

Japanese 100 Great Mountains Vol. 6: Episode 026-030

Originally written in Japanese and translated by Hodaka

Photographs by Hodaka

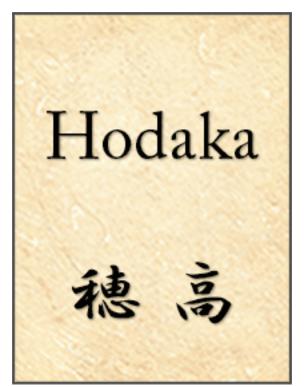
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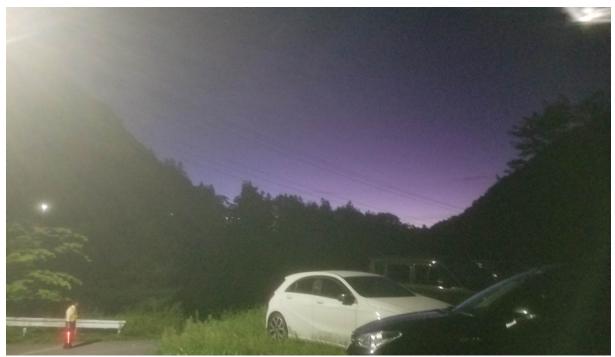


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Episode 026: Mount Senjo



Just one year ago, I stayed in a tent at Kitazawa Pass to climb Mount Kaikoma and Mount Senjo in the Southern Alps. But at the time, due to the rain on the second day, I was able to climb only Mount Kaikoma (refer to Episode 018). So, I aim at the Mount Senjo, which I could not conquer last year. This time I have decided to stay in a mountain hut and chosen a weekend on account of the weather and my schedule.

Approaching the Southern Alps by your own vehicle is restricted, so you need to use bus or taxi to get there. On Saturdays and Sundays, the first bus is available earlier than on weekdays and heavily crowded.

I have arrived at Ashiyasu parking lot at 5:15, about one hour before the first bus. But the parking lots around the area seem to have already been full and I have to get back to the fifth parking lot, which is an about 10-minute walk to the bus stop. I quickly pack up my belongings and get to the bus station, where I see a long line already there.



The first three buses have been parked. I manage to take a seat in the third bus and many passengers fill even the aisle of it. After nearly a one-hour drive, we have reached Hirogawara. I need to change buses here to head for Kitazawa Pass, so I immediately join the line leading to the ticket booth.



Although the line is very long, the bus stop is located in the opposite side. So, I first put my backpack in another line to wait for buses and then get back to the line for tickets again. Buses are arriving one after another and the number of passenger is increasing. I think I did the right decision to first put my backpack in the line for buses. The bus I get in is filled to capacity, including auxiliary seats, and has

departed. Then, I have arrived at Kitazawa Pass at around 7:00 am. While eating breakfast bread, I repack my belongings and start climbing.



Mount Senjo (altitude of 3,033 meters) is called the "Queen of the Southern Alps" because of the graceful appearance, which is in contrast to the severe looking of Mount Kaikoma. The vicinity of the mountaintop is a cirque and has a mountain hut in it. This time I have decided to stay in the Senjo Hut that I could not experience last year. Although a typhoon is approaching, the weather seems to be good until tomorrow. Climbing under the fine weather is well worth waiting for.

I am getting through a forest zone in the heat of over 30 degrees Celsius. When I take a break at the 5th station, a turning point of mountain paths, other mountaineers are climbing up one after another and I hastily resume moving forward. Crossing the tree limit and looking back, I can see the white summit of Mount Kaikoma, which I conquered last year. After that, I feel more comfortable because Mount Kaikoma can be seen each time I look back.



Also, I find a tent site at the foot of the mountain and can recognize a lot of tents set up there by taking pictures of it with a telescope lens of my camera. When I have reached Mount Kosenjo, with an altitude of 2,855 meters, the beautiful cirque leading up to Mount Senjo is in front of me. The scenery is just like the alps in summer. Walking on a gentle ridge for a while, I am getting through a thick creeping pine zone. I try looking for ptarmigans, but in vain. While the top of Mount Senjo is appearing, the Yabusawa Cirque spreads in my right side and I can see the Senjo Hut where I will stay today below the curl.



The summit is so crowded that there is a line to take pictures in front of the mountaintop sign. It would be difficult for me to take pictures without other climbers in the scenery. Waiting for them to leave, I am having lunch at the end of the summit. It will take only 30 minutes from here to the mountain hut, so I can spend a leisurely time. One-day climbers have to descend early to get on the last bus at 4:00 pm. As it is getting sparse, I take photographs of the mountaintop sign again.



The 360-degree view from the summit is superb. I think it might be the first time for me to overlook a cirque (or Kar in German) from the summit of those among Japanese 100 Great Mountains I have ever conquered. Since the sun is shining hard and I have fully enjoyed staying at the summit, I head for the mountain hut.

There is some space with benches and tables in front of the hut. I can see Ina City in Nagano Prefecture below and look up at the cirque surrounding us. I know another mountain hut is nearby, but I have decided to choose this one because its photographs in guidebooks and on the Web fascinated me due to its great location. Moreover, although I learned it after the decision, there is the best spot to see the sunrise, which is about a 15-minute walk from the hut. If you are lucky, you can see at a time the top three of Japan's highest mountains: Mount Fuji, Mount Kita, and Mount Aino.



Following the check-in, workers in the hut guide me to the accommodations on the third floor, by going up the exterior steps after getting out of the second floor including the reception desk. I see 16 sets of futon (Japanese-style bedding) lined up in the room. Thanks to my early arriving, I can get the one at the left end, which is the best position because it is close to the entrance door and has some space to left my backpack and belongings. I can go in and out very easily.



It is pleasantly sunny outside. The contrast between Yabusawa Cirque and the blue sky is so beautiful that I take many pictures. Some groups are in high spirits while drinking beer on the benches. I read some books in the hut and lie down on my futon for a while to take a rest. In the meantime, other mountaineers are coming one after another and all the futon have been occupied.



The dinner starts at 5:00 pm and a staff member asks us to come to the dining hall. This mountain hut can accommodate up to 55 people and the dining hall is full of us today's guests. The dinner is a hamburger steak and a fried shrimp, which is a feast as a dish in a mountain.

After a while, a manager of the hut greets us and explains the matters that require attention in the hut and the weather of the mountain.

"Usually, it is very easy to fog up here. But today we have the clear sky almost all the day. I think it is one of the best three days this year."

The manager's remarks put enthusiasm into the dining hall. He also adds, "A fog has set in now, but I think it would clear up during the night and you could see the sunrise."



It is still bright after the dinner, so I have decided to head for the place which is said to be the best spot for us to see the sunrise.

In Mount Senjo, we often see birds flying over creeping pines. It looks like a rock ptarmigan, but actually is a spotted nutcracker, which inhabits a high mountain and likes to eat the nuts of creeping pines. I see spotted nutcrackers flying even in this late hour, when a rock ptarmigan has suddenly appeared in front of me.



Obviously, it is not a spotted nutcracker. When I approach it slowly, it lies down on a mountain trail, enters the vegetation around here, and is pecking at the leaves.

Rock ptarmigans are designated as one of specially protected animals. It is said that it will not often appear on a sunny day to protect itself from natural enemies. But as I am taking pictures of the bird, I can see three more rock ptarmigans in the upper area.

Japanese people have conceived of rock ptarmigans as a messenger of gods since the ancient times and handled them carefully. So, even when we approach it, it will not try to escape from us. But it is the case found in Japan. On the other hand, I heard that rock ptarmigans are eaten in some countries and the birds there will run away immediately after they see a human.



I have reached the place which is said to be the best spot for us to see the sunrise. While the sun is gradually setting, the lights of a city at the foot of the mountain can be seen more clearly. This time I bring a large tripod, which I purchased to take pictures of starry skies, and try it to shoot the sunset. Although the sky is clear, clouds seem to be springing up from the foot of the mountain.



At it has become dark after the sunset, I return to the mountain hut with the headlight on. Ina City can be seen from the square in front of the hut and I see fireworks rising above the city. I think I will take photographs of the stars later, but I cannot see them because of the fog thickening around here. The lights-out of the hut is 8 pm. I get back to the room once and change the lenses of my camera for taking photographs during the night. The staff has turned off the light at 8 pm and I have fallen asleep immediately.

It is before midnight when I have woken up. I can see the stars through the window, so I get out of the hut quietly with my belongings including the camera. It has cleared up completely and the countless stars in the heavens are above me. I find the Milky Way right above the mountain. I think this is the first time in a mountain for me to see the Milky Way so clearly like this.

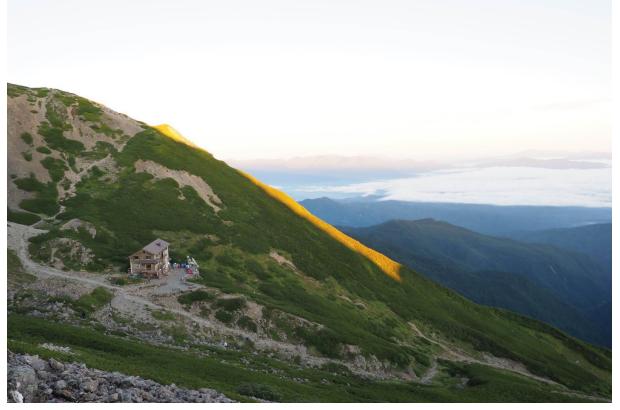


I set a tripod in front of a bench and take pictures of the cirques, the mountain hut, and Ina City. Although I usually take pictures with a smaller tripod, I can do that comfortably with the larger one. It is not so cold and I'm absorbed in doing it. In the meantime, two men get out of the hut and head for the mountain trail. After a while, I can see their headlights at around the summit. They seem to try conquering the peak in the dead of the night.

Taking pictures of the starry sky for nearly one hour, I get back to the room and fall asleep again.



When I wake up before 5 am, some of us guests seem to have already left the mountain hut to see the sunrise. I also come to the place, where I took pictures last evening, before the sunrise at around 5:15. As the manager of the hut said, it is really a wonderful moment when we can even see the top three highest mountains in Japan at a time.



Then, I get back to the hut and have breakfast. After leaving the hut at 6 am, all I have to do is climb down straight to Kitazawa Pass. Although a typhoon will be approaching here this evening, I see quite a few people coming up for their one-day climbing.

I quicken my pace because I think I might be able to get on an earlier bus. However, many people are coming up and rocky stretches continue, which makes me slow down so as not to get injured.

Once I have reached the bus stop, I have left my backpack on a seat in the waiting room. A number is attached to each seat and we can get on the bus in numerical order. My seat number is three.

I still have about 2 hours until the bus departure at 9:45 am, so I have decided to go to a nearby cottage to drink coffee.



Thanks to many books and photo albums about mountains in this cottage, I need not worry about being bored. When I return to the bus stop a little before the departure, the waiting room are crowded with people. While waiting for the bus to come, I enjoy talking about mountains with a woman sitting next to me. In the bus, she says she comes from Kagoshima Prefecture and gives me detailed information about mountains in the Kyushu Island and the Western Japan.

After arriving at Hirogawara, the woman and I first try to stand in a line for the ticket booth and for the bus, respectively. But luckily, we can take a taxi. We have departed earlier than the bus and part from each other at Ashiyasu.

If I climbed Mount Senjo last year, I couldn't have seen the stars in the heavens from the mountain hut. Climbing Mount Senjo this time has become a fulfilling experience.



Episode 027: Mount Kisokoma



This time I have planned to traverse Mount Kisokoma and Mount Utsugi in the Central Alps (or Kiso Mountains). When I called a mountain hut near the summit of Mount Kaikoma yesterday, the person on the phone was very kind to me.

Mount Kisokoma is the highest peak among Kiso Mountains. Despite the altitude of 2,956 meters, we can reach the summit for about 2 hours after getting on ropeway (or cable car). It is the reason why this mountain attracts many visitors.

Considering the time required, I need not start climbing from early in the morning. So, I have left my home at dawn and it is new to me because I usually start climbing at dawn.



I drive from Tokyo to the direction of Nagoya on the Chuo Expressway and buy some bread for breakfast at Yatsugatake Rest Area, which is known for the delicious bread sold there.

Getting off the highway at Komagane Interchange in Nagano Prefecture, I have arrived at Suganodai Bus Center at a little past 9 am. It is the limit where we can reach by our own cars and we have to take a bus to move from here to the ropeway platform. Although it is heavily crowded on weekends during the tourist season, there are few climbers today because of weekday.

The bus departs at 9:45, goes up hairpin curves for about 30 minutes, and has arrived at Shirabidaira Station, the ropeway platform. This ropeway boasts the largest elevation difference (950 meters) in Japan, accommodates about 60 people, departs every 30 minutes. I'm surprised that climbers have to wait for three hours to get on the ropeway during the peak season.

We can move to Senjyojiki Station, the other end, in just seven and a half minutes. The altitude of the station (2,612 meters) is the highest in Japan as a ropeway platform. A hotel next to the station is also said to be the one at the highest altitude in Japan as a hotel.



I submit a mountain climbing registration form and get out of the building. Senjojiki Cirque, one of the three greatest cirques in Japan, spreads out before me. The steep rock face of Mount Hoken contrasts well with the blue sky, which represents the superb views in the Central Alps. You can see this great scenery just by getting on the ropeway, so quite a few people visit here in their everyday clothes without mountaineering.

When I am taking pictures, a heavy fog comes up from the foot of the mountain and prevents me from seeing the scenery. Since I can hardly see anything in the fog after that, I think I reached here in a timely manner to see the superb view.

I have a plenty of time and climb so leisurely that I'm not tired at all despite the steep rocky stretches. The mist starts clearing and the blue sky is spreading. But the clouds are moving so fast that the scenery is immediately filled with the white fog again before I take out my camera.



After less than one-hour climbing, I have reached a ridge line, whose scenery is called Nokkoshi Jodo. However, I can only see the mountain trail because of the thick fog.

It will take me another one hour to get to the mountain hut from here. Since it is a little past noon, I boil water to prepare for lunch. When the sky clears up occasionally, I can see the mountain path that I have climbed, and some figures on the top of Mount Hoken.

Then, I pass "the summit mountain hut" on the way to the summit beyond Mount Naka. This is the memorial place where I once stayed in my tent for the first time.

It is before 2:00 pm when I have reached the summit of Mount Kisokoma. It is a spacious place with a large shrine worshipped. By the time, the blue sky spreads out again and I can overlook the scenery.



It is about five minutes' walk from the summit to the mountain hut at which I am staying tonight. The hut is easily recognizable because the letters "Kiso Summit Hut" are written with kanji (Chinese characters) on its roof.

I have arrived at the hut and the manager, whom I spoke on the phone, comes out. Following the checkin procedure at the dining room, he serves some tea and sweets to me.

The mountain hut is huge enough to accommodate up to 100 people, but there are few guests tonight and I can use the room spaciously.



I exchange greetings and talk a bit with other guests in the room: two elderly women from Kansai (or Western Japan) and one man from Nagoya City. The man seems to have already stayed at this hut for several days and climbed Mount Sannosawa, located beyond Mount Hoken, today.

I lie down on my futon (Japanese-style bedding) and spend time reading a book until the meal to be served at 5:30 pm. In the meantime, the party of three housewives has newly arrived and made the room livelier. The seven of us guests share the dinner table and enjoy talking. After the meal, we drink some tea and continue talking about mountains, each of our locals, and journeys.



The fog outside is so thick that we cannot see the stars at all. According to the weather forecast on TV, it will not be fine tomorrow. To make matters worse, it will be raining in the afternoon. As everyone is disappointed, I show them some pictures of the starry sky and sunrise I took when I climbed Mount Senjo the other day (refer to Episode 026). I'm glad they seem to be emotionally moved by them. I might have to give up traversing to Mount Utsugi and climb down in the morning. I think I will have to make the final decision by checking the weather condition in the morning.

After the lights have been turned off at 8:30 pm, I have fallen asleep immediately. I wake up once at a little past midnight. On the way to the bathroom, I turn my headlight toward the sky, which is still foggy and drizzling.



I wake up at 4:50 am in the expectation of seeing the sunrise, but the weather hasn't changed since last night and we can't see anything in the fog. This seems to be the first authentic mountaineering for some housewives coming from Nagoya, so they are sorry they cannot see the sunrise.

After breakfast, I depart from the hut first among the guests, pass the summit of Mount Kisokoma, take a detour to Mount Naka, and return to Nokkoshi Jodo.

Weather permitting, I would traverse to Mount Utsugi. But I have to give it up this time due to the bad weather. Still, I have decided to climb down through Mount Hoken, at least.



Mount Hoken, with an altitude of 2,931 meters, is 20 minutes' walk from Nokkoshi Jodo. The rocky place is steep and its precipice is hundreds of meters in height. Since rocks are slippery, I am climbing carefully while using chains equipped there. The thick fog obstructing the view below me does not rouse much of a thrill. Although I think so, I slip and lose my balance once. I notice the precipice right there, which has made me scared to death. Come to think of it, I remember that the passengers behind me on the bus moving to the ropeway said, "If you slide down from Mount Hoken, your body would be too destroyed to be identified."

I have enough time to spare even after passing Mount Hoken. So, I have decided to go to Mount Sannosawa, which is a mountain I talked about with a male guest in the hut.

Usually, there are few climbers coming to Mount Sannosawa. I meet no one on the way under the bad weather. Not raining, but dew on creeping pines, which are as high as my waist, is soaking my pants and shoes. The fog seems to be clearing up several times, but soon covers the view again. I take a rest for a while beside the small mountaintop sign. After all, the fog has not cleared up until I have finished climbing down.



When I return from Mount Sannosawa to Gokurakudaira and am walking down to the ropeway station, one climber is coming up toward me. She asks me about the way ahead and we have a conversation for a while. She lives at the foot of Mount Kisokoma and seems to go up the mountain each time she feels like doing so by using the annual ropeway pass. I have not known such a pass is available. The price is quite reasonable, so I think I want to use it if I live nearby.

After arriving at Senjojiki Station of the ropeway, I put away the wet backpack cover and outerwear. I still have some time and have decided to drink some coffee at a store called "2612 Café", which is named after the altitude. Mount Hoken, which I could see yesterday, cannot be seen at all today. The fact makes a tour group of climbers disappointed when they get off the ropeway.



The ropeway departs at 13:00 and after getting back to the other station, I take a bus heading for Suganodai Bus Center. When the bus has parked at a bus stop in front of a hot spring, two passengers are getting on it and say to me, "Oh, hey!" They are the ones from Kansai whom I met in the mountain hut last night. They say they have come straight to the hot spring after descending the mountain. We are pleased with the unexpected reunion.

After returning to the parking lot and changing my clothes, I head for a nearby hot spring named "Komakusa no Yu". Since my body has become cold, taking a bath leisurely is healing me. By the way, I have a plan to eat "Sauce Katsudon", a local food in Komagane City, which I found through the Internet. Among several stores in the vicinity, I have chosen a restaurant named "Meiji-tei", located close to the hot spring. The pork cutlet is huge enough to stick out from the bowl. I am fully satisfied with the impressive appearance and the delicious taste.



Episode 028: Mount Tateshina



I bought a new tent in the fall of 2019 and wanted to try it by the end of the year. At first, I chose a mountain in Oze among those having tent sites on the mountainsides. But I could not make it, because the huts in the mountain had already been closed at the end of October. As I considered other mountains, I had decided to climb Mount Tateshina, belonging to the Yatsugatake Mountains.

Mount Tateshina is also called "Suwa Fuji" (meaning "the mountain like Mount Fuji in the Suwa region"), because of the beautifully conical shape. The altitude is 2,531 meters. Deep coniferous forests spread over the mountainside and the summit has a lava dome with huge rocks piled up. It works as a large reservoir and there are several ponds around the mountain. It is said that it has been worshiped as a god of water and agriculture because it has enriched people through the rivers flowing at the foot of the mountain.

Since I once went on a day trip to climb Mount Tateshina, I have been wanting to stay at a hut in the mountain next time. But the huts have already been closed in early November. While searching through the Internet, I have found the Futagoike (meaning the Twins Pond) Hut, which has a tent site and is the only one still open in the Tateshina area this time of the year. I have not known the Futagoike Hut before, because it is a long way from the other huts near the summit. According to the information I saw on the Web, it seems to be a great place where we can set up a tent right in front of the waterside and take photographs of the stars reflecting on the surface of the water under the fine weather. The images of the tents on the waterside I saw looked very tranquil and attractive. So, I thought it would be the best place for me to try the new tent.



Like the previous occasion, this time I needed not start climbing early in the morning. So, I left my home at about 6 am, moved leisurely, and got to Kita-Yatsugatake Ropeway Station, a starting point for climbing, at 9:30. The parking lot is very spacious because of the ski slopes in winter. Unlike the route I chose last time, I have decided to head for Mount Tateshina via Mount Kitayoko by using a ropeway. If you buy a round-trip ropeway ticket, the price will be more reasonable. Since I am going to stay in a tent tonight, I ask a woman at the ticket counter, "Can I use the return ticket even if I come back tomorrow?" She answers, "Yes, of course." When I have purchased the round-trip ticket, I cannot predict that the conversation will later affect this mountaineering.



Getting on the ropeway at 10:20, I move to the Mountaintop Station, the other end of the ropeway, in about seven minutes. There is a small yard with a trekking course you can walk around in a quasinational park formed by the eruption of Yatsugatake Mountains.

I turn into a side road in the middle, ascend the mountain path for about 40 minutes, and have reached the Mount Kitayoko hut. This hut is a memorable place for me, because it was the place I met a married couple who runs a restaurant in Gunma Prefecture (refer to Episode 025). I see a table for rest beside the hut and have decided to have a meal here. Then, after climbing for another 15 minutes, I have arrived at the summit of Mount Kitayoko. Since you can reach the summit only about one hour after getting off the ropeway, this place is heavily crowded with a lot of climbers.



Mount Kitayoko (also called Mount Yoko) has two peaks: the southern peak and the northern peak. It is about five minutes' walk from the southern peak, the nearer summit, to the northern one. Few climbers get to the latter, though. Then, I go further to head for the hut via Mount Otake. In the route, I have not encountered anyone, except for only a pair of climbers.

Walking on a huge rock, surrounded by thick woods like a jungle, gives me the impression I am wandering in an unexplored region. There are some places where I almost get lost. Still, a pond is finally appearing and I have arrived at the Futagoike Hut.



When I check in at the reception, the manager of the hut asks me about my plan for tomorrow. "I will climb down by ropeway after conquering the summit of Mount Tateshina."

When I say so, he tells the shocking truth.

"But in fact, the ropeway is available only by today."

I explain to him that I earlier confirmed the availability of the ropeway with the woman at the ticket office. According to the manager, she seems to have called the hut and said, "I'm sorry I mistakenly gave him the wrong information. I will refund the ticket price, if he comes here again tomorrow." I lose strength of my legs and almost fall on the floor. The manager sympathetically offers to help me consider an alternative plan, but I have decided to think about it later.

As the name "Futagoike" (meaning "Twin Pond" in English) indicates, it actually has two ponds: "Oike" ("Male Pond") and "Meike" ("Female Pond"). The tent site is located in the opposite side and is about 10 minutes' walk from the hut. I'm walking with excitement toward the site while remembering the photographs of the cozy place.

But the road leading to the site is submerged in the middle. As I am taking a detour, I notice the water level of the pond has been risen due to the typhoon the other day. Since the record-breaking typhoon massively damaged Nagano Prefecture and the Kanto region last October, the entire tent site has been flooded.



I have no choice but to set up the tent in some space between bamboos near the pond. Although there certainly is the pond right in front of me, the bamboo grasses hinder me from seeing it when I am standing around the tent.

This time I use the tent, manufactured by the maker named NEMO, for the first time. Despite the tent for two persons, it is light and its spaciousness and green color made me decide to purchase it.

When I have finished setting up the tent, I hear a sound from behind. Then, one man has appeared and he seems to stay in his tent. I speak to him and he tells me that he comes from Chiba Prefecture and has climbed up here from another staring point. We can exchange information about the route each of us has walked through today.

I return to the mountain hut to get water, have a meal while listening to the radio. Then, I lie in the tent and think about the route for tomorrow.



When looking out of the tent at 20:00, I can see the stars in the heavens. I have decided to go to near the pond to take photographs of the night sky with a tripod and a camera. I sometimes hear some eerie noise from the bamboos in the darkness. Still, it is a fantastic view in which the moonlight shines on the pond and the mountain hut in the distance.

After returning to the tent, I put on a down jacket because of the severely cold temperature, get into my sleeping bag, and have fallen asleep. However, I wake up during the night many times due to the coldness.

The long night finally comes to an end and the rising sun gives me the will to act lively and makes me feel the blessing of it. When I am striking the tent after the breakfast, I notice the ground has been frozen and can see how cold it was.



I exchange greetings with the man who stayed in his tent near mine and leave at around 6:30 am. I'm planning the schedule for today: I first head for Mount Tateshina via Mount Futago, return to the ropeway platform via Mount Kitayoko, and walk to Mountain Foot Station of the cable transport. The route to Mount Futago is gentle and easy to walk, and the great view fully satisfies me. There is a parking lot near here, so people can easily come to the Futagoike Hut by car. I think I will come here to stay in a tent again someday in the future.

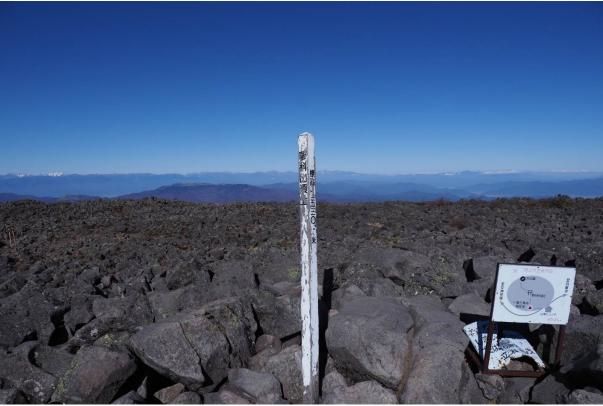
I have arrived at Tateshina Sanso a little before the summit of Mount Tateshina. Although the hut is currently closed, I can take a rest at the space in front of the hut.



Because of the location at the fork of mountain routes, many climbers are coming up here from other starting points.

It will take about 30 minutes to reach the summit from here. Considering I will later come back here, I have decided to leave the main backpack behind and carry sub backpack containing minimal belongings. In fact, I have carried the backpack, which is as heavy as 17 to 18 kilograms, so far. The sub backpack is so light that I can climb steep rocky stretches very easily as if I got wings on my back.

Huge rocks spread over at the summit. It is a spacious flat place with a diameter of about 100 meters. It looks like a landscape found in another planet. Torii (sacred Shinto gate) and Tateshina Shrine are standing at the center of the wide summit.



After returning to Tateshina Sanso, I carry the heavy backpack on my back again and then aim for the ropeway platform over Mount Kitayoko. The ropeway is not operated today, so there seems to be no one else walking on my route.

According to the map, the course time is about 3 hours. Accumulated fatigue makes me delay, but I have finally reached the top of Mount Kitayoko.



I feel less stressed because I need not go up any more today after conquering the summit. The Mount Kitayoko Hut is closed, although it was open until yesterday. Later, I know the fact that the ropeway is out of service for inspection from today, and that the Mount Kitayoko Hut is closed on weekdays unless they have some reservation.

When I return to a small yard near the ropeway, no one can be seen around there. Such scenery is really rare. The Mountaintop Station is closed and there is no sign of any human being today. I have to climb down from here to the Mountain Foot Station of the cable transport.

Usually, it takes about seven minutes each way by the ropeway. But I move on foot and end up spending nearly one hour. If I'm not tired, it would have been no big deal. But since I have crossed three mountains while carrying the tent on my back, the fatigue on my foot have been heavily accumulated. I used the Kita-Yatsugatake ropeway several times in the past, but this is the first time for me to walk on the mountain path under the cable transport. Meandering in a broad area, I am climbing down endlessly while looking up at the rope of the aerial tramway.

Finally, I have arrived at Mountain Foot Station. When I visit the ticket counter again, the staff who sold the ticket yesterday apologizes sincerely and gives me a full refund. She says she noticed that the ropeway would be out of service and guessed I would stay at the Futagoike Hut, which was still open yesterday, and made a phone call. If such an accident did not happen, I would not have dared to walk down under the ropeway. It has become truly a valuable experience for me.



Episode 029: Mount Kusatsu-Shirane



When the Tokyo Marathon (2020) was coming up in a month, I went to a familiar restaurant in Gunma Prefecture to meet the owner with whom I had become acquainted in a mountain (refer to Episode 25). According to the advice from him, I was jogging on a bridge over Tone River nearby.

On the following day, I headed for Mount Norikura, a snowy mountain located at the southern end of the Northern Alps. Despite the nice weather, my legs buried in the snowfield with crampons and it seemed difficult to keep climbing without snowshoes. To make matters worse, I was caught in the whiteout and could do nothing but retreat.



After that, due to the spread of the new coronavirus infection, we general runners were not allowed to participate in the Tokyo Marathon. A lot of other events have been canceled throughout Japan and there are no signs of the termination (as of March 2020).

In the meantime, I bought snowshoes for the next mountaineering and decided to aim for Mount Kusatsu-Shirane on a fine day. Although its official name is Mount Shirane, the mountain is generally called "Mount Kusatsu-Shirane", along with the local name "Kusatsu" to distinguish it from other Mount Shiranes.

The altitude of Mount Shirane near Yugama is 2,160 meters. When Mount Kusatsu-Sirane is regarded as one mountain range including Mount Ainomine and Mount Moto-Shirane, Mount Moto-Shirane, which has an altitude of 2,171 meters and is the highest peak.

Mount Shirane is an active volcano that has erupted several times since the 1900s. It recently erupted in January 2018 and its volcanic alert level was raised. Then, the level gradually has been lowered and I have decided to climb Mount Moto-Shirane at Level 1 (We need to pay attention to an active volcano).



On the day before climbing, I bought a Daruma Bento, a specialty of Takasaki Station in Gunma Prefecture, on the way to the mountain. It is a popular bento (lunch box), including various ingredients centering on mountain products in a red plastic container in the shape of a Daruma doll. This Daruma Bento would be an essential item during this mountaineering.

Then, I headed for Karuizawa, spent the night in my car, and started driving at dawn to Manza Onsen, a hot spring and the starting point for the climbing.

Reaching the parking lot of the facility called "Manza Nature Center," I get out of the car. The sulfur smell reminds me that this is a hot spring. A snowplow is removing snow around here.

According to the information I searched through the Internet, snowshoes or Wakan (Japanese-style rackets) seem to be essential. I also saw the scene of Mount Moto-Shirane on the Web.

After changing clothes, I equip for a snowy mountain and start climbing at 7:30 am. There is a steep slope at the starting point. The snow is so deep that I have decided to put on snowshoes immediately. Another climber has just started ascending ahead of me.



The steep slope is 7 to 8 meters high and looks like a wall. I watch my steps and go up carefully. It takes more than 10 minutes for me to go over the slope.

After that, the gentle slope continues without any danger. There seems to be little snow when I see it from a distance, but the mountain path is densely covered with snow.

The snowshoes, which I use for the first time, is comfortable. I do not bury my legs in the snow and follow the trace of the climber going up ahead of me.

After a while, when the climber is putting on the Wakan, I greet and pass by him. There is no trace in front of me, but I keep going while checking the route with the GPS of my smartphone.



To check my location, I try to take my smartphone out of the shoulder case of my backpack, when I realize it's empty. The zipper is open, and it seems that I forgot to close it and the smartphone dropped by chance.

Fortunately, since I used it a few minutes ago, I am returning while checking on the surface of the snow carefully and have found it stuck in the snow ground. I'm relieved. But the battery has exhausted so much probably because of having been wet for a while. It might not be able to last until I climb down. The climber, who was putting on the Wakan earlier, catches up with me. The two of us check the direction and are getting through the forest zone while taking the lead by turns. Relying on the map with the GPS, we wander around and head for a mountain ridge. Finally, we have found a trace from another direction. It is a clear trace which some people seems to have passed before today. I think we will need not worry about getting lost if we follow the trace.



Although the sunshine is comfortably warm, I get cold immediately when I take a break. Since I boiled tea just before climbing and put it in Thermos, I can have some hot tea even during the rest. Thanks to that, it is comfortable mountaineering.

After passing through the forest zone, I have reached an open slope. Looking back, I can see the beautiful mountains of the Northern Alps. The snowshoes I am wearing have blades on the outer edge, and I can climb on snow slopes without any difficulty.

When I have arrived at the spacious place near the summit in about 3 hours after the start of climbing, I see the beautiful shape of Mount Asama over the mountains. It's about time my smartphone is just dead.



There is a mountaintop sign that reads "Mount Moto-Shirane" in this spacious place. But the actual highest peak is the mountain seen over there on my left side. I see the trace leading to the point on the snowfield. Now that I have reached here, I start walking through the forest zone aiming for the highest peak.

The actual summit of Mount Moto-Shirane is amid the forest zone, and I only find pink tape stuck on a tree branch to show it is the summit.

While taking some photographs of the surrounding snow scenery, I see the man, who climbed with me halfway up the mountain, is around the summit sign. When we pass each other, he says to me, "Your climbing pace is very fast, right?"



After coming back to the mountaintop sign and taking the picture, I have something to do quickly. I want to make a snowman by using the lunch box in the shape of a Daruma doll. Since I saw it on another snow mountain in the past, I have wanted to try it someday. It is the reason why I bought the lunch box on the way (refer to Episode 021).

Squeezing snow into the empty lunch box, I have easily succeeded in creating a beautiful snowman in the shape of a Daruma doll. I try to take a picture of the mountaintop sign against the background of Mount Moto-Shirane.

There is not enough space on the mountaintop sign to put the snowman on. I try to have the snowman pierced with the corner of the mountaintop signboard but to no avail. As I see another climber coming up here, I try making a snowman again and finally succeed in taking a picture of the third snowman. Since it is just before the climber has arrived, it is quite timely. The climber seems to be surprised by the snowman and takes a picture of the snowman. I think it was worth making it.



I have reached the summit with snowshoes and needed not to use crampons. Then, I start climbing down at once. I pass by several climbers, who are less than I expected.

Moving on, for the time being, I find the trace branching into two. One is probably the trace that I came from earlier, so I have decided to take the other route.

A thin coat of snow covers the trace, which seems to have been made yesterday. I think nobody walks on it today. I enjoy walking on the quiet snow slope without seeing anyone. I sometimes find animal footprints on the snowfield and imagine what creatures have left there.

After climbing down for nearly two hours, I see Manza Ski Resort in the distance. Approaching the parking lot as the starting point, I descend the steep slope carefully and have come back safely.



I take down my backpack, change shoes, and enter the "Manza Nature Center." This facility introduces the nature of Manza and Kusatsu areas, and we can learn about seasonal plants and animals, and volcanoes. I buy a pin badge of Mount Moto-Shirane and talk with a shop staff about the regulation of entering the mountain.

Then, I head for Manza Onsen, which is the hot spring with the highest sulfur content in Japan. I get a map, drive for a few minutes, and have reached the spa town, which is crowded with accommodation facilities. Because of ski resorts in the vicinity, there are many accommodation facilities and a lot of skiers.

As I want to take a bath asap, I have decided to take a dip in a hot spring in Manza Kogen Hotel. There is outdoor mixed bathing with an altitude of 1,800 meters. You can enjoy eight types of hot springs with different temperatures and health benefits. It's the most satisfying moment to take a hot spring after mountaineering while watching the snow and blue sky.

Mount Kusatsu-Shirane is famous for the Yugama, the crater lake, where the surface of the lake shines in emerald green. Although entering this area is prohibited now, I would like to revisit Kusatsu Onsen when we can climb safely.



Episode 030: Mount Ontake



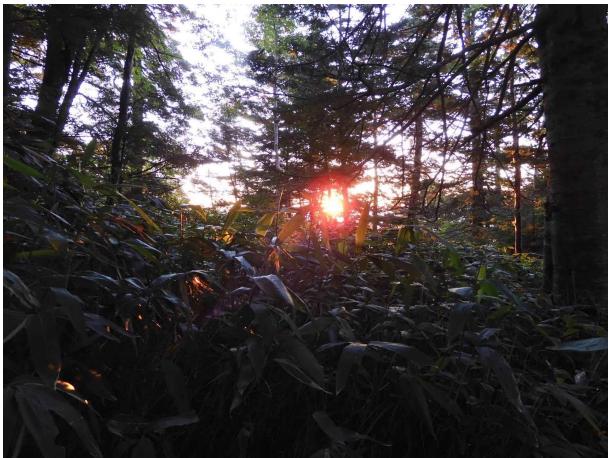
Even after the state of emergency effective from April to May (2020) was lifted, I have refrained from climbing as the new coronavirus did not show any signs of convergence. Furthermore, we had an unusually long rainy season this year, which finally ended in the Kanto region at the beginning of August. Then, the time has finally come to climb a mountain on a sunny day after the rainy season. It will be climbing after a long time, and I have chosen Mount Ontake in the Central Alps. Mount Ontake is an independent, active volcano, which is away from the Northern Alps. In recent years, an eruption occurred in September 2014, and 58 people were killed tragically. As of 2020, 5 people are

still missing.

Although climbing Mount Ontake was restricted since the eruption, the prohibition was partly withdrawn in 2019. Climbers still cannot enter some areas of the mountain but can reach the summit. We can choose one of several starting points, including a ropeway. I want to start climbing early in the morning and have decided to drive to Nakanoyu starting point on the 6th station.

Leaving Tokyo, I take a break at Yatsugatake Rest Area. Despite the clear sky, the moon is covered with clouds. After taking a nap, I head for the starting point. While driving the dark mountain road, stone monuments standing in a row gives me an eerie feeling.

I have arrived at Nakanoyu starting point a little past 3 am. A lot of cars have already been parked, and more vehicles are coming in one after another. I look up at the sky and see the stars twinkling. I take pictures of them through the windshield of my car, but cannot keep shooting long due to headlights. As the sky is getting gradually brighter, the stars are melting into thin air.



Some people start climbing in the complete darkness before dawn. I want to begin moving after getting a bit brighter and take a short nap until I leave my car a little past 4:30 am.

My outfit is simple because of a day climbing. Although the probability of eruption is currently low, I still have to carry a helmet. I must not forget to apply sunscreen because it seems to be getting pretty hot today.

After I walk for a while, a building appears in front of the mountain trail, where some staff is checking each climber's body temperatures as a measure against coronavirus. I submit a mountain climbing registration form, receive a map that shows the hazard area and a paper with notes, and start ascending. Climbing for the first time in about five months motivates me entirely, and I am walking triumphantly. Before long, the morning sun began shining the trail, and I can see the sun through the trees. Passing through the forest zone, I have reached a place with a good view of the sea of clouds. I talk

lively with the person who is resting there.

After climbing for nearly an hour and a half, I have arrived at a mountain hut called Nyonin-dou at the 8th station. There is a space for a rest in front of the mountain hut, where I can enjoy the view of the sea of clouds below. Most climbers spend their time here resting, eating, and taking pictures.



Looking up, I can see the summit of Mount Ontake. Mount Kengamine, the highest peak, is along with Mount Mamahaha, Mount Mamako, and Mount Marishiten.

As a whole, Mount Ontake has a broad base and trapezoidal shape. It is a huge independent mountain, and you can distinguish it from other mountains easily.

After climbing for about three hours, I have reached near the summit and found three evacuation shelters.



Although there was no shelter on Mount Ontake in the past, these shelters were installed after the eruption in 2014. Each shelter can accommodate up to 30 people, who can protect themselves from volcanic rocks. A memorial monument to the eruption victims is standing next to the shelter, and the damaged hut is being demolished.

I go up the stairs, pass through the Torii (sacred Shinto gate), and have arrived at the peak with the altitude of 3,067 meters. Several climbers are staying at the space around the summit, and more people are coming one after another.



We can see right below us the lakelet called "Ninoike" (meaning "the second lakelet"), which is the lake at the highest place in Japan. Around the top of Mount Ontake, there are five lakelets, from "Ichinoike" (the first lakelet) to "Gonoike" (the fifth lakelet). Although Ichinoike is dried up, other lakelets have their features.

Looking far beyond Ninoike, I can see clouded mountains of the Northern Alps. In fact, I plan to climb Mount Hotakadake and Mount Yari next time.

While I am eating snacks, the man next to me asks me to take his picture, and we have a lively conversation for a while. I say to him I'm targeting at the Northern Alps next time, whereas he seems to plan to go around mountains in the Tohoku region.

After leaving the summit, I head for the direction of Ninoike. I walk along the partially dried lakeside, pass by the mountain hut, and cross an open plateau called "Sai-no-Kawara" (meaning "Riverside of Styx").

The green mountains contrast sharply with the blue sky in the background, making me feel the Alps in summer.



After crossing "Sai-no-Kawara", I can overlook "Sannoike" (the third lakelet). Sannoike is the largest among the five lakelets on this mountain. With the beautiful cobalt blue water, it is the deepest alpine lake in Japan. I think it can be one of the pleasures of climbing Mount Ontake to see this beautiful lakelet.

When I climbed Mount Ontake before the eruption in 2014, I stayed at a mountain hut near Sannoike. Since I had plenty of time during the previous mountaineering, I walked on the caldera rim even to Mount Mamakodake on the second day. I could enjoy the scenery of Sannoike from various angles. This time I can see the lakelet's beauty again, which has not been changed even after the eruption. By the way, I am reminded that news said a new lakelet had appeared near "Ninoike" (the second lakelet) after the eruption. The lakelet seems to have been created because accumulated volcanic ashes dammed up melted snow and rainwater, dried up quickly in the past. Those working in mountain huts seem to call it "Nitengonoike" (the second and a half lakelet). The way the lakelet was created makes me think about nature's power and overwhelms me.

After enjoying the view of Sannoike, I move on rocky stretches to the summit of Mount Marishiten, one peak of the outer rim of the volcanic crater. Ancient people worshipped some mountains and named them "Marishiten". In the past, I once conquered another Mount Marishiten in Mount Kaikoma (refer to Episode 018).

The mountaintop sign between rocks is difficult to recognize, so I inform the climbers looking for the sign. Even though the sky was perfectly clear, clouds have sprung up all of sudden and completely covered the sights of the mountain and the lakelet.



According to the information, there is a route in which we can go down from "Sannoike". But the map I received at the starting point shows the route is currently closed. I have no choice but to go back on the way I have come here.

While resting in front of the mountain hut named Ninoike Sanso on the way back, I see a group of people dressed entirely in white coming here. In fact, I saw this kind of group several times in the middle of climbing up to the summit. They blow on a conch shell and sing a song of belief together. Those remind me that people have worshipped Mount Ontake since ancient times.

In the book titled "100 Famous Japanese Mountains", the late Kyuya Fukata, the author, wrote about Mount Ontake that the believers in white robes were so many that the mountain path looked white. The scenery still remains. Indeed, I have found many stone monuments and religious objects everywhere along the way, which makes me feel this mountain has a long history as a sacred place.

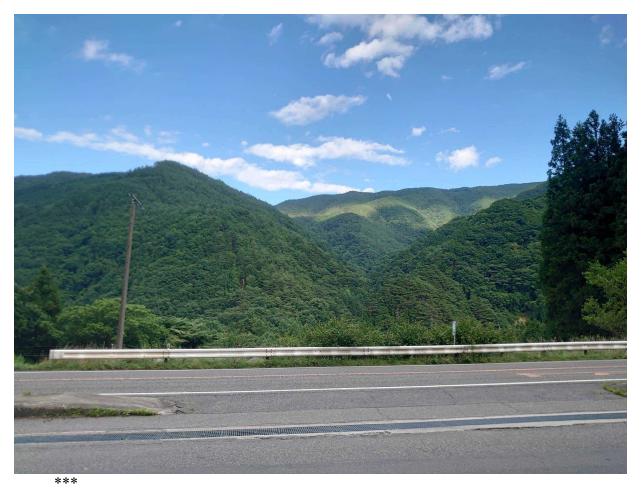


Then, I have arrived at the hut called Nyonin-dou (literally meaning "hut for women") at the 8th station. The hut, which was closed when I was climbing up, is now open, and I purchase a pin badge. Before the Meiji era (until the late 19th century), people believed the area above the 8th station was a sacred place of the mountain god, and women were not allowed to enter. Women had to wait for their male companions at the hut, which was then called "Nyonin-dou".

I feel that the downhill path is really long, and my legs are trembling when I have finally got back to the parking lot. I immediately move to a hot spring, which is introduced in a guidebook. While rinsing off my sweat, I feel hungry.

Although I search for a place to eat local food, most restaurants will not open until the early evening. I give up once, but I find a restaurant on my way home and have had plenty.

This time I am really exhausted because I climbed one of the Japanese 100 Great Mountains after a long suspension regarding COVID-19. Still, I feel even the exhaustion is really precious.

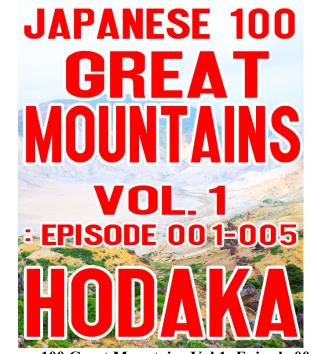


The Japanese version of this article with more photographs can be read at the author's blog.

http://hodakaclimber.blog.fc2.com

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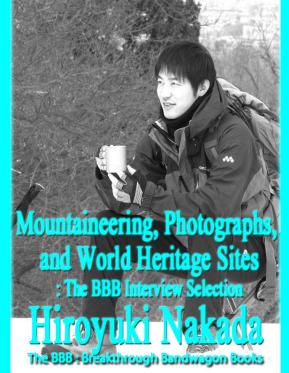


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