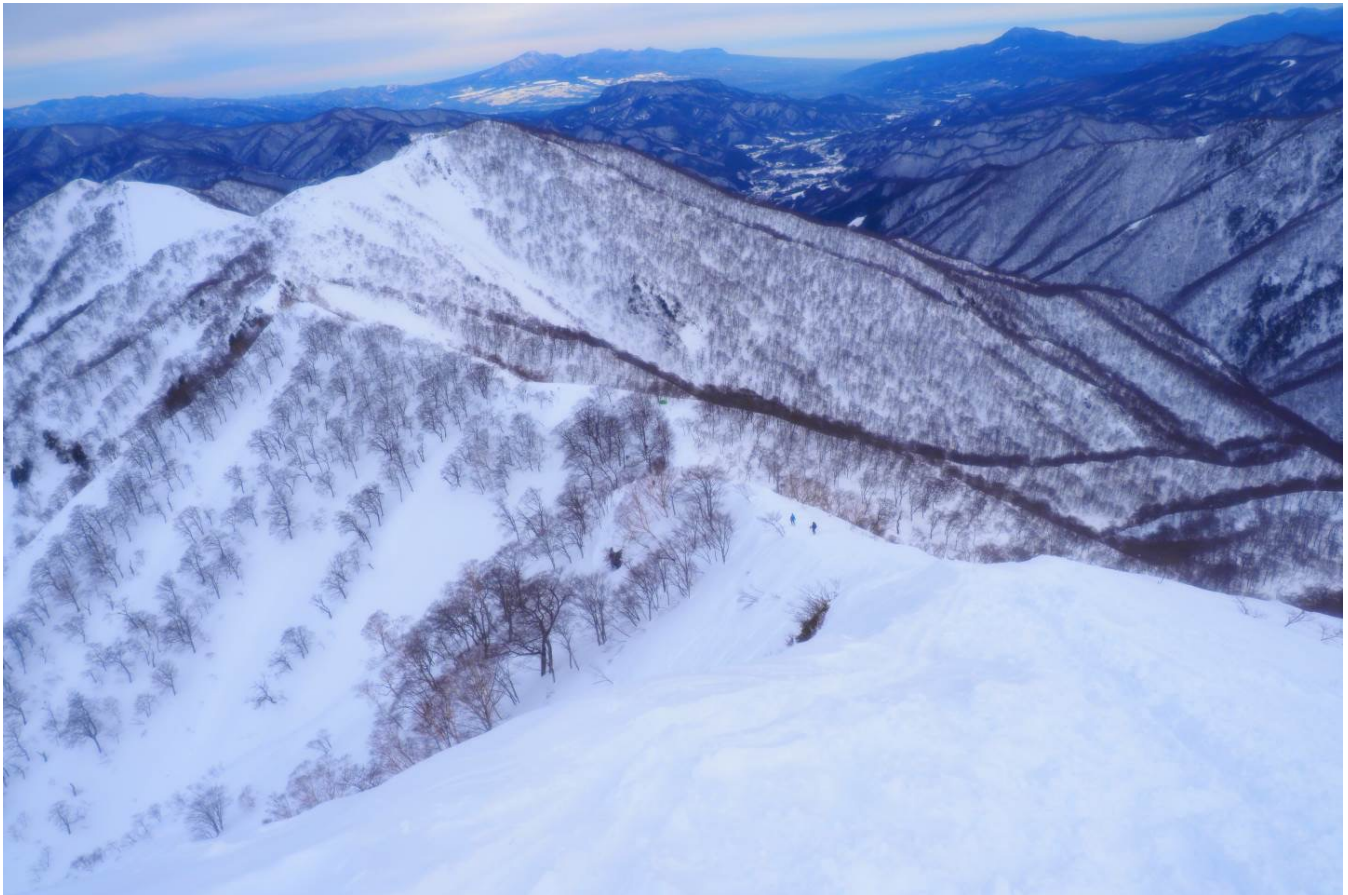
When I hear the droning noise and look up at the sky again, the drone has come back to above us before we know it. The person holding the remote control takes our photographs from the drone in the sky.

Actually, I have long been interested in a drone. After seeing the real drone, I have a stronger urge to fly it by myself.



I want to stay at the summit for a little more while, but I rush to climb down so as not to miss the last gondola of the ropeway. While climbing down, I pass by people who come here to enjoy backcountry ski in the mountains. They seem to climb up to the summit and slide down from there without a rest. The foreigners who flew the drone also are sliding down comfortably on the large snow slope. Sliding down on such a steep slope requires quite a high skill. Even so, I want to try it someday in the future, because they look really comfortable.

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While I'm climbing down, it is getting darker with many clouds. I seem to have conquered the summit quite timely. Coming back to the ropeway station without any trouble, I take off the crampons and brush the snow off. Although the last gondola of the ropeway will depart at 16:30, I get on it about 30 minutes earlier than that.

The souvenir shop is still open at the Tanigawa Base Plaza and I succeed in purchasing a pin badge of the mountain.

In fact, I have been wanting to visit a particular restaurant after climbing Mount Tanigawa. So, I leave the parking lot soon after getting back to my vehicle. I came to know the restaurant on a blog written by a mountaineer who climbed Mount Tanigawa. It seems to be run by a butcher shop and I have been craving to eat its dish after mountaineering.

Then, I have arrived at the restaurant after about 20 minutes drive from the Tanigawa Base Plaza. I can barely have a seat 10 minutes before the order stop at 17:00. The restaurant is in a Western-style brick building and has a spacious atmosphere especially because there is no customer except only one family and me.

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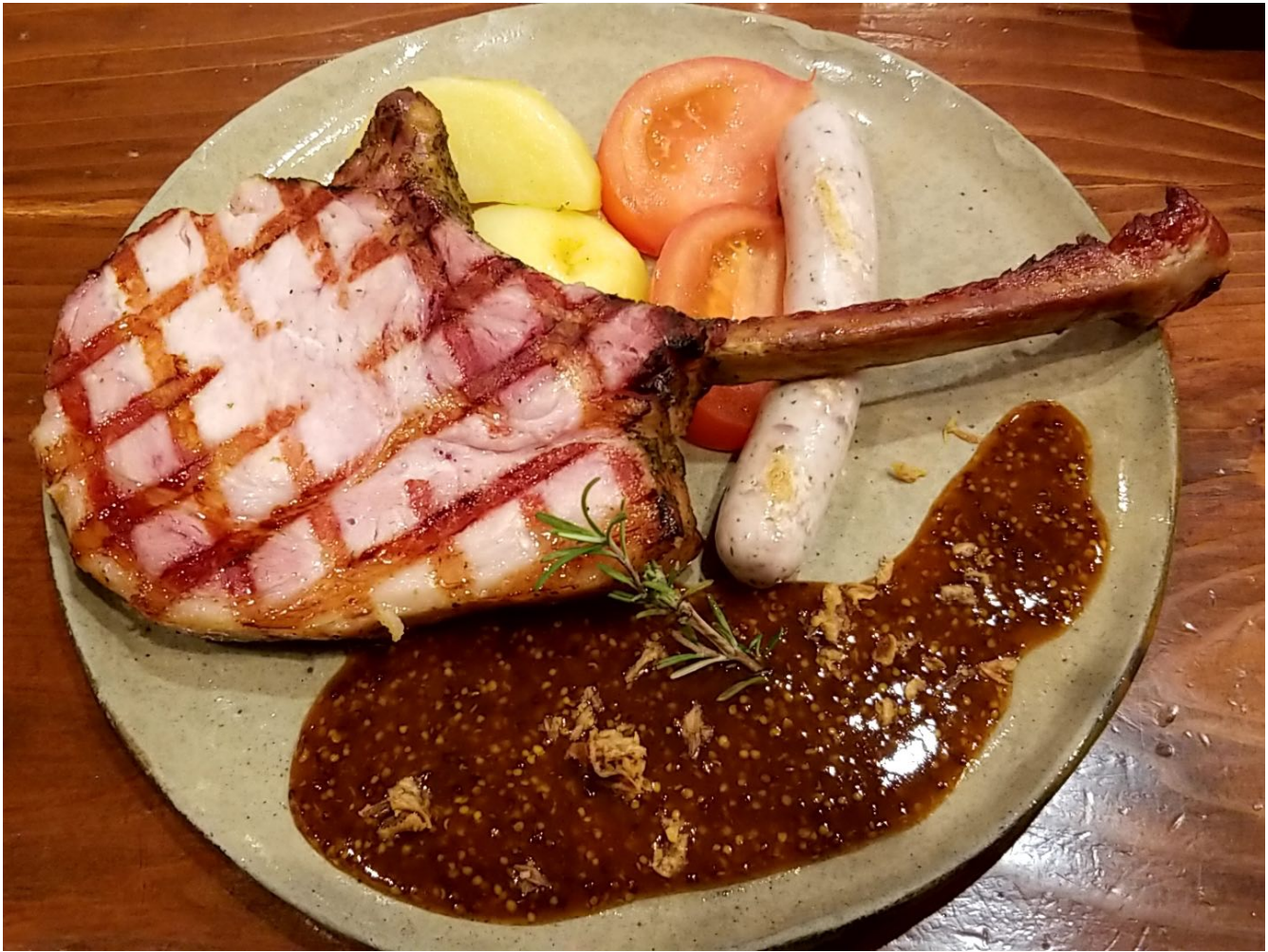


Every dish on the menu looks delicious. I feel like devouring thick fatty meat to restore my energies and order a substantial rib born steak. The gorgeous meat is soft enough to allow the knife to cut in it very smoothly and the taste of the fat is really something. It fully satisfies me.

Climbing snowy mountains involves many risks such as disaster and sliding down. Still, we can see beautiful sceneries peculiar to this season, if we prepare the equipment properly and check the route and snow conditions in advance and are favored with fine weather. So, I would like to try to conquer other snowy mountains in the future.

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## Episode 022: Mount Kobushi



Suffering from hay fever (pollen allergy) peculiar to spring, I do not want to go out so frequently in this season. Still, I have decided to climb Mount Kobushi (or Kobushigadake in Japanese), known for its rich primeval forest and water source, at the end of March.

Some might think it would be reckless for me to climb a mountain where much pollen could be produced during this season. But actually, it is said that cedar pollen is released in the morning sun and alights onto plain areas in the daytime, and that the amount is not so much in the mountains except early morning.

Unlike in urban areas, the pollen fallen on the ground will not be blown up again in the mountains. Considering the high humidity of Mount Kobushi still covered with snow, pollen would not be scattered so much. For the reasons stated above, I have decided to climb.

Mount Konbushi stretches over three prefectures: Yamanashi, Saitama, and Nagano Prefectures. It is one of the main mountains among Okuchichibu Mountains and the source of Chikuma River, the upper reaches of Shinano River pouring into Sea of Japan, and the source of Arakawa River and Fuefukigawa River, both of which flows into the Pacific Ocean.

The name “Kobushi” derives from the ancient names of the three prefectures: Kai (current Yamanashi), Musashi (current Saitama), and Shinano (current Nagano). (\*The first letter of the kanji characters indicating the three prefectures can also be read as “Ko”, “Bu”, and “Shi”, respectively. Linking them, the name was named “Kobushi”).

The view from the summit, with an altitude of 2,475 meters, is wonderful. It is said that no less than 43 mountains among Japanese 100 Great Mountains can be seen from the vantage point.

There are two starting points for climbing the mountain. The one from Nagano is a relatively short course. The other from Yamanashi is the longer course, whose standard time is more than 10 hours. Since I climbed from Nagano in the past, I have decided to use the route from Yamanashi for the first time. Many guidebooks recommend climbers to stay at a mountain hut because of the long distance of the course. However, the hut will not open until late April and I have to make a day trip this time.

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I have arrived at a starting point, which is a parking lot located near the entrance of Nishizawa Valley at around 5 am. It is still dark. Then, I change clothes and pack things to prepare for climbing. Although I expected the mountain to be crowded because it's sunny Sunday, only two vehicles have been parked there.

Usually, Mount Kobushi still has snow in this season. When I checked the snow condition through the Internet two days ago, there seemed not to be so much. It made me decide to bring six-edged light crampons there.

By the time I start at 5:30 am, several more cars have newly arrived. Walking on a paved road for about 30 minutes, I have reached a turning point of two routes, which leads to Nishizawa Valley and Mount Kobushi, respectively.



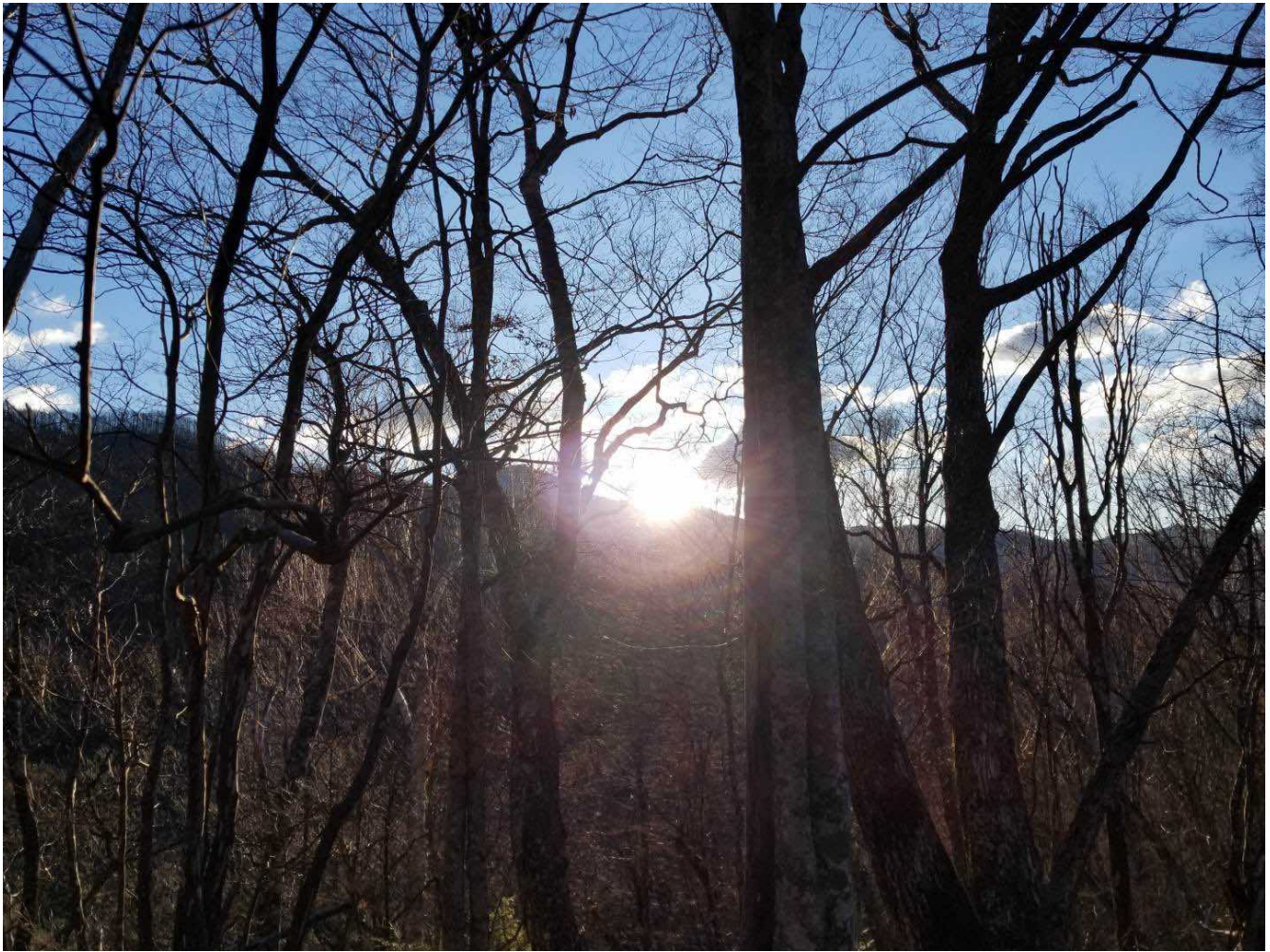


The route to Nishizawa Valley is a trekking course with waterfalls and deep waters, which attracts many visitors in a summer or an autumn foliage season because people can appreciate great sceneries even in light clothing.

In the route to Mount Kobushi, I am climbing up on a mountain path called “Toku-chan Shindo” (meaning “New Path of Toku-chan”). The difference in elevation of this route is no less than about 1,400 meters, which means we have to experience physically tough climbing. Also, gregarious rhododendron around here is at its best in May to June.

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As I am climbing slowly on the steep slope, three pairs of climbers are passing me by. Snow is gradually appearing and some parts of the road are frozen. I'm watching my steps while climbing. After climbing for about two and a half hours from the starting point, I have reached a junction with another mountain trail. At the place, I equip myself with light crampons.

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Another climber who I meet there is also being equipped with his crampons. We exchange the words like, "The road is frozen more than expected, right?"

As I am advancing, the amount of snow is getting larger. Still, I can be climbing comfortably thanks to the light crampons. When I look back after passing through the forest zone, Mount Fuji is beautiful enough to recover my spirits.

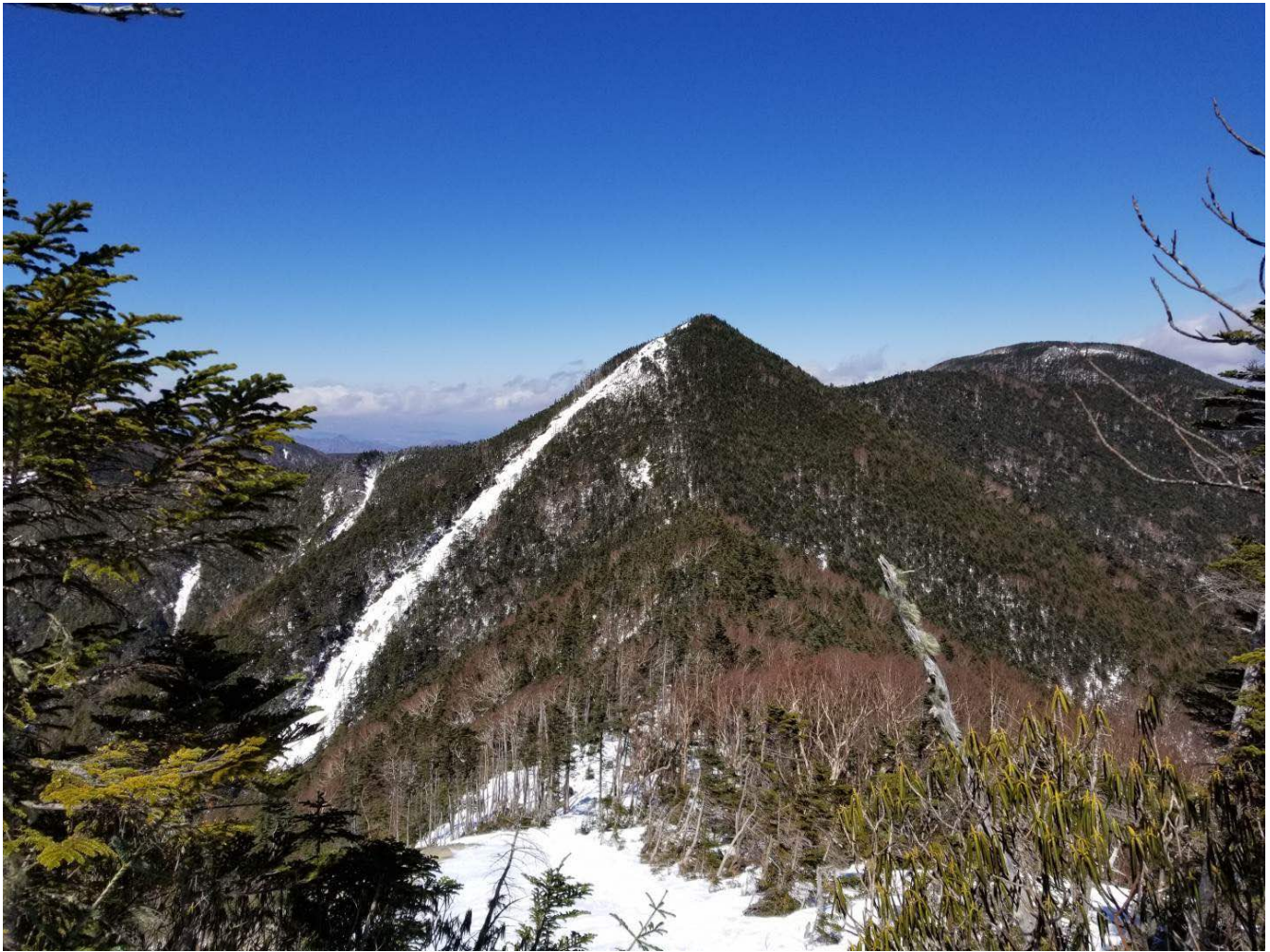
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I take a short break while eating trail chow at a rocky stretch where Mount Fuji can be seen clearly. After a while, I have reached the mountaintop sign of Mount Tokusa, with an altitude of 2,469 meters. But I don't stay here because the view is extremely obstructed. When I get through the forest zone, the view opens up and I can see the beautifully conical shape of Mount Kobushi.

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I first walk down on a snowy slope, climb up again toward the summit, and get to Mount Kobushi Hut, which is closed in this season. Amusingly, the letters indicating the name of the hut are made of wood.

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The person, whom I met earlier when I put the crampons, is descending apparently after already conquering the summit. We have a short conversation and he says, "I have met few mountaineers today. There must be no one at the summit now." The summit seems to be very close. As I am walking for a while, the mountaintop sign is appearing beyond the forest zone. Today's weather is so perfect that I understand people can see no less than 43 mountains of Japanese 100 Great Mountains from this vantage point.

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I monopolize the summit and am taking pictures, when I hear some voices and see a couple ascending from another mountain trail. They are surprised by this fine weather because they departed from Nagano Prefecture in the blizzard last night. They say they have arrived at the summit after walking for about four hours from the starting point.

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We talk about each mountain path each of us has experienced today and about the names of the mountains we can see in the distance. Also, we can take each other's pictures.

When I ask them to take my picture with my single-lens reflex camera, they are interested in it and I say I want to bring it to a mountain even though it is heavy and expensive.

The episode of my losing the camera when I was sliding down on a snowy mountain (refer to Episode 013) makes them burst into laughter.

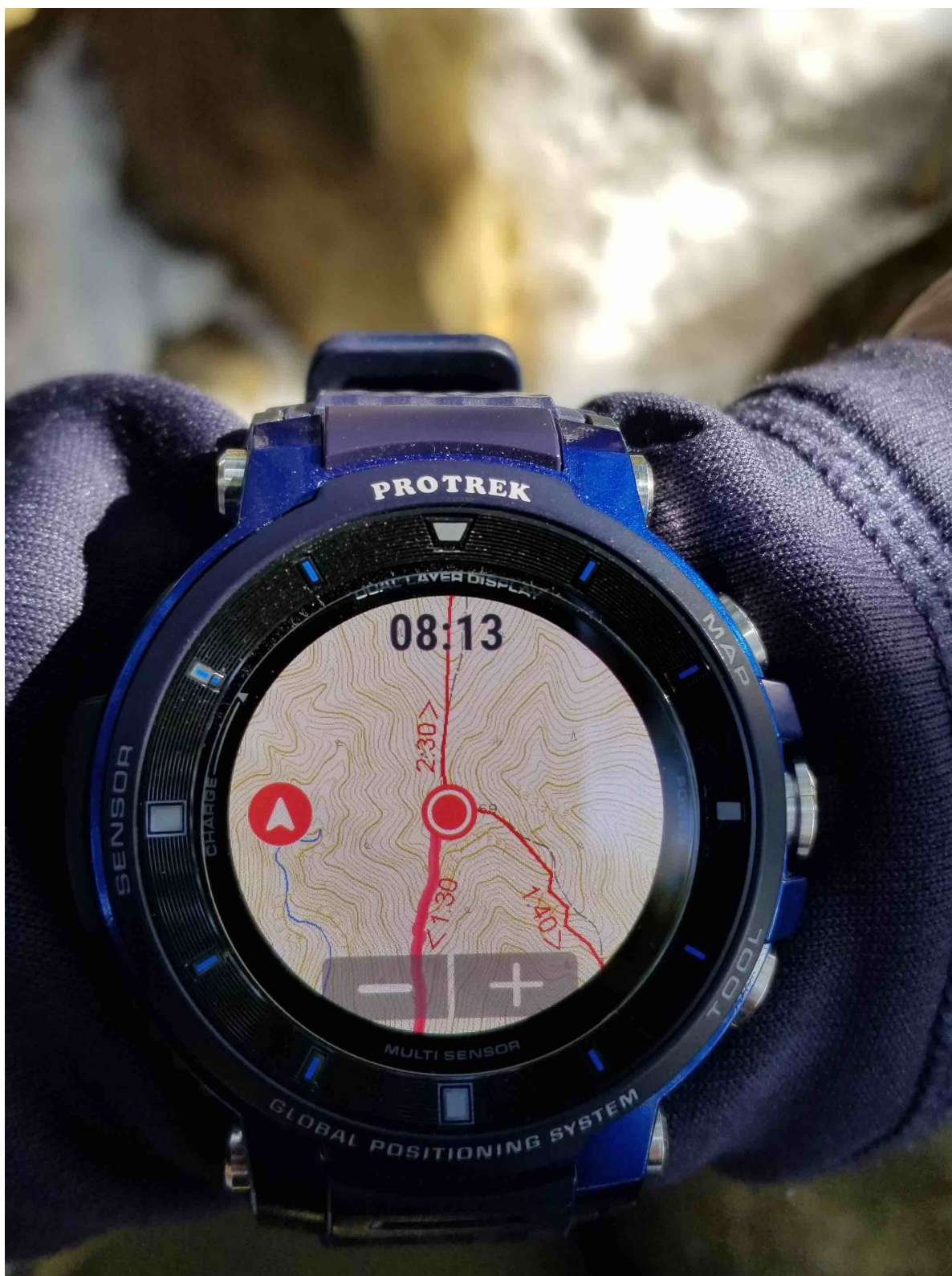


Because of the interaction with other climbers, I have stayed at the summit about 20 minutes longer than expected before I start climbing down.

In fact, I try using a new gear during this mountaineering. It is a wristwatch with GPS function and I can switch the screen from the watch to a map, which gives me the information where I am in a mountain.

The trail of this mountain is so maintained that you need not worry about getting lost. Still, when I have to walk a long distance like this time, I feel secure if I know where I am now. Although I can know the current location by checking a paper map, it is very convenient for me to easily know the location while walking.

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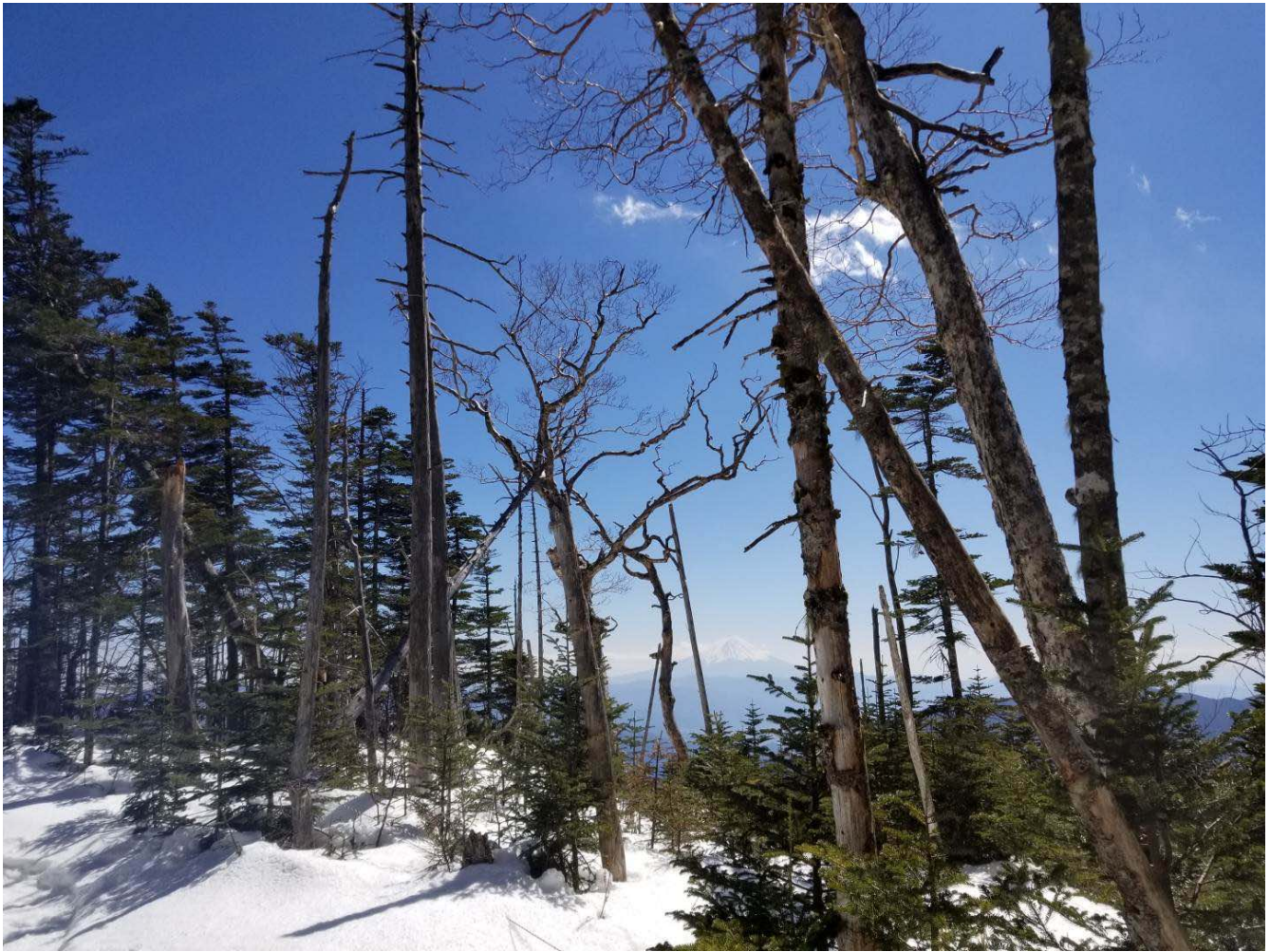
I need to be especially careful when climbing down a frozen mountain path. So, I'm watching my steps more cautiously than I did when I was ascending.

No one can be seen during the descending. I can do nothing but walk endlessly and the accumulated fatigue on my legs prevents me from accelerating.

Suddenly, two deer have run through very fast in front of me. In spite of my tiredness and the boring situation by then, the impact of the wild deer has drastically spurred me.

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As the sun is setting, I can return to the parking lot before it is getting dark. Because the mountain hut is closed, I cannot buy a pin badge this time. I visit a nearby souvenir shop at a Roadside Station (or Michi-no-Eki in Japanese) but cannot find it. I think I need to buy it another time.

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I have long wanted to eat Yoshida's Noodles (or Yoshida-no-Udon in Japanese), a local food of Yamanashi Prefecture, which contains thick and chewy noodles, cabbage, horsemeat, and chili pepper-based spice called "Suridane".

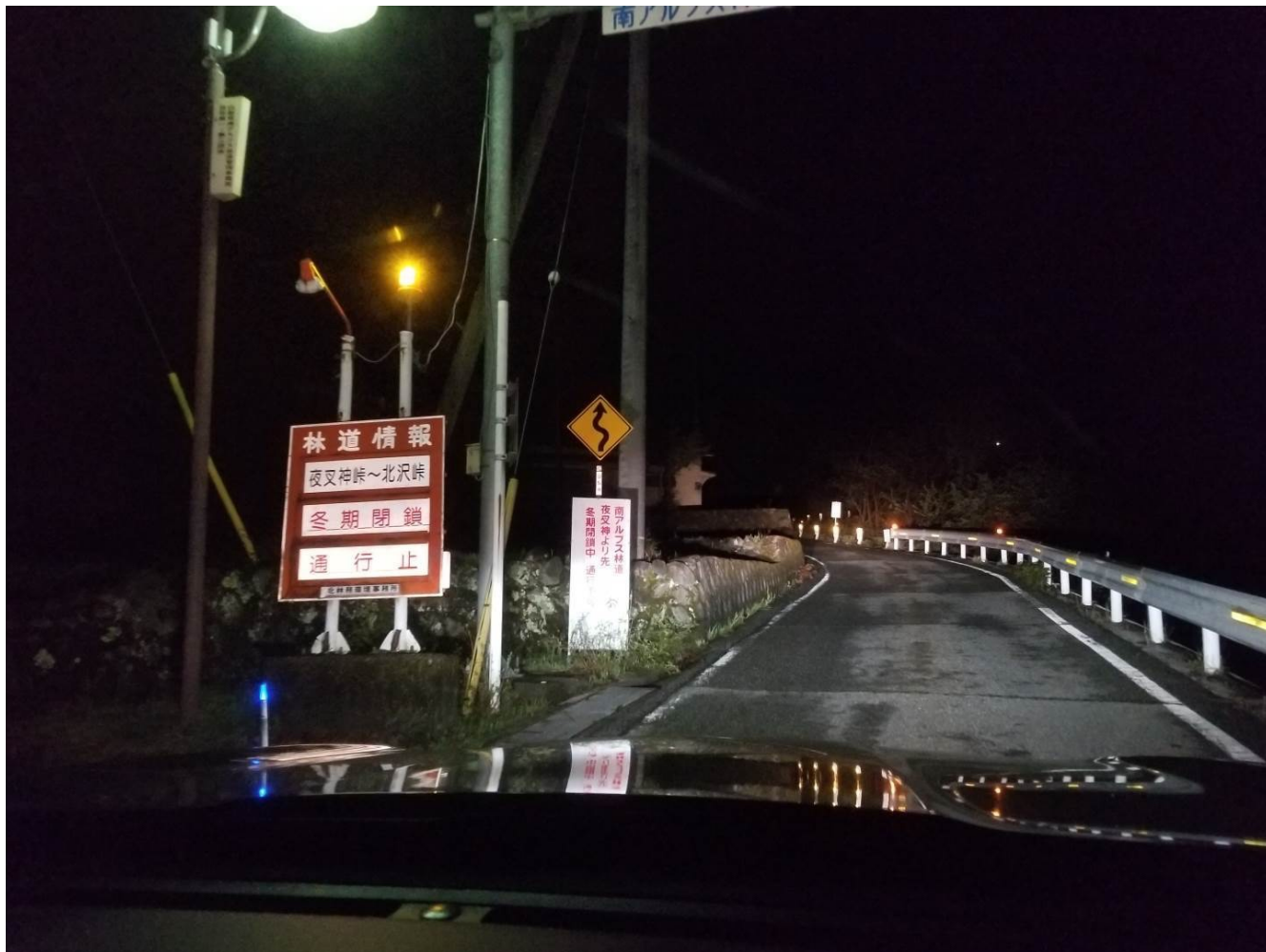
There are many Yoshida's Noodles restaurants in Fujiyoshida City, where it originated. I find Yoshida's Noodles in the menu of a restaurant in Hatsukari Parking Area at the Chuo Expressway. After eating it, I start driving home.

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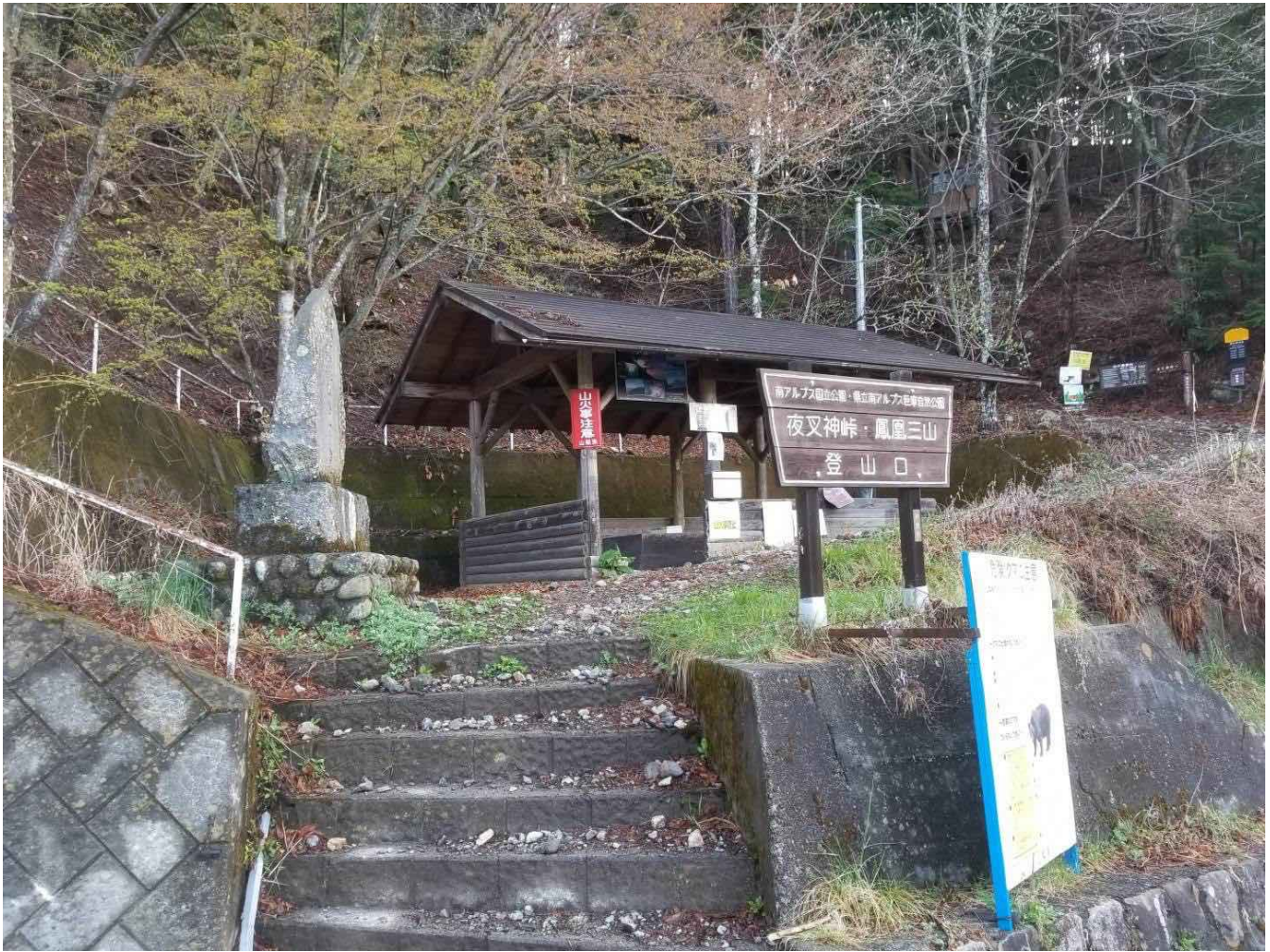
## Episode 023: Mount Hoo



“Reiwa”, the new era name of the Japanese history, became effective on May 1st, 2019. After that, I have chosen Mount Hoo in the Southern Alps for my first mountaineering in the Reiwa era. In fact, there is no mountain whose name is Mount Hoo. It is the generic name for Mount Jizo-dake (2,764 meters), Mount Kannon-dake (2,841 meters), and Mount Yakushi-dake (2,780 meters). The three mountains are widely known as the Hoo-Sanzan (literally meaning Phoenix Three Mountains). This time I have to stay overnight in a mountain hut, because it would be difficult for me to get there and back in a day. When I made a phone call to make a reservation in advance, the owner of the hut ominously said, “Sir, I would like you to equip yourself properly. We have had a lot of snow this year. Especially, single male climber tends to have an accident more often than others. So, you should be extremely careful.”

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This is my second visit to Mount Hoo and I have started from the Yashajin Pass starting point, which is a route I did not choose last time.

In general, the Southern Alps is not readily accessible unless you use public transportation. However, it is relatively easy for you to get to Mount Hoo, because you can reach the Yashajin Pass by your own vehicle.

Winding mountain paths are followed by the Yashajin Pass starting point, beyond which you are not allowed to enter by your car. The space on both sides of the road can accommodate about 100 automobiles. Still, I think it might be heavily crowded, considering today is during the Golden Week holidays in Japan, and have arrived there at 3:30 am just in case.

Although it was raining on the way, it is getting clearer enough for me to see the starry sky. After taking a nap, I have prepared and departed at 5:30 am, which is 30 minutes behind schedule since I have overslept a bit.

Climbing up a gentle slope for about an hour, I have arrived at the Yashajin Pass. It belongs to a national park, where you can savor the great view of the Shiramine Three Mountains: Mount Kita, Mount Aino-dake, and Mount Notori-dake. Many people visit here to take beautiful pictures.

At first, some parts of the scenery are covered with mist. Gradually, it is being cleared away, as great mountains of the Alps are appearing.

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After that, the road is getting steeper. As I am climbing up alone, I see other climbers walking ahead of me. Snow is gradually appearing on the mountain path. Since the frozen ground continues, I equip myself with crampons to climb smoothly. Considering the high temperature and the slippery snowy road, I have to be careful not to veer off the trace.

I have arrived at the Minami-omuro hut about five and a half hours after I started mountaineering and take a break.

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There is a tent site here and some people are pitching tents on the snow field. It will take me one and a half hours from here to reach the Yakushi-dake hut, the mountain hut where I am staying tonight. I know I cannot get water at the Yakushi-dake hut, so I replenish my canteen at a watering place here. While I see the blue sky, it suddenly starts snowing like a snowstorm. But after a while, it has cleared up again.

I am heading for the mountain hut, my destination. When I get to a ridge line with a fine view, I can see the northern part of the Southern Alps, including Mount Kita, the second tallest mountain in Japan. I keep climbing the rocky stretch with the crampons.

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After climbing for nearly seven hours, I can see the roof of the Yakushi-dake hut from the top of the rocky place. As it is a little past noon, I have decided to climb Mount Yakushi-dake, one of the Hoo-Sanzan, where I can reach from here in about 10 minutes.

The summit of Mount Yakushi-dake is a flat place surrounded by some rocks. It doesn't not like the summit. Thanks to its spaciousness and great view, I am very comfortable.

There still are the remaining two mountains of the Hoo-Sanzan ahead of me. But if I try to conquer them, it would take me three more hours. I have decided to climb them tomorrow and get back to the mountain hut to check in.

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Yakushi-dake Hut was rebuilt about two years ago and reborn into a clean mountain hut that can accommodate 80 people. It has a lot of snow during this season. The snow is deep enough to bury the mountain hut and the area in front of the entrance door has been dug out and made into stairs. I take off the crampons, climb down the stairs, and check in at the reception. Several pin badges are sold at the counter and I buy one on which the three mountains are engraved. The first floor is a dining room and the second floor is a spacious, clean place to sleep. There is a table at the center of the second floor for visitors to relax and we can enjoy reading magazines and books concerning mountains. There are enough spaces for guests to sleep, and some look like separated private rooms.

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I have a plenty of time until dinner at 5:30 pm, so I take a nap.

When I wake up after a while, mountaineers I met in the mountain earlier today come to check in one after another. While I am reading comics regarding to mountains, the owner of the hut shouted from downstairs, “It’s time for dinner”, at 5:30 pm.

I share a dinner table with a group of three old men in their 70s. Considering their ages, they are really tough guys and tell me their interesting episodes when they climbed Mount Fuji in midwinter of February and ran 40 kilometers as trail running. The amount of Oden (Japanese one-pot dishes) is not enough, so almost all the guests refill their rice.

According to the weather forecast on TV, it will be fine tomorrow and I’m relieved. The owner tells us that inclement weather continued during the first half of the long holiday season and they had a rough weather like snowstorm yesterday. I seem to come here quite timely.

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After dinner, I take my camera and head for the summit of Mount Yakushi (or Yakushi-dake in Japanese) again. I have some time before sunset and can savor the magnificent scenery while taking pictures as I like. The wind is so cold that I have pain in my fingertips sticking out from my gloves. Other guests have not climbed to the top at the hour.



As the sun is gradually sinking over the mountains, the scenery is changing from the one I saw earlier today. I can appreciate the beautiful transition of the sky color. From the vantage point, Mount Fuji looks beautiful. I stay here until the clouds have been dyed scarlet.

As it is getting dark, I climb down to the mountain hut and then head for Mount Sunaharai, which is about five minutes walk in the opposite direction. From the point, I can see the night view of the Kofu Basin spreading at the foot of Mount Fuji.

While it has become dark after sunset, Mount Fuji has disappeared in the darkness and the shape of the Kofu Basin is looming up with the lights of the city. The night scenery reminds me of the view I saw from Mount Tanzawa before. (refer to Episode 003)



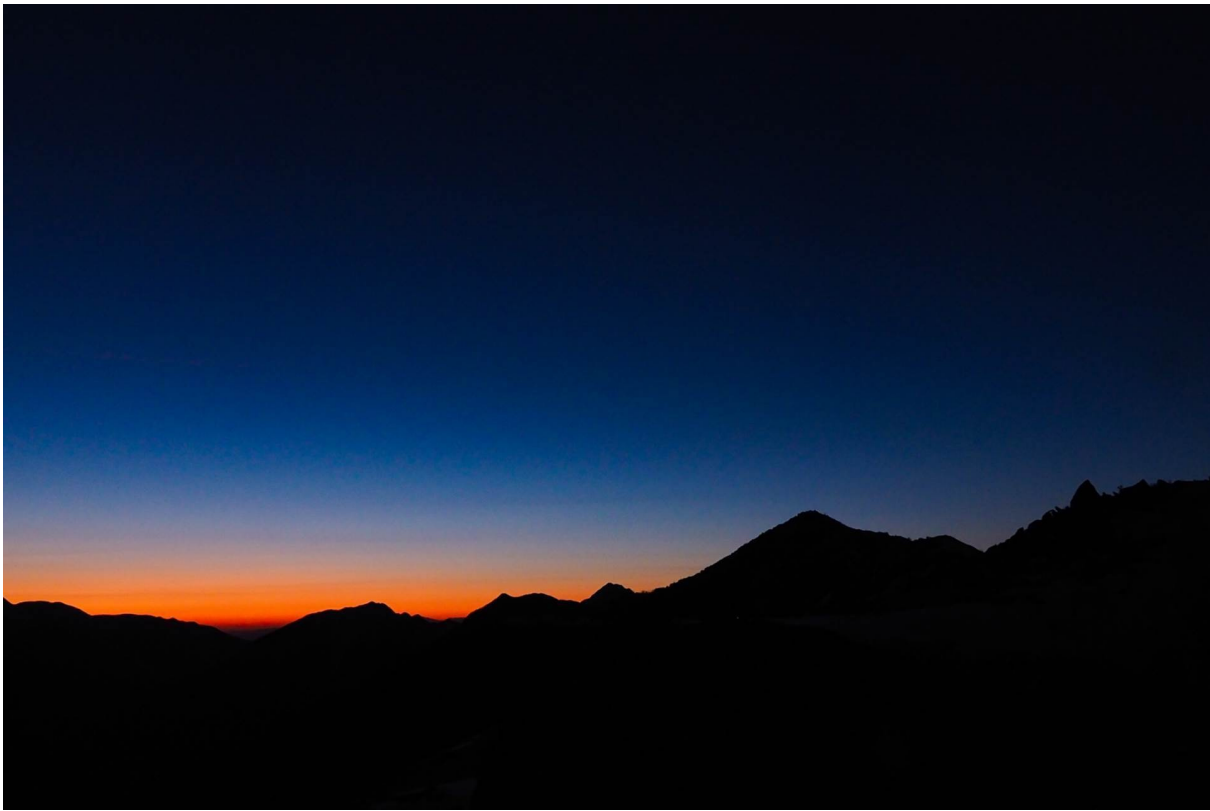
When I return to the mountain hut at around 7:30 pm, three senior climbers, with whom I shared the dinner table, are drinking alcohol in the free space and ask me how I like the mountain at the hour. At first, I think whether to join the conversation. But since the starry sky is beautiful, I get out again with a tripod and take pictures from the space in front of the hut.

The lights-out is 8 pm. The lights of the hut have been turned off and the darkness has settled over the mountain. Even after the lights were put out, anyone can go out freely. I gaze at the stars for a while and then return to the room.

When entering the room quietly with the headlight on, one of the senior climbers is snoring loudly. Still, I am so tired that I can fall asleep instantly.

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I had a good night's sleep, although I woke up several times in the middle of the night. I notice it is getting brighter and get out of the mountain hut. It is the time when the sun is about to rise. The owner of the hut says to me, "Today's sunrise time is 4:50 am, so it's just right." I haven't seen the sunrise from a mountain for a long time. The weather is fine and Mount Fuji looks beautiful on the right side of the sun.



The same climbers, with whom I had dinner last night, and I share the breakfast table since 5:30 am and talk about today's schedule.

Today I aim to conquer Mount Kannon-dake and Mount Jizo-dake, both of which are beyond the Mount Yakushi-dake I climbed yesterday. After that, I will come back to the hut and return to the parking lot in the end. It seems that their route partway overlaps mine.

After passing Mount Yakushi-dake, I walk on the ridge line for a while. Then, I head for the summit of Mount Kannon-dake, which is 40 minutes' walk. The elevation of the mountain is the highest among Hoo-Sanzan (three great mountains). Rocky stretches are at the back of the summit. They have enough space and are jammed with people.



The road from here to Mount Jizo-dake is steep and rocky, so I need to descend carefully. At the latter half of the route, I can walk on the gentle ridge. While descending on a snowy road, I see a lot of Jizo (stone statue) enshrined and have reached the summit.

A huge obelisk is standing vertically high above the sky in back. Some climbers are clambering up the obelisk, but I only take photographs this time because I conquered it in the past.

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When I'm about to turn back, the elderly climbers, with whom I became familiar at the hut, have just arrived at Mount Jizo-dake. As we have to part from each other, I have our commemorative photos taken with the obelisk in the background. One of the pleasures of staying in a mountain hut is such a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

I walk over two mountains on my way back, return to the hut, and have arrived at the parking lot of Yashajin Pass starting point after 3 pm. Then, I stop by Yashajin Hut right in front of the parking lot to take a hot spring bath, feel refreshed, and go home.



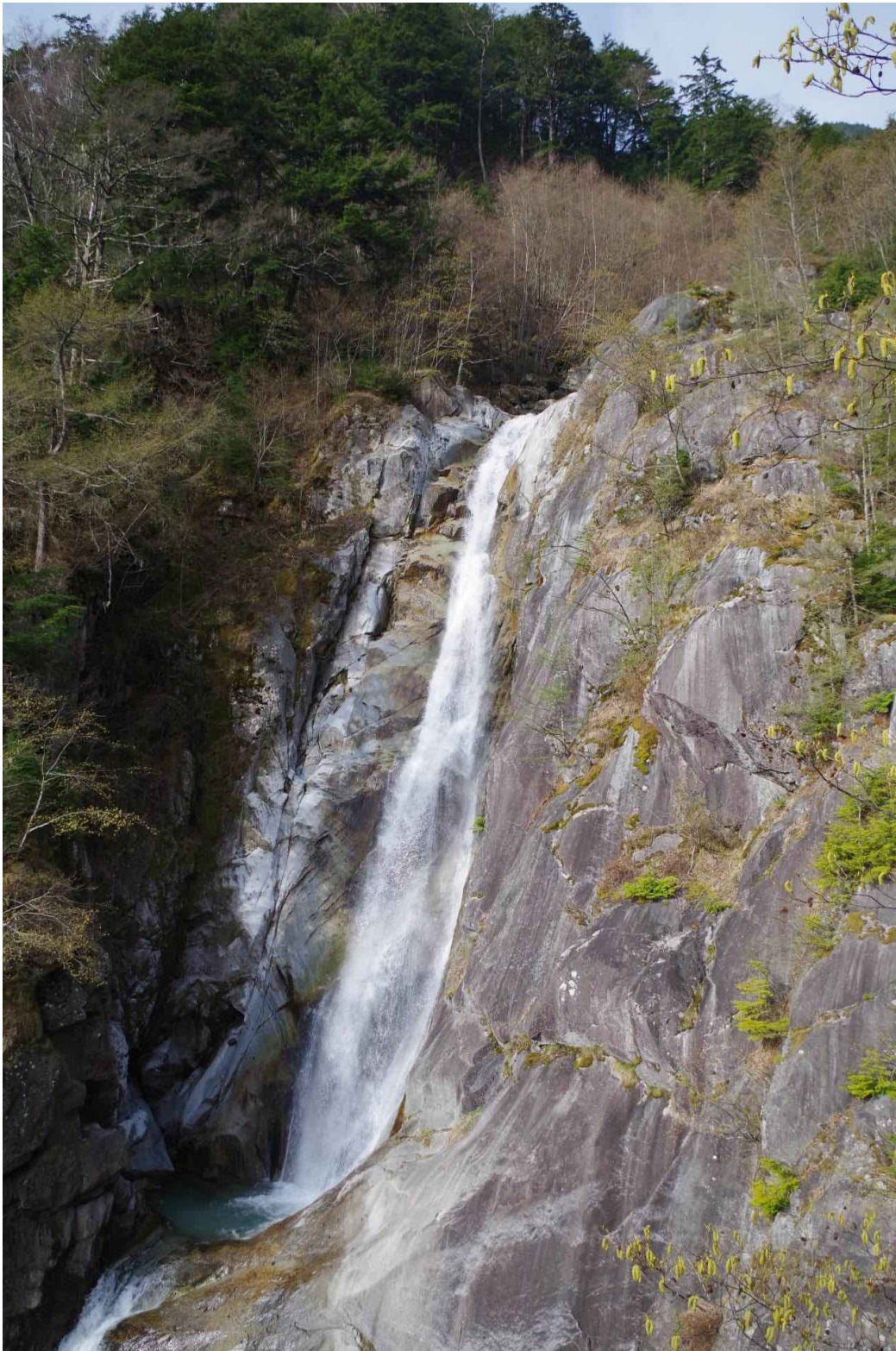
In the past, I once climbed Mount Hoo from a starting point at Aoki Mineral Spring, not from Yashajin Pass I have chosen this time. It was a popular route because it took a shorter time than that from Yashajin Pass.

During the previous visit, I left the parking lot and climbed along the stream called Dondoko-sawa. Various waterfalls were appearing one after another, which made me temporarily forget the fatigue from climbing steep slopes.

It was early in the afternoon when I arrived at the Hoo hut. Since I was carrying the tent at that time, my luggage was heavy. I pitched a tent quickly and took a rest there. After cooking my own supper, I took photographs of stars from the mouth of the tent without worrying about the surroundings until late at night.

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On the second day of the climbing in the past, I first conquered Mount Jizo-dake, followed by Mount Kannon-dake, and then by Mount Yakushi-dake.

The summit of Mount Jizo-dake was beyond mountain trails consisting of white sand which was hard to walk. As its name indicated, a flock of Jizo (stone statues) were enshrined there.

Once upon a time, there seemed to be a custom in which women wishing to have a child borrowed one of the Jizo from there and prayed for it at their own places. If they were blessed with a kid, according as tradition, they returned the Jizo and offered new one there.

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An obelisk was standing at the summit as a symbol and we could clamber up to the middle of it relatively easily. I actually tried and enjoyed the experience because it was quite exciting. There was a shrine and a god was worshipped.

After descending the mountain, I searched through the Internet and knew the fact that there was a gap behind the rock and people could get in and reach the top from inside the rock by using the rope.

Although I saw some records of those who actually conquered it, I couldn't believe how they could stand in such a place.





## Episode 024: Mount Azumaya



奉祝 天皇陛下御即位

# 男体山登拝大祭

日光祈りの霊山

- 7月31日 (午後より)
  - ・行人行列・子供みこし・深山廻りコンテスト
  - ・午後10時30分より和太鼓『室』による太鼓の奉納
  - ・午前0時より男体山登拝開始
- 7月31日～8月1日
  - ・深山廻り・奉納花火・大抽選会 (8月1日)
- 8月4日
  - ・第58回鹿の釣弓道大会 (当日参加受付)
  - ・灯籠流し

●宝物館特別展開催中

日光二荒山神社  
NIKKO FUTARASAN JINJA

令和元年  
**7月31日～8月7日**

【期間中 ●夜間登山 (午前0時開門) ●御内陣参拝】

登山期間：4月25日～11月11日

お問い合わせ：0288-55-0017 (中宮祠)・54-0535 (本社)  
<http://nikko.futarasan.jp>

日光二荒山神社 男体山登拝講社本部  
協賛：(公社)栃木県観光物産協会 (一社)日光市観光協会  
写真奉納：岩澤 敬美 (中宮祠)

As the number of mountains that I can climb and come back to Tokyo in a day is decreasing, this time I originally planned to visit Mount Nantai in Nikko City, Tochigi Prefecture.

Usually, we climbers have to pay a fee to enter Mount Nantai after 6 am at a Shinto shrine at the foot of the mountain. But I have learned from the Internet that we will be able to climb it after midnight only during a designated week called “Tohai Taisai” (meaning “grand festival of climbing to worship the mountain”) in around August every year.

Since I once climbed it in the morning in the past, I have decided not to choose the mountain this time but to try the night climbing during the period. Instead, I have selected Mount Azumaya at the border between Gunma and Nagano Prefectures.

When I conquered and climbed down the mountain four years ago, a shop at the foot of the mountain was closed because the weather was not good on the day. I thought I would definitely try the soft ice cream sold at the shop next time.

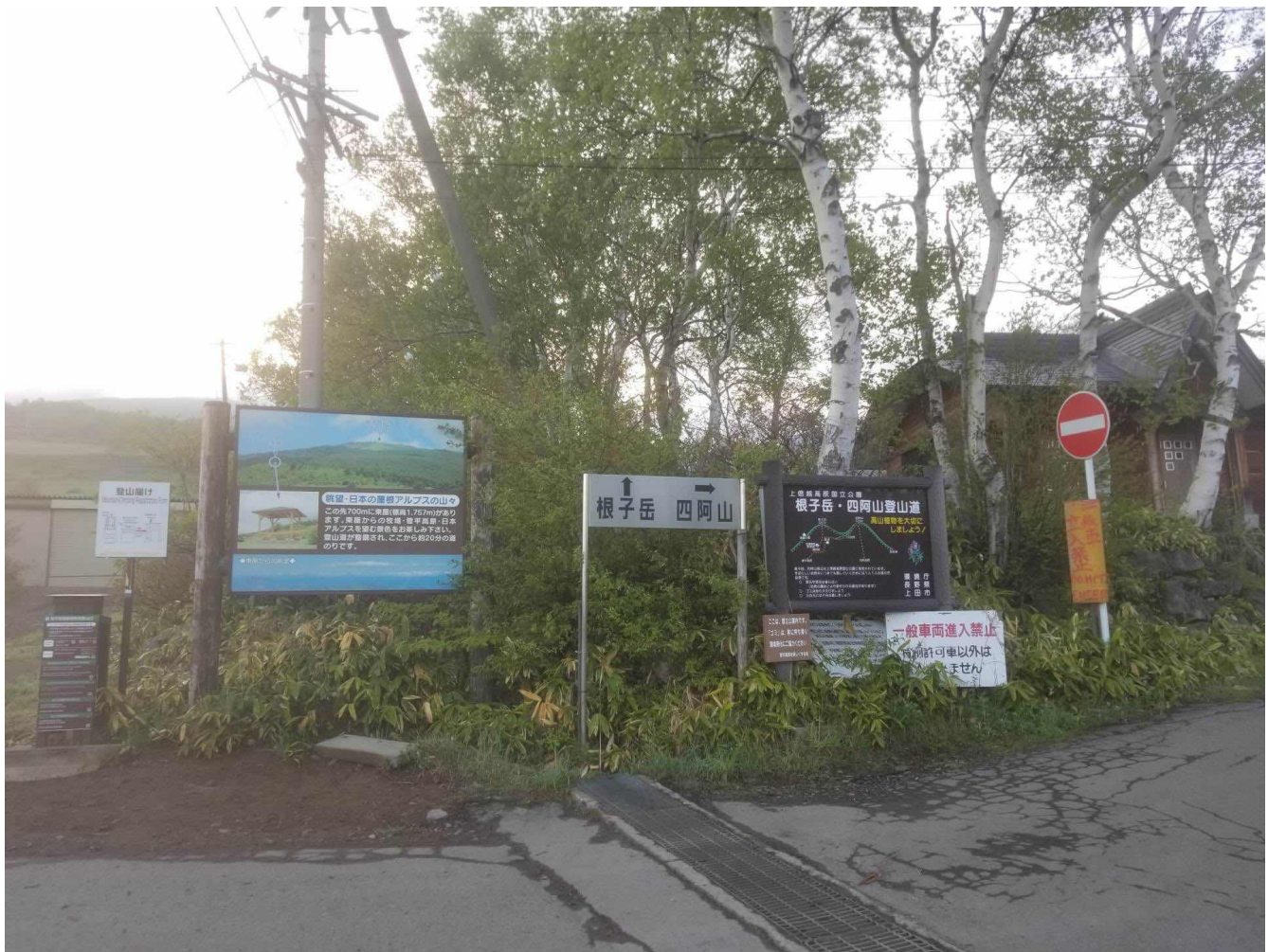


Mount Azumaya, with an altitude of 2,354 meters, is a magnificent mountain, which has Sugadaira ranch spreading out on the hillside. There is no dangerous spot on its mountain paths. It is popular because you can climb and come back in a day while appreciating the tranquil scenery.

Mount Neko-dake, one of Japanese 100 “Flowery” Great Mountains, is adjacent to Mount Azumaya and people usually climb both mountains in a row. By the way, the kanji characters of “Azumaya” is difficult to read and there might be few people who can read it correctly unless they know this mountain.

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The Sugadaira plateau, the starting point with an altitude of 1,600 meters, is a cool place. You can see cows in a close distance and enjoy the pastoral atmosphere.

It is readily accessible by car and I drive on a gentle slope from the direction of Nagano City. Arriving there before 5 am, parking my vehicle at the lot closest to the starting point. It has become completely bright by the time I start climbing.

Walking to the right at a turning point of Mount Azumaya and Mount Neko-dake, I am welcomed by a herd of cows and healed by the scenic view of the plateau.



A guidebook I read introduces a route in which you first aim at the summit of Mount Neko-dake and that of Mount Azumaya in a row, and then climb down them. During the previous visit, I chose the opposite route and felt fine while walking down on gentle slopes of Mount Neko-dake. This time I have decided to choose the same route again.

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Passing the herd of cows and walking, the starting point of Mount Azumaya appears on the left. According to the information I obtained in advance from the Internet, it seems that some snow still remains. But since the amount is not so much that I need crampons, today I am walking with trekking shoes after a long time. Recently, I have often climbed with snow mountain shoes, so I feel my legs lighter than usual.

While ascending a deserted forest zone, I enjoy the tranquil atmosphere by listening to the twitter of Japanese bush warblers and other wild birds. Looking back the way I have climbed up, I can see a vast plateau that leads to Nagano City.



Flowers are blooming here and there. When I am taking pictures of cherry blossoms wet with morning dew, a pair of climbers have passed me by, saying, “Hi! You have a nice camera!” More flowers will bloom from now to summer.

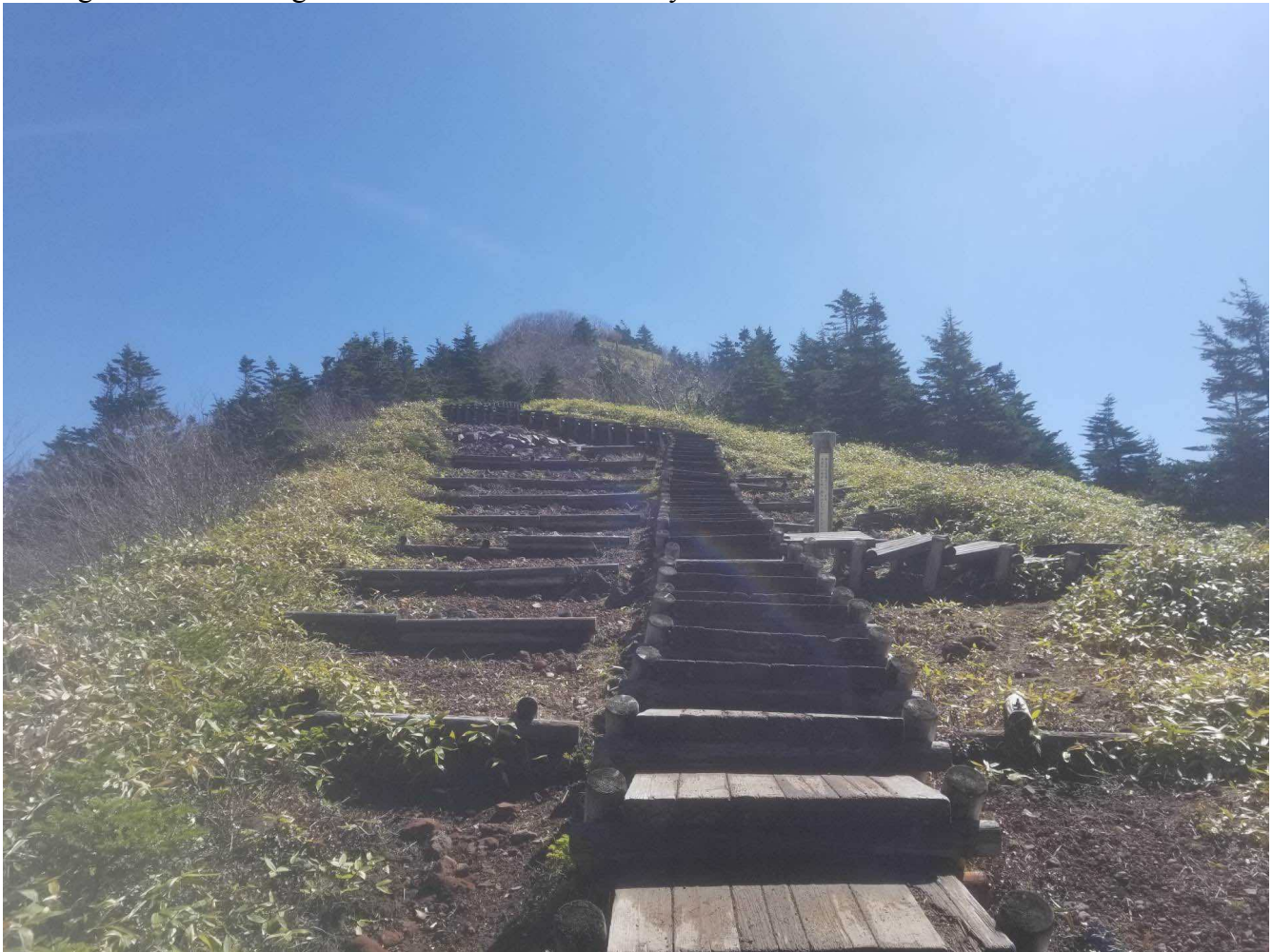




I continue climbing and find snow slopes in the forest zone. As the information I got from the Internet, there would be no problem if I don't put on crampons. After leaving the forest zone, you can see the full view of Mount Neko-dake, which has gentle downward slopes on the left.

At the turning point of Mount Neko-dake and Mount Azumaya, I join the climbers coming up from Mount Neko-dake. We will reach the top of Mount Azumaya in about 20 minutes.

The mountain path is well maintained and followed by a long wooden staircase leading to the summit. The signboard indicating the summit of Mount Azumaya can be seen over the stairs.



There is a small shrine next to the mountaintop sign, which stands out clear against the blue sky. During the previous visit, it was cloudy and misty around the mountaintop. So, the summit under the perfect weather gives me a completely different impression.

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I pass the small shrine and walk to a place, which has a great view and enough space for us climbers to take some rests. I join the people, who are eating some foods after reaching the peak. It is still before 9 am and I need not hurry.

Spending a leisurely time while appreciating the scenery, I start heading for the next destination, Mount Neko-dake with an altitude of 2,207 meters.

By the way, until I return to my home and see the photograph I took in the past, I do not notice the fact that the small shrine at the summit of Mount Azumaya has been replaced.

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When I come down to the turning point leading to Mount Neko-dake, one senior climber seems to be considering whether he should climb Mount Neko-dake. Based on my experience, I say to him, “I recommend you to climb Mount Neko-dake.” He follows me and says, “I have climbed Mount Azumaya and considered whether to return the way I climbed earlier today. But, after all, I have decided to aim at Mount Neko-dake.”

As a steep downhill continues for a while, I am climbing down carefully. When I have arrived at a pass, a gentle slope leading to the summit of Mount Neko-dake has appeared in front of me.

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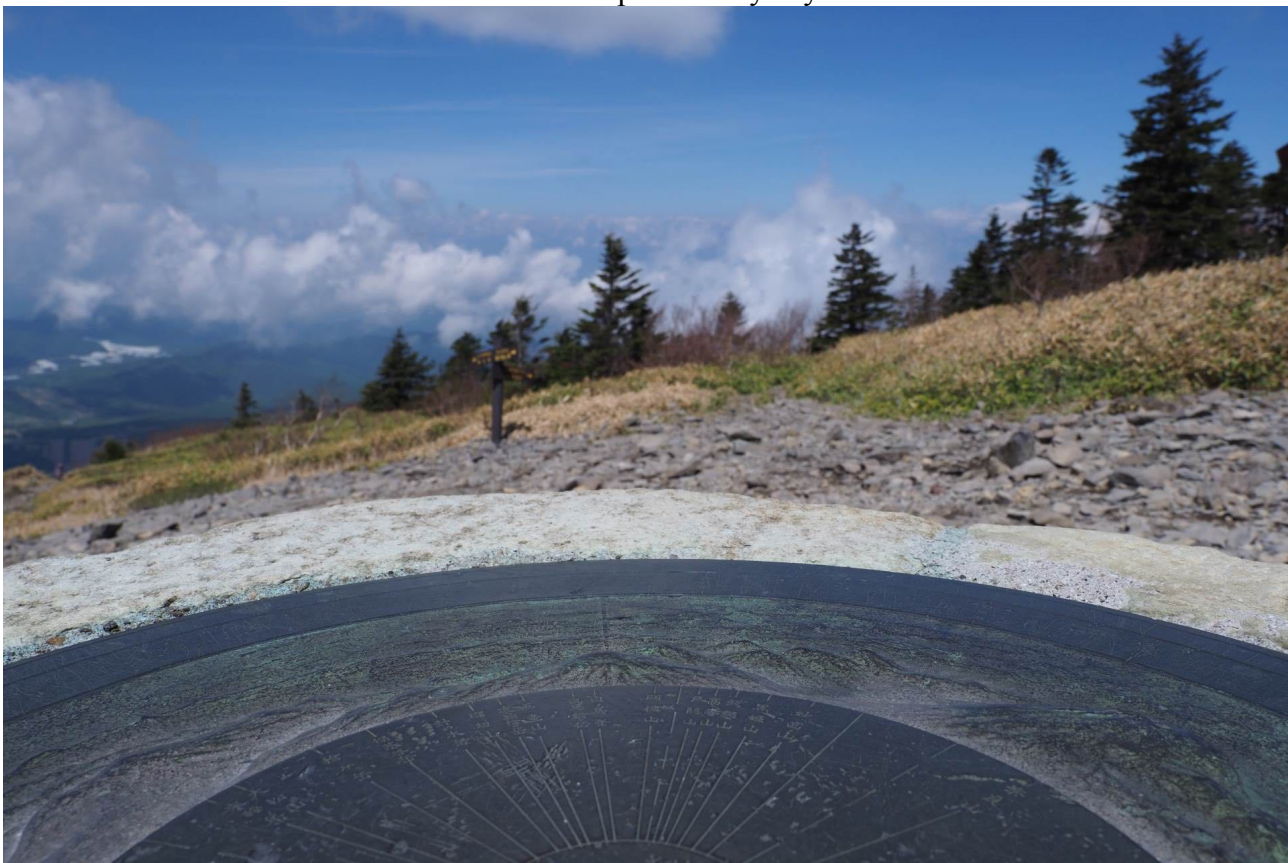
The green meadow contrasting well with the blue sky makes me feel comfortable while climbing. I exchange greetings with climbers coming from Mount Neko-dake to Mount Azumaya. I look back and see the road, which I have just climbed, leading all the way to Mount Azumaya. The scenery remind me of the one I saw in Mount Asama (refer to Episode 020). Some huge rocks can be seen in the upper part of the mountain path. Climbing over the rocky stretches, a small shrine standing at the summit of Mount Neko-dake is appearing.

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From the top of Mount Neko-dake, you can look around the large, unobstructed sky and the magnificent scenery. Mountains over there and their directions are inscribed on a stone monument in front of a small shrine. I can see the summits of the Northern Alps far away beyond the clouds.





The place around the small shrine is spacious enough to take a rest everywhere.

After taking some photos, I start climbing down at around 10:30 am. In this route, I can comfortably descending while seeing the vast scenery right ahead of me and the ranch near a starting point. It is our pleasure to climb down while appreciating flowers blooming here and there. After greeting a group of junior high school students who come here on a school excursion, I have finished climbing down to the staring point before noon.



By the way, soft ice cream is sold at a shop next to the starting point. Because the shop was closed last time, this time I'm relieved to see the "Open" sign.

I first buy a pin badge, order the soft ice cream, and finally eat it in the shop. The soft ice cream after mountaineering is unbelievably delicious. I have a chat with an elderly woman who runs the shop and talk about the group of students I met earlier. She says she received a phone call in advance from the school and will serve the soft ice cream for the tens of students when they return here.

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The parking lot, which was deserted in the early morning, has been almost filled to capacity thanks to the fine weather. In fact, it is a privately owned property and costs us 200 yen to park here. Since custodian was not here in the early morning, I have to pay when leaving. I have been healed by the tranquil scenery with the ranch, forgotten the physical fatigue by seeing various flowers, and enjoyed the soft ice cream after mountaineering. So, Mount Azumaya is one of the Japanese 100 Great Mountains that I can recommend to beginners.

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## Episode 025: Mount Nantai



I have climbed the Mount Nantai in Nikko City once. The other day I was about to visit there again, but came to know we would be able to climb it after midnight during only one designated week in summer (refer to Episode 24). It was the reason why I had decided to climb it during the period as my second visiting there. Also, I thought it would be easier to climb at night than in the intensive heat during a day of August. This year the rainy season lasted longer than usual, which made me unable to climb as many mountains as I originally wanted to. So, I am finally climbing a mountain after a long time.

I left my home early in the evening because I wanted to secure parking space and take a nap in my vehicle, preparing for the night climbing. I could see the stars while driving in Gunma Prefecture, so the weather condition would be fine. Although it took much time than I planned due to some traffic jams, I have entered Nikko City, passed through Iroha-zaka Slope, and arrived at Lake Chuzenji. I have parked my car and walked to the shore of Lake Chuzenji. Under the twinkling countless stars, I am taking pictures of them for a while in the dead silence.



At 11 pm, I have reached Futara-san Shrine, the starting point to climb Mount Nantai. The parking lot is already filled to capacity, but luckily I find a space for one automobile. After parking my car, I am preparing for mountaineering. Since the climbers are allowed to enter the mountain at midnight, more cars are arriving one after another. Because of the popularity of this night climbing, it seems that on the particular weekend the parking lot is filled in a short time and the mountain path is so crowded. In the end, I don't have enough time to take a nap, although I had a 30-minute break at a rest area on a highway. Then, it is time to start climbing.

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It is said that Shodo, a Japanese Buddhist monk, was the first person who climbed Mount Nantai in 782. The mountain itself has been the object of worship and mountaineers usually have to pay 500 yen as entrance fee. But this time, we are required to pay 1,000 yen for the special night climbing. I receive a lucky charm at the reception and put it on around my neck.

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We, about 50 climbers, are gathered in front of the precincts. As a priest ritually purifies us, we obey the Shito rule: bow twice, clap our hands twice, put our palms together, and then pray for the god while bowing deeply.

At midnight, we start climbing simultaneously in the sound of someone beating drums. This is the first time for me to experience such a unique start like some race or something.

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The steep stone steps continue right after the starting point and we are climbing the slope filled with rocks and grass. The mountain in the darkness looks a little eerie, but I need not worry thanks to the tens of other climbers.

When about 20 minutes have passed, some people are panting and begin resting one after another. As I properly take a rest at my own pace, I have reached a spacious place, the 3rd station, in another 30 minutes. Almost all the climbers get their backpacks down onto the ground and take some time to take enough rest.



After that, we can walk on a paved road, which is so comfortable that I can afford to look up at the starry sky. The stars, which can be seen through the leaves of trees, are really beautiful.

In a 40-minute walk, the torii (Shinto gate) of the 4th station is appearing, followed by a mountain path again. Steep rocky stretches extend, so I prepare myself for the tough climbing.

Since each climber has his or her own pace, I sometimes lose sight of others around me and find myself climbing alone. The headlight is the only thing I can count on. Due to its poor visibility, I am about to take a wrong route several times. Still, I am gradually climbing up the rocky stretches and gaining altitude.





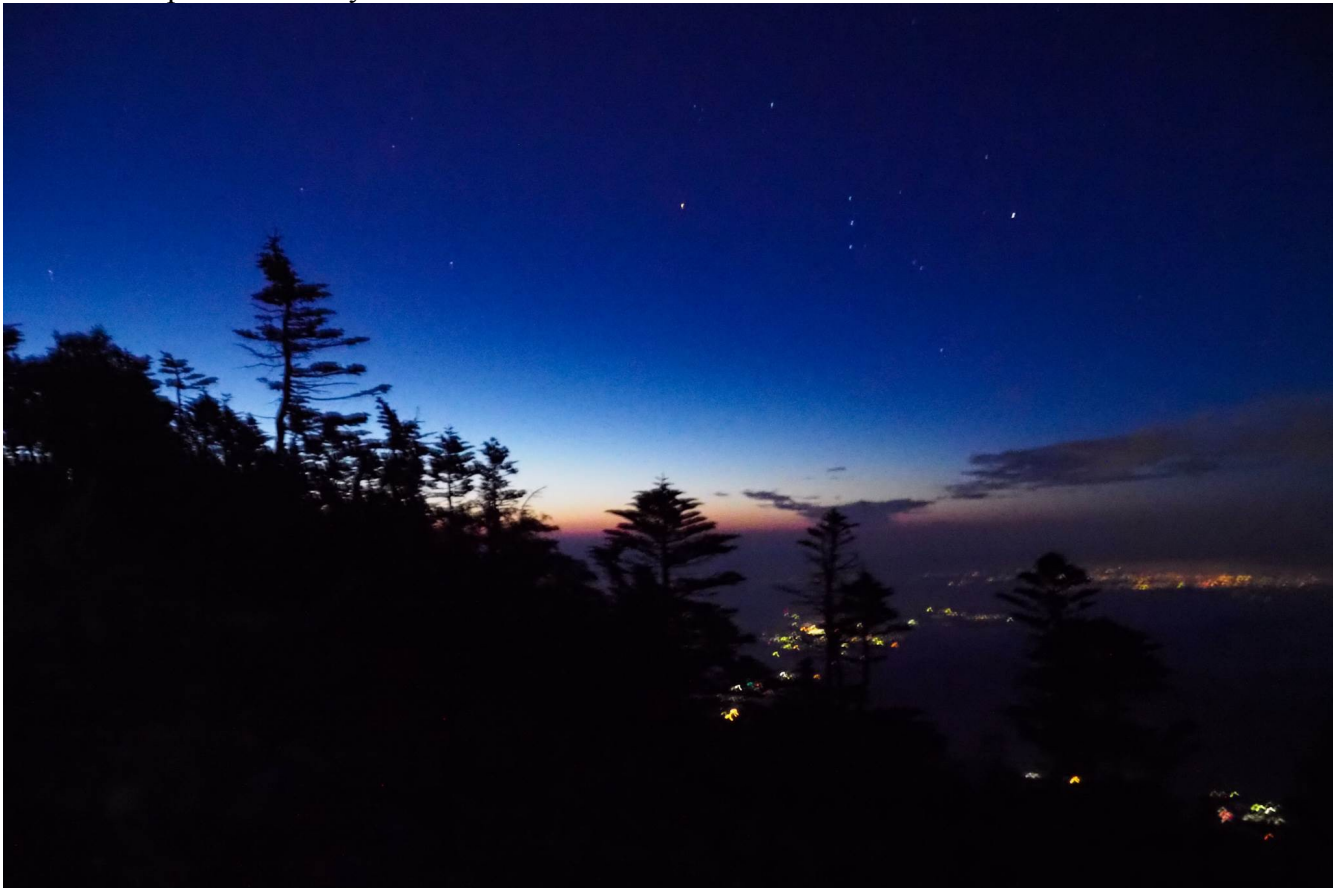
Mount Nantai has been a mountain for Shugendo (meaning ascetic mountaineering as religious training developed in ancient Japan). This time I see several Yamabushi (monks practicing in mountains), wearing white robes with wood sticks. I am climbing along with some of Yamabushi for a while. Probably because of a part of their training, they recite a sutra and blow on a conch shell each time they reach a stone shrine. The sound of the conch shell reverberating in the night mountain creates a mysterious atmosphere.

When I pass by a group of three elderly women taking a break, one of them suddenly asks me, “Hi, how heavy is your backpack?” Actually it is not so heavy, but my backpack might look a little big. I too have stopped there to take some rest.

“The stars are so beautiful, right?”

When I say so, they are surprised, “Oh yes! We cannot afford to see the sky.”

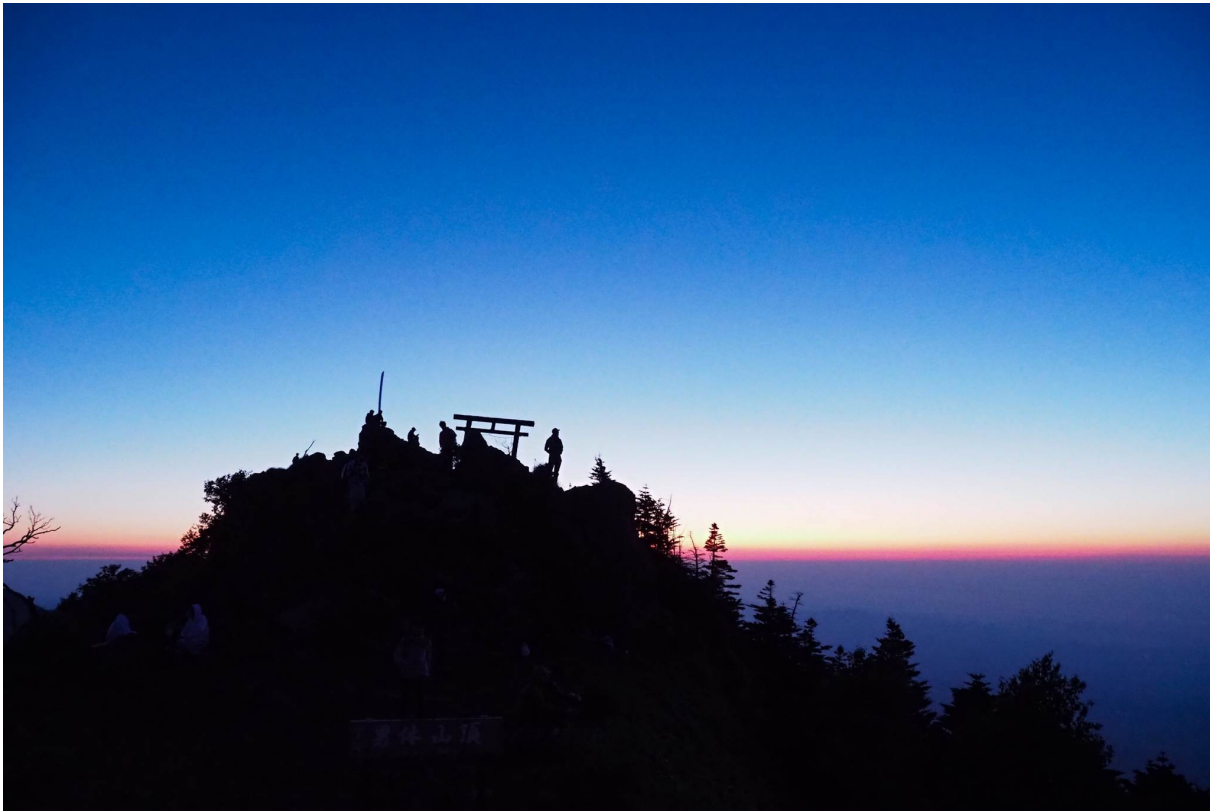
I am also surprised that they don’t notice the wonderful stars in the heavens.



While becoming sleepy and being half conscious, I keep climbing the rock stretches. We have crossed the tree limit, followed by a wide mountain path stretching. Even after the rocky places end, the trail filled with gravel is hard to walk and makes me exhausted. Still, I am slowly climbing step by step. The night mountaineering reminds me that I used to climb all night to see the sunrise from the top of Mount Fuji.

The sky is getting gradually brighter, whereas the Orion can be clearly seen. The torii (sacred Shinto gate) standing at the summit is finally appearing, when climbers give a shout of joy and I am being filled with a sense of achievement. It is still before 4 am and the sun is expected to rise at around 4:40 am. We have a plenty of time to see it.

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Getting through the torii (Shinto gate) at the summit, I find a shop and buy a pin badge (mountaintop limited edition) there. In a spacious place near the shop, climbers who arrived earlier are securing better positions to see the sunrise while boiling water to warm them up. A huge sword, the symbol of Mount Nantai, can be seen over the people.





More mountaineers have arrived one after another. Still, there is enough space for them all to see the sunrise. Since my body is getting cold because of the sweat, I put on winter clothing and am waiting for the time.

Another torii and stone monuments are standing at the back of the mountaintop sign and the giant sword is towering on a rocky mound. The sword was originally dedicated about 140 years ago and exposed to the weather. It was found broken and remade into a stainless steel sword in 2012. It is about 3.5 meters in length and worth seeing. The place where the sword stands is the highest point of Mount Nantai, with an altitude of 2,486 meters.



The area where people can see the sunrise very well is heavily crowded. The town's lights are visible below and the clouds flowing between the mountains are fantastic. The eastern sky is getting brighter and the time of sunrise is approaching. Everyone is waiting for the moment while holding a camera.

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Then, the sun is finally appearing in the clouds, rather than above the clouds. Everyone becomes speechless and is savoring the moment for a while.

Then, maybe as a part of this mountain worship festival, we hear the announcement, saying, “Everyone, let’s celebrate with three cheers.” All of us at the summit shout “Banzai!” (hurray) three times and enjoy the unusual sense of unity.



There is a statue of the Futara-san great gods standing on the other side of the shop, from where you can see Lake Chuzenji below. A huge shadow of Mount Nantai reflecting on the surface of Lake Chuzenji is called “Shadow Mount Nantai”.

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As I start descending from the summit at 5:30, I can clearly see the road I climbed up earlier. In particular, I realize how steep the rocky stretches are. If I could see such wall-like slopes when ascending, it must have been a mentally much tougher experience. Since I could barely see the rock in front of me thanks to the darkness, I did not feel the climbing was too hard to endure.

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When I have descended for two and a half hours and finished climbing down the mountain, my legs are trembling even while just standing because I have been overworking my knees. I want to a day-use hot spring and search the Internet for the information. But I have to give it up, because there is no hot spring available in the morning.

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Then, I head for a restaurant in Gunma Prefecture where I have planned to drop by after the mountaineering. It is a restaurant, specializing in carefully selected natural food, run by a married couple whom I once met in a mountain hut in Yatsugatake a few years ago.

Although it is my first visit to the restaurant in a long time, they look fine and tell me that they just climbed Mount Azumaya a couple of days ago. Climbing all night has made me hungry, so I feel the master's dish is more delicious than usual.

The couple are also marathon runners. The master participated in the Tokyo Marathon this year (2019) and his record is posted on the wall. When I say I'm going to participate in the Tokyo Marathon next year (2020), he is glad to give me various advice.

We can climb Mount Nantai for a limited period between April and November. Among them, we can enjoy the night climbing for only one designated week in summer. It has become a very good experience and worth trying.

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

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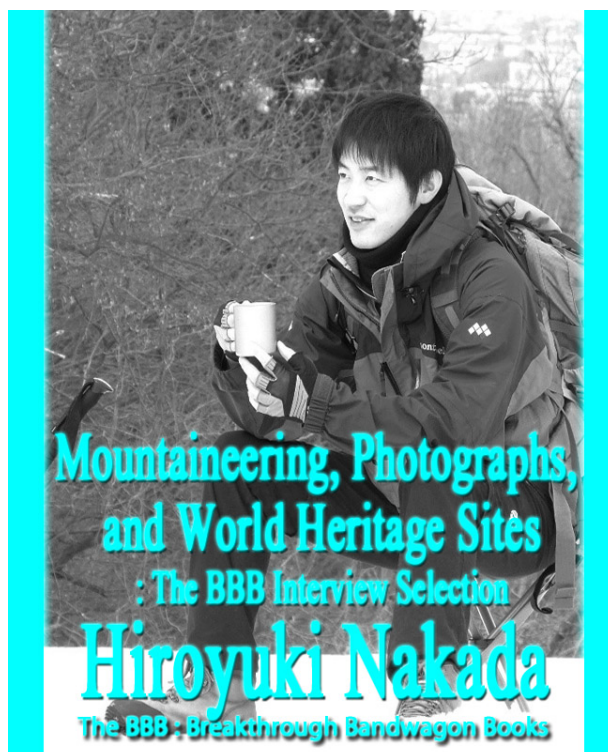


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Mountaineering, Photographs, and World Heritage Sites (Under the name of Hiroiyuki Nakada)

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