

Japanese 100 Great Mountains Vol. 7: Episode 031-035



JAPANESE 100 GREAT MOUNTAINS VOL. 7 : EPISODE 031-035 HODAKA

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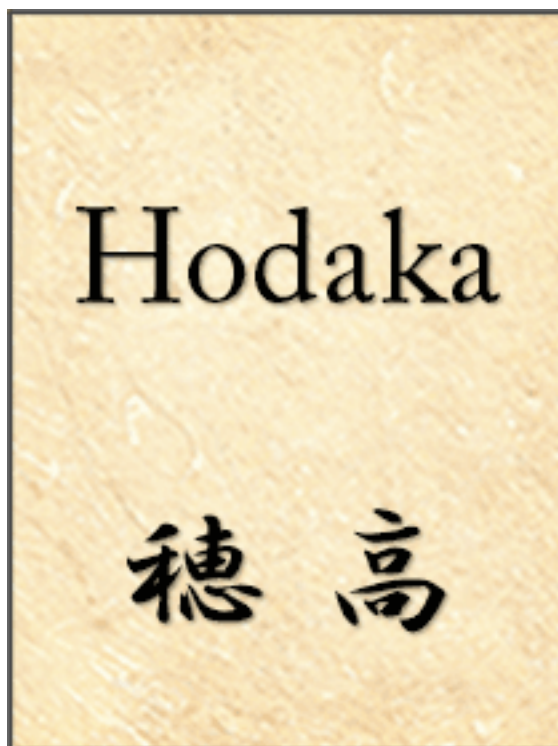
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Episode 031: Mount Hotakadake

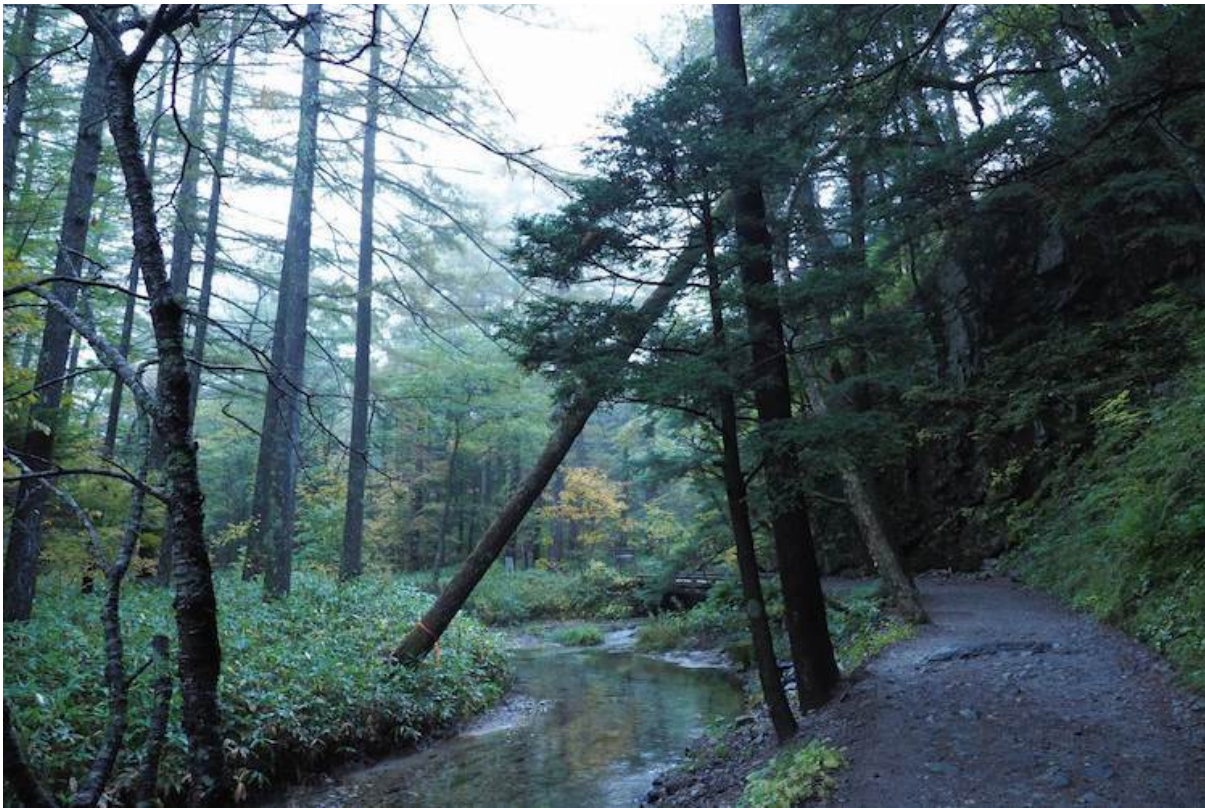


Due to the effects of COVID-19, mountain lodges have been closed or limited guests in 2020. I made a plan to traverse from Mount Hotakadake to Mount Yari in the Northern Alps and booked a mountain lodge in October. A week before the scheduled day, Typhoon Chan-Hom formed off the coast of the Pacific Ocean. The strong typhoon was predicted to move slowly across Japan, and if the weather was terrible on the day, I was going to abandon my plan. However, on the day before I left my home, the typhoon miraculously made a U-turn to the Pacific Ocean and changed its course. So, I can drive to Kamikochi in Nagano Prefecture as planned.

It was still raining slightly when we left home at 8 pm, but it gradually cleared up, and I can see the moon at Lake Biwa rest area on the way. I'm going to take a nap here so that I can reach Kamikochi at dawn. I haven't gotten much sleep and left around 2 am, arriving at the parking lot at 4 am. It seems to accommodate nearly 500 cars, and more than half of the space is already filled.

We are not allowed to enter Kamikochi by our cars and need to take a bus here. To get on the first bus at 5 o'clock, I walk to the bus ticket office. There is already a long line. Because of a holiday, the buses seem to be increased in frequency. The bus takes us to the Kamikochi Bus Terminal in the dark for about thirty minutes.

While I submit the mountain climbing registration form and have a meal, the next bus has arrived, and the place is crowded with a lot of climbers. Finishing the warm-ups, I have departed from Kamikochi before 6 am. The sky above is overcast, and the mountains are not visible at all, so even the famous Kappa-Bashi bridge doesn't look good. I find a monkey climbing up a tree right next to me and point my camera at it. A few more monkeys are around here, and they are so familiar with humans that they don't seem to be running away. Anyway, the first step is to walk for about three hours along the Azusa River.



I think I'm lucky it's not raining at least, but the sun is gradually shining, and it is clearing. An hour's walk from Kamikochi takes me to Myojin Pond, where we can stay overnight, and another hour takes me to Tokusawa-en. Tokusawa-en is also a campground, and I see several tents. The inn's cafeteria is like a restaurant, and it has a good selection of shops, which makes me feel comfortable.

Exactly ten years ago, I was supposed to traverse from Mount Hotakadake to Mount Yari by the same route as this time. At the time, after conquering Mount Hotakadake, I gave up traversing because of the inclement weather and stayed at Tokusawa-en on my way down. I remember that the meal was gorgeous and that I was satisfied with a comfortable bath.



On the road to Yokoo, the contrast between the blue sky and mountains in autumnal colors is beautiful. When I have arrived at Yokoo, it is crowded with mountaineers who are about to climb. The trail is mostly flat to this point, and we can reach here even in light clothing, but we need authentic mountain equipment to go further.

I have left for Karasawa at 9:30 am. Walking through the forest zone along the river, I see the mighty rock, which is famous for rock climbing and called “Byoubu-iwa” (meaning “folding screen rock”). As the sunshine is getting stronger, my fatigue is building up a lot. Soaking in the beauty of the surrounding autumn leaves, I continue to climb and have arrived at the Karasawa campsite around 1 pm. It is located at an altitude of 2,300 meters and surrounded by cirques below the Hotaka mountains. This campground is so popular that it is packed with more than 1,000 tents in the best season. Many tents are set up today, and many people are enjoying a beer at a shop. Looking at them sideways, I keep climbing up to the Mount Hotakadake Sanso (hut) above.



The Karasawa campsite is surrounded by the mountains of the Northern Alps. I will have to climb for another three hours from here to the mountain lodge where I will be staying today. Most climbers stay at Karasawa, with only a few heading onward.

I've been walking for about six hours so far, and with the weight of the backpack, my fatigue is building up. As we walk along the open mountain trail in the cirque, a few climbers in front of me shout "Yoo-hoo," and I hear their echoes. A foreigner nearby also shouts, "Arigato!" and enjoyed the echoes.



The trail leads to a steep, rocky area called Seitengrad. Since it is a dangerous route, I have put on a helmet. Probably because I only got a short sleep in the car, I feel sick and a little nauseous, which makes my steps heavy and slow. Ladders and chains have been installed in some dangerous areas. It's been a long time since I last climbed a mountain, so my legs cramp a lot.

When I am quite exhausted and resting, a man with a camera on his helmet comes up and says, "Let's go slowly." Also, another climber says, "I have medicine for cramped legs." With the support of strangers' kindness, I have arrived at the Hotakadake Sanso before 5 pm. This is a memorable lodge where I once evacuated when I came to the Northern Alps with my tent for the first time and almost got lost in bad weather.



When I check-in, I have to fill in my temperature and health status. In addition, as a measure against COVID-19, we are asked to put paper disposable seats on our beds. Each person's bunk is separated from its neighbors by a board. We are required to wear a mask in the hut, which is a different way to spend time.

Placing my luggage on the bunk, I lie down to take a rest for now. As the sun is setting, I go outside to see the other side of the lodge. I share the moment of the sunset with many other guests. Thanks to the typhoon's passing, I am grateful that I can see such a beautiful sunset.



The dinner starts at 5:40 pm, and the table has already been set. I talk to the man sitting across from me, who spoke to me earlier on the uphill slope. He seems to be uploading videos he took while climbing the mountain to YouTube. I bring GoPro with me on this hike and will be using it tomorrow, so I ask him about his shooting style and editing for reference. By then, I have recovered from the sickness I felt during the climb. After the meal, I lie down on the futon (bedding) and immediately fall into a deep sleep.

When I wake up, it is still 8:30 pm. I go out of the lodge and see the twinkling stars in the sky. I bring my camera and tripod to take pictures. I can also look down at the Karasawa campsite.

After a while, a man next to me asks if I can take pictures of the stars, so I show him the pictures. He says his iPhone should take pictures of the starry sky, but he doesn't seem to get convincing ones. He comes from Gifu Prefecture. We talk for a while about the local area and plans for tomorrow and then return to the lodge together as it is getting cold.

I will be staying at the Yarigatake Sanso tomorrow, and it will take about nine hours from here, based on a simple calculation of the course time on the map. I will go over the killets, where slip and fall accidents occur frequently, so I need to go carefully. I want to climb Mount Okuhotaka in the opposite direction from this mountain hut, so I decide to climb in the dark before breakfast and fall asleep.

I wake up at 4 am and go outside. It is dark, and the stars are still shining. About fifty minutes from here, I will reach the summit of Mount Okuhotaka. With my headlight and only my camera, I am climbing up the rocky terrain in total darkness.

Almost empty-handed, it is effortless for me to walk on the rocky place. I look up and find a headlight in the silhouette of the mountain. Someone seems to be climbing ahead of me. Relying on my headlight, I proceed in the direction indicated by the circles on the rocks. After a while, the silhouette of the shrine on the slightly elevated pedestal is appearing. It's the summit of Mount Okuhotaka, which is the highest peak (3,190 meters) in the Hotaka Mountains. It is known as the third highest mountain in Japan and is very popular among climbers.



I remember well the first time I climbed the summit. It was when I had no time to rejoice as I was anxiously searching for my way in the rainy, dim light. Now I sit next to the shrine and am enjoying the quiet moment before the dawn. There is almost no wind, so I don't feel the cold. The moon is shining brightly in the sky, and the stars are disappearing little by little.

The eastern horizon is gradually turning orange, and the sky color gradation is beautiful enough to move me emotionally. Although I want to stay here and wait for the sunrise, breakfast starts at 5:30 am, and I return to the mountain hut before the sun starts rising.

I sit next to the YouTuber whom I shared the dinner table last night. While we are talking about our plans for the day, It is just at the moment of sunrise. I take pictures of the sunrise from the dining room and go outside after breakfast.

It looks like we will be blessed with good weather today.

I get ready and head for the Mount Yari Sanso, my next destination.



Episode 032: Mount Yari



Departing from the Hotakadake Sanso at 6:30 am, I firstly aim for Mount Karasawa at an altitude of 3,110 meters and have reached the summit in about 20 minutes. The rocky summit is not spacious. But since there is only a pair of climbers, I can take pictures calmly.

Looking back down, I can see the roof of the hut. On the other side, the sharp peak of Mount Yari (or Yarigatake in Japanese) at the end of the steep rocky ridge. It is called the “Matterhorn of Japan” and is a mountain that every climber dreams of climbing at least once. Today, I am going to traverse to the summit.

Among the several routes to climb Mount Yari, the route from Mount Hotakadake is said to be one of the most difficult in Japan, with narrow footholds and dangerous paths. A few years ago, I spent a whole day traverse from Mount Yari to Mount Hotakadake, but this time I will follow the opposite route. Thanks to the fine weather as the previous occasion, I should be able to move forward comfortably without slippery rocks.

The descent from Mount Karasawa is quite steep, so I descend carefully. I try out the Go Pro I bring with me this time. With the GoPro attached to my helmet, I try recording and have succeeded in capturing some powerful images.

Following the paint marks on the rocks, I am descending the almost vertical cliffs. It has taken more than two hours from Mount Karasawa to reach the top of Mount Kita-Hotaka, with an altitude of 3,106 meters. Right next to the summit is a mountain lodge, located at the highest altitude in the Alps.

An elderly woman climbs up alone and takes a selfie. I ask her if she wants me to take her picture. She is a very cheerful old lady, posing with one leg up in the air. When I tell her that I am heading for Mount Yari, she is surprised and says happily, “I’d like to go there someday, too.”



The precipice-like route continues beyond Mount Kita-Hotaka. It is so high that I would lose my life if I fall from here. Checking footholds, I am descending carefully and slowly. When I have finished going down, I look up at the mountain and am astonished again by the height.

After a while, a man with a GoPro, just like me, is coming up from ahead. I have not seen a climber in a while, so I speak to him. He says he is taking the opposite route from Mount Yari to Mount Hotakadake. We wish each other good luck and have parted ways.

Then, I pass through a point called “Hida Naki” (meaning “Wail in Hida”), where if I miss even one step, I will slip and fall. After that, there is another dangerous part called “Hasegawa Peak” with sharp drops on both sides. The letters of “H Peak” are written on the sheer cliff, and it is very thrilling when I peer down from there.



When I check the GoPro footage later, I feel like I'm cowering. But strangely enough, I don't feel too scared while climbing. Then, I passed the "Daikiretto," whose ridge drops off deeply, but I don't have an intense fear because I have been here before.

In the meantime, a female solo climber has passed me at a swift pace. When I look ahead a little after that, I see her clinging to the cliff and climbing up several times. Admiring the way she is going up the cliff, I keep walking.



It was 4:00 am this morning that I conquered Mount Hotakadake. After breakfast, I have crossed the difficult terrain for almost six hours. I am quite tired and cannot pick up the pace as I want. When I have finally arrived at Mount Minamidake Hut, I lie down to rest in the outside space. The lodge has been closed for the season since yesterday, and it is quiet and still. I see only one tent set up in a tent site. It seems that someone has this spectacular view all to himself or herself. I want to rest here for a while, but I cannot afford to relax because it is still going to take more than three hours to reach my destination, Mount Yari Sanso. I will leave as soon as I have recovered some strength.



From here on, there are no dangerous spots, but I have to cross three peaks. I climb up a gentle slope, and it is 4:00 pm when I have reached Mount Nakadake, the second summit.

In general, we climbers should arrive at a mountain hut by 3 pm or 4 pm at the latest. I think it takes much time, so I call the hut and say, “I’m sorry, but it looks like I will arrive around 5:30 pm.” The woman on the line replies, “If you arrive too late, it will be difficult for us to serve meals.” I have some food, but I want to have a warm meal at the lodge. So, I have decided to hurry anyway.

As the sun goes down and a lot of gas comes out around me, I keep walking frantically, almost without taking a break. Seeing the signboard indicating the distance to the hut cheers me up a bit, and I have managed to arrive at 5:15 pm. I can see the inside of the lodge’s dining room, where climbers staying there are in the middle of having their meals.



When I check-in, a lodge woman tells me that she will prepare the meal only for me from 5:40 pm. If I had not talked with her on the phone earlier about when I should eat, it would have taken me much longer to arrive here.

She asks me to use the top bunk of a bunk bed, which is a large space. There is no one in the bunk next to me due to measures against COVID-19, so it is spacious and comfortable. However, it is too hard to climb the ladder to get to the top bunk because of my leg fatigue and pain.

At 5:40 pm, an announcement in the hall says that the meal is ready. I walk to the large dining room and find a meal for me there. The meals are a hamburger steak and a large bowl of rice. The delicious food is gradually recovering my strength.



After I have finished eating, I thank the staff at the lodge and immediately get back to my bed. Lying down on the futon (bedding) with a full stomach and tiredness, I hear my roommates say they can see many stars outside. I am unwilling to go down the ladder, but I go outdoors to see the stars. To be honest, the stars do not impress me a lot, as there are much fewer stars visible than yesterday's sky. The person next to me, stayed in a tent last night, and I have a nice chat about yesterday's starry sky. The inside of the lodge is spacious. The second floor is a shared space with a self-catering room, a drying room, and a large lounge with magazines and books about mountains. We can also charge my smartphone on the first floor, which is a helpful service. I bring my sweat-soaked clothes to the drying room. After the lights-out at 8:00 pm, I have fallen asleep soundly.

When I have woken up at 4 am and go outside, it is clear and starry. I get back to my bunk once, equip my camera and helmet, and set out for Mount Yari's summit since a little past 5 am. Although the eastern sky is getting brighter, I still seem to have some time before the sunrise.



Usually you can reach the summit of Mount Yari in about 20 minutes from the Mount Yari Sanso. Still, during the consecutive holidays, the mountain is so crowded that it will sometimes take nearly 3 hours. Putting on the helmet with the GoPro, I start climbing up the cliff. The cliffs look steep, but if you climb slowly and carefully, there is no danger. However, a person who is climbing a little higher suddenly shouted, “Watch out!” A rock about the size of my fist has fallen in front of me, and the broken pieces have hit me in the face. The rock almost hit me directly. Although I have been able to avoid injury, a helmet is an essential item.

When I have reached the long vertical ladder that led to the summit, I start climbing while recording with my GoPro. At the end of the ladder, I finally see an amazingly magnificent view. A sea of clouds spreads out in the vast sky, and beyond it is a strong orange glow, as if the sun is about to rise. It’s a sight that makes us feel the grandeur of the universe. Several people have already been at the summit, and we are waiting here quietly for the moment of sunrise.

When I first came to the Northern Alps ten years ago, I planned to traverse this route. But I could not conquer any summits but Mount Hotakadake due to inclement weather. I’m truly glad that I have completed the long-desired route over a decade, even with the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a small shrine at the top of the mountain. Also, a wooden board with the letters “Yarigatake” written on it is placed there, and you can take a memorial photo with it.

When I conquered Mount Yari a few years ago, it was evening, and there were a lot of clouds. So, this time I have a very different impression. Before 6:00 am, we see the sun appearing. The sunrise from an altitude of 3,180 meters is exceptional.



After returning to the hut and having breakfast, I will just climb down to Kamikochi. The course time will be about seven to eight hours. I start climbing down at 7:00 am. When I look back after a while, I can see Mount Yari's steep form against the blue sky.

As I descend further, I notice something moving on a rock. When I get closer and take a closer look, it is a monkey. I am surprised to see it at such a high altitude. When I look around, several other monkeys are acting in a group, and they seem to be responding to the cries of their family in the distance and crying back.



Originally, I planned to take an earlier bus if I could descend the mountain quickly. But my legs are sore, and I have decided to go at my own pace. As I have descended to Yokoo, the rest of the path is flat and familiar.

When I have come to Myojin Pond, I see a man with an air gun standing in front of the hut. He suddenly starts shooting at the roof, and I wonder what is going on. He seems to be chasing away monkeys with his air gun.

When I have arrived safely at Kamikochi before 3:00 pm, the Kappa Bridge, which was cloudy on the way, now looks beautiful against the blue sky.

There is already a line at the bus stop, but I am glad to see that the bus has left earlier than scheduled. After returning to my car, I drop by a nearby hot spring to relax and unwind from the exhaustion during the past three days.

Although I could not climb as many mountains as I wanted to in 2020 due to the COVID-19 and the self-restraint period, it is very satisfying mountaineering for me to traverse from Mount Hotakadake to Mount Yari.



Episode 033: Mount Bandai



I'm going to make a day trip to Mount Bandai in Fukushima Prefecture after the state of emergency regarding COVID-19 has been lifted in February 2021 in all areas except Tokyo metropolitan area. Mount Bandai, also known as Aizu Fuji, is an independent volcano towering in the center of Fukushima Prefecture and is one of the prefecture symbols. The mountain erupted in 1888, and the north side of the summit collapsed wildly. The front and back sides of the mountain look very different.

The word "Bandai" means a rock ladder that spans the sky, and there are some routes to the summit from all directions. Bandai Myojin is enshrined at the top of the mountain, suggesting that people have worshipped it.

When considering the route to climb in the snow season, I have decided to take the route from the north, called Ura-Bandai (meaning backside of Bandai), because I want to see the frozen Yellow Fall that can only be seen this time of year. The weather has been fine for the past few days. When I gathered information on the Internet, I found records of people who had recently climbed the mountain. While looking at the map, I referred to their courses and time and got an image of the snow conditions. Leaving home the night before, I head for the Tohoku Expressway through the Metropolitan Expressway. At rest areas where I stop for a break several times along the way, the cafeteria and stores are open late into the night.

After about three hours of driving, I have arrived at a rest area near Mount Bandai in Fukushima Prefecture and decided to spend the night in the car parked here. Even with winter clothes and a blanket, I feel severe cold in the middle of the night. So, when I can't stand it anymore, I turn on the air conditioner in the car to warm up.

To start climbing early in the morning, I get off the expressway before dawn, and after a while, on a rough road from the public highway, I have arrived at Ura-Bandai Ski Resort. When I have got to the parking lot for climbers at around 5:30 am, the moon is shining on the dim ski slope.



I see the light at the back of the slope, and upon closer inspection, I realize that a snow maintenance truck is working on the hill. As it is getting brighter and brighter, now I can see the slope clearly. If I use the lifts, I can save my energy and gain altitude on the way up. But the lifts will start operating at 8:30 am. I think it would be a waste of time to wait until then, so I have decided to go up the slope and left before 7:00 am.

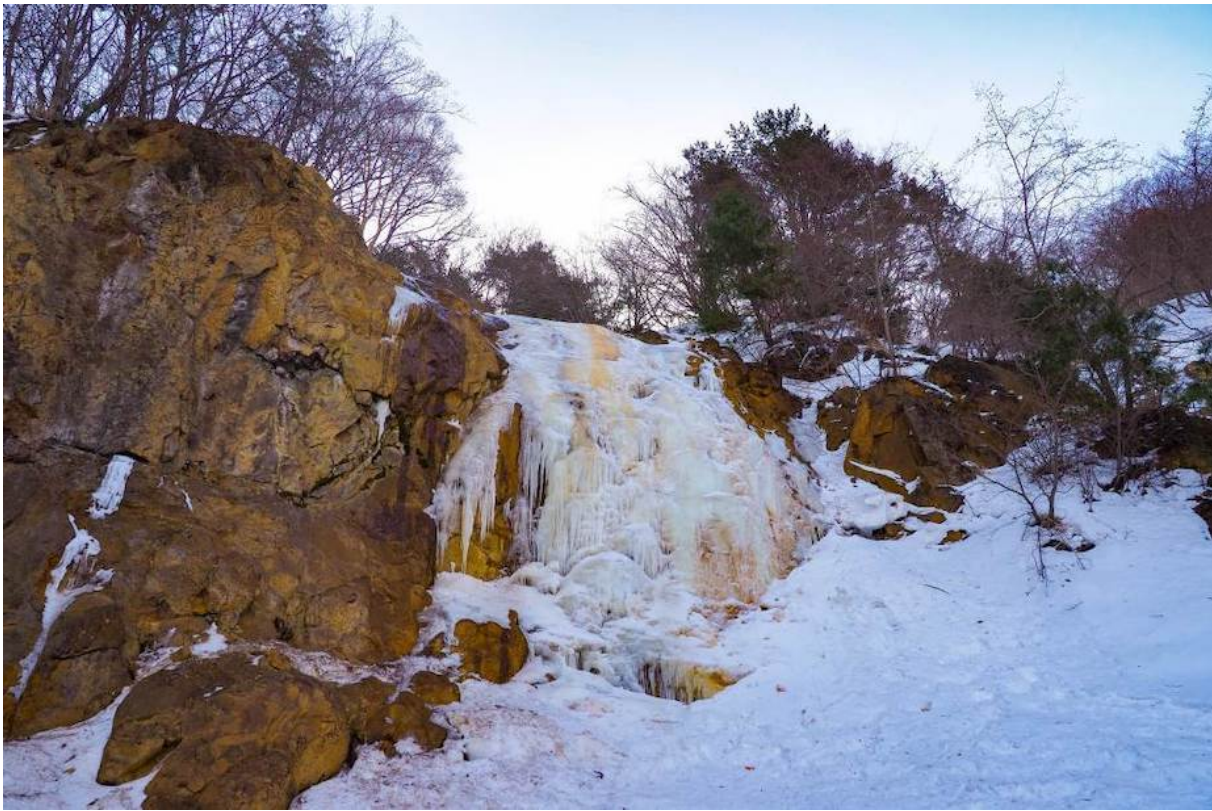
I am climbing up the edge of the slope near a forest zone and see traces of many climbers. At first, I go up with my hiking boots. But the snowshoes, which I put on halfway, have made the climb much easier. The empty slopes in the morning are refreshing and liberating.

When I have reached the top of the slope, I am rewarded with a spectacular view of the mountains and lakes in the distance. There is also a trekking course from here, and some people enjoy walking on the snow with their snowshoes.



As I walk through the forest zone, the Akanuma lake (or Aka swamp) is appearing. This lake contains a lot of manganese and has a unique color. Since it is frozen at this time of the year, I walk across the surface of the lake and come to a pure white snowfield. Beyond the lake, the smell of sulfur wafts in the air, and smoke spews from the rocks. This area is the site of an eruption, and the surface of the mountain is rough and volcanic.

I can see Yellow Falls over there. It is a frozen waterfall about ten meters high, created by melting snow and seeping out with sulfur and iron in the ground. As it can only be seen during the severe winter season, it is not uncommon for people to visit Mount Bandai to see the Yellow Falls during this season.



The slope is getting steeper from here, so I change from snowshoes to crampons. According to the map, it seems that I have to go back quite a way while taking a detour. But since there seems to be a slight trace on the slope next to the Yellow Fall, I have decided to climb straight up there, instead of going back, to save time.

As the slope becomes even steeper, I am carefully climbing step by step while kicking the snow ground to secure a foothold. I have managed to climb up there safely, but there is no sign of anyone passing through. With the untrodden snow that is difficult to walk, it might take me some extra time.

After that, I have a hard time crossing a steep slope to get back to the mountain trail while holding on to the tree trunks. I see a clear trace on the trail, making me climb easily. Walking with ease, I have come to an open ridge.



One climber is coming down, and we have exchanged greetings. Because the man is coming back now, he must have started climbing so early in the morning.

There is almost no wind today. The temperature is high, and I feel hot. In the wonderful scenery, the beautiful form of Mount Bandai is picturesque. A signboard with a warning about gas is standing nearby. I have made a snowman, as I did at Mount Kusatsu-Shirane (refer to Episode 29).

Then, I am going on a path with a rocky surface that is difficult to walk on with crampons. After climbing up the gently sloping snow, I have arrived at two mountain huts. They are not open during the winter months. The Kobo-shimizu Hut is half-buried in snow, whereas Okabe Hut has snow just up to roof level. So, I have decided to take a rest on the roof.



As it is quite hot, I take off my clothes I was wearing inside to adjust my body temperature and have a light meal. I lie down on the roof and stretch out while looking up at the blue sky. I feel like taking a nap here. Then, I hear someone saying “Hello,” and see a female climber just passing by on her way to the summit. According to the course time printed on the map, I’ll reach the summit in about 30 minutes from here. After a good rest, I have resumed my climb to the top.

The course is almost straight with a clear view to the summit, and I can see the back of the female climber I met a while ago.

As I am climbing and savoring the beauty of the pure white snow mountains, the summit sign is gradually appearing. The signboard is out of the snow, but the hut next to it is buried up to its roof in snow.

The altitude of Mount Bandai used to be 1,819 meters, but it was changed to 1,816 meters in 2010 by the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan, and the signboard has been replaced.



While I am taking pictures, the female climber I greeted earlier comes down from a place higher than the summit. She tells me that she have come up here using the lift. She seems to be from Nagoya, but now she lives in Fukushima for a certain period and has been climbing the mountains of Tohoku here and there.

After parting from her, I go up and find a shrine buried in snow.

There is a legend a demon annoyed the people in the Aizu region once upon a time, and Kobo Daishi trapped it in a pot and buried the pot here to worship it. Beyond this shrine, Lake Inawashiro spreads out, and a hazy Mount Nasu can be seen in the distance.

I enjoy the 360-degree panorama, take a video, and start heading back down the mountain.



I'm climbing a mountain for the first time in a while. My legs are a little sore, partly because I haven't been getting enough exercise lately.

While descending, I have stepped through the snow and fallen forward with my left leg buried up to the base. I struggle to pull my leg out, and the crampon blade on my right foot gets caught and tears my trousers. It doesn't seem to affect my climbing, though.

After a while, I feel an uncomfortable sensation as if I have cut my left big toe, so I descend slowly, protecting my left toe.

I pass the place where I joined the trail on the way up, go down the slope with traces, and have reached Yellow Fall. From here, I change into snowshoes and walk across the snowfield.



I have decided to use the lift to descend from the slope.

When I ask a staff, he says, "It's okay if you buy the ticket after you get off." A trekking group is just about to get on the lift, and I follow them.

While I am waiting, an elderly staff asks me, "Did you make it to the summit?" I reply, "I have met only two people." He says, "There were about 150 people up there yesterday, Sunday." I'm lucky to be climbing today because I enjoy quiet climbing.

Using the lift is the right choice because it gives me more time and reduces the strain on my legs. Maybe because of a weekday, there are no skiers on the slopes, and it is quiet.

I pay the lift fee at the counter and ask about the pin badge of Mount Bandai. It's not sold here. I look it up on the Internet and find that it is sold at a mountain lodge.

Mount Bandai is a treasure trove of alpine flora with a wide variety of flowers blooming in the summer, so I want to climb again in the summer to get a pin badge.



Episode 034: Mount Norikura



With the start of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, which was postponed for a year, and Japan's gold medal rush continuing, I have decided to climb Mount Norikura in the Northern Alps.

Mount Norikura is located at the southernmost point of the Northern Alps, and its name comes from the fact that the mountain looks like a horse with a saddle on its back when viewed from Hida in Gifu Prefecture.

The elevation of Mount Norikura is 3,026 meters, and there is a place to get on and off a bus at 2,702 meters, which is the highest bus terminal in Japan. Visitors can get there by bus until autumn, making it easy for beginners to climb.

In the past, when I tried to climb Mount Norikura in the snow, I had to withdraw due to bad weather. But when there is no snow on the mountain, it is very easy to climb. Also, we can take a sunrise bus that departs in the middle of the night for a limited time during only the summer. I heard about the bus from an acquaintance who actually used it, so I have wanted to use it if I climb Mount Norikura.

Last year the sunrise bus was completely suspended due to the influence of Covid-19, but this year it seems to have resumed with an advance reservation system. So, I want to head for Mount Norikura to view the sunrise. I can drive my own car to the Norikura Kogen Tourist Center, where the bus departs, and the bus will leave from there in the middle of the night.

I plan to arrive in the evening and spend the night in my car, so I have plenty of time. I have left the afternoon of the previous day and drive at leisure. With no traffic jam, I pass through Matsumoto City in Nagano Prefecture and stop at a convenience store to buy some food for the night and the next day.

There are very few cars heading toward Norikura. I park the vehicle on the mountain road and take some sunset photos, arriving at the parking lot of the tourist center at around 7:00 pm.



About 20 cars are parked in the vast parking lot for about 200 vehicles. I can park in an ample space without worrying about the ones next to mine. Although the shop and the ticket office are closed, I check the restrooms and the bus stop before it gets dark. Then, I have snacks with alcoholic drinks, which I bought on the way.

I should not turn on the car's engine out of consideration for my surroundings, so I spend my time relaxing, checking my smartphone, or reading a book with the light of the headlamp. The clouds that covered the sky have cleared and filled with stars, so I have decided to use a tripod in the middle of the large parking lot to take pictures. Only the light of the vending machine is floating in the pitch darkness. It's been extremely hot all over the country lately, and today is no different. But with an altitude of 1,450 meters, it is getting colder here as night falls. So, I cover myself with a blanket and take asleep in my car.

Although I cannot sleep well, I have woken up around 2:30 am and start preparing. Heading for the bus stop earlier, I finish the procedure and wait on the bench. Other climbers are gathering gradually. Some cars arrive just in time for the bus's departure time. Then, the bus has left at 3:40 am with about thirty passengers, including families and groups of climbers.

The seats on the bus are comfortable, with plenty of room and no neighbors. After departing, the bus guide has announced that the sunrise would be around 4:50 am and the current weather condition at the summit is dense fog.

It's dark outside, and I don't know what the weather will be like. I close my eyes and sleep until we arrive at the summit, hoping that it will be clear and we can see the sunrise. The bus takes about 50 minutes, meandering widely, to reach the bus terminal, the highest in Japan.



The last stop is the Tatamidaira Bus Terminal at an altitude of 2,702 meters, but a new bus stop was built in 2017 just before the terminal. We have to get off at the new bus stop to see the sunrise. The bus stop is called “Altitude of 2,716 meters” and is a dedicated stop for the sunrise bus. Since the number of visitors to Mount Norikura is declining, they decided to place this bus stop at a higher altitude than the Tatamidaira Bus Terminal, the last stop, in order to sell the fact that it is located at the highest point in Japan as a tourist attraction.

To the left and right of the bus stop, there are two mountains: Mount Daikokudake and Mount Fujimidake. We can see the sunrise from the top of either of these mountains after a 15-minute walk up a gentle path.

When we have arrived at the bus stop at 4:30 am on schedule, it’s still dark and a little chilly outside due to the thick fog. We split into two roughly equal groups and are climbing one of the mountains.

I have chosen to climb Mount Fujimidake because it seems convenient to move to Mount Norikura after seeing the sunrise. The top of the mountain is spacious and has a great view, so if the weather is clear, we should see the beautiful sunrise.



Although we can hardly see the scenery due to the fog today, I set up my tripod and camera. I am waiting for the sunrise while eating a light meal. Even after sunrise, we can't see the sun at all, but the sky is gradually getting brighter, and sunbeams begin to pour down from the thick fog. Then the vegetation of the ground is illuminated, and a fantastic landscape is spreading out. The climber next to me says to me, "I have seen the sunrise, but I have never seen such a scene."



On our way down Mount Fujimidake, we see a rock ptarmigan keep still in the fog. It is difficult to recognize it due to the fog, but another climber first notices it and tells us about it. We are lucky to see the bird because it is designated as one of the specially protected birds. It is estimated that only about 120 rock ptarmigans are living in the area around Mount Norikura.



After descending Mount Fujimidake, I walk along the open flat path toward Mount Norikura and see the Kiezugaikake pond, where the snow does not melt all year round. As the foggy sky is gradually clearing up to reveal blue skies, the green slopes of the mountains begin to take on vivid colors.

Arriving at the mountain hut called “Katano Koya” (meaning “cabin on the shoulder”), which is the starting point for Mount Norikura, I have dropped my luggage on the table outside to take a break. The blue skies stretch out, but the summit of Mount Norikura is still covered with clouds. It takes about fifty minutes to reach the summit, and the mountain trail is well maintained, so we can climb with light equipment. While getting close to the top of the mountain, I can look down on the Gongenike pond, the second-highest crater lake in Japan (about 2,840 meters).

The sunlight shines from behind me on the way to the top of the mountain, and I also see the Brocken specter in which a rainbow ring is formed around my shadow reflected in the fog. That’s a rare phenomenon because it requires a lot of different conditions. It’s interesting to see the rainbow follow my shadow as it moves.



It has been completely clear by the time I reach the summit, and about ten climbers are taking pictures. There is a shrine on the opposite side of the mountaintop sign, and I go around to its back and find another shrine.

After enjoying the view from the summit, I drop by the mountain lodge just below the summit, which is just a store, to buy a pin badge. The shop staff asks me about the sunrise bus, and when I tell her that it is now by reservation only, she is surprised by the information. I hear that before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of buses was increased to accommodate the number of climbers, so the impact of COVID-19 can be seen in these places.



While going down the mountain, I pass many climbers aiming for the summit, and I exchange greetings with them. I have descended to the mountain hut “Kata no Koya.” As I am looking for some souvenirs, a staff speaks to me. I tell him that I have come here by the sunrise bus, and he says, “Please stay at our hut next time.”

When I return to Tatamidaira, the bus terminal, there is a flower garden on the south side, with a walking trail where you can go around. You can see many alpine plants during July and August, including Komakusa, the queen of alpine plants. I still have some time until the next bus, so I walk around the trail.



Buses leave every hour, and I have decided to take the 9:05 bus back to the Norikura Kogen Tourist Center, where I parked my car. It was too dark to see out of the bus when I came earlier, but the return bus takes us down through the vast nature of the foothills.

This road is also the course for the Norikura Hill Climb, a 20 kilometers long course with a considerable elevation gain. Several bicycles are coming up slowly and passing by the bus.

The hut I see from the bus on the way down looks vaguely familiar to me. I have realized the bus stop of “Katano Koya Guchi,” where I turned back when I climbed the snowy mountain. At that time, I couldn’t see anything in the whiteout. So I am impressed this is the very place.

When the bus has arrived at Norikura Kogen Tourist Center, and I am looking for my ticket, the bus guide says, “Please take the ticket home as a souvenir.” It’s still past 10:00 am, and I start heading for Hirayu Onsen in Gifu Prefecture.



Episode 035: Mount Yake



Hirayu Onsen is a hot spring resort in Okuhida, Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture, and the starting point for Kamikochi and Norikura, which have restrictions on private cars. It is about an hour's drive from the Norikura Bus Terminal. Considering the distance, I will stay overnight and climb two of Japanese 100 Great Mountains. On the second day, I plan to climb Mount Yake (or Yake-dake in Japanese) in the Northern Alps. I will pass through Shirahone Onsen, a secluded hot spring, located deep in the mountains.

There is a shorter route to Hirayu Onsen. But since the starting point I will use on the second day is on the way to the mountain pass, I have decided to drive through Abou Pass to get a preview. The parking lot at the starting point, which can accommodate about thirty cars, is almost full. I think I would be able to park tomorrow since I am starting the climb early in the morning.

After confirming the starting point, I hurry to my destination.

While driving along the mountain pass, I witness several groups of four to five adults gathering with large insect nets and wonder what they are doing. This question is about to be cleared up the next day. I have arrived at Hirayu Bus Center before noon. This is a bus terminal with plenty of shops and restaurants, so I have decided to have lunch here. Hida is famous for its Hida beef, so I order the Hida curry with Hida beef. It is a large portion and delicious. I have finished it in no time.



I have found a free tourist pamphlet, “Rurubu Hida Takayama,” and read it. This area seems to be an attractive place with abundant nature and delicious food. While thinking about spending plenty of time this afternoon, I will try to find somewhere to go sightseeing.

I have decided to visit a sightseeing spot called “Hirayu Otaki (Otaki means large waterfall),” which I found in the brochure. On the way, I have stopped by Hirayu Shrine nearby. It’s a nice place with a water mill and old-fashioned houses surrounded by nature.

Hirayu Otaki is a short drive away. As I have parked my vehicle in the parking lot and am walking, the waterfall is gradually appearing. The promenade is closed, and we can’t get close to the waterfall, but it is powerful even from a distance. I see the legend of the origin of Hirayu Onsen written on a signboard.



It's almost 3:00 pm, so I am heading for the inn. Unfortunately, the inn I wanted to stay at in Hirayu Onsen is fully booked, so I have taken a room at a nearby inn that offers overnight stay without meals. I am the first guest to check-in, and other guests arrive one after another. A foreign staff member showed me to a room, where the futon (bedding) is laid out in the middle of an ample space of eighteen tatami mats. Anyway, I'll take a hot spring bath.

There are two open-air baths and two indoor baths, each of which can be reserved for private use. I'm not so tired today, but I am refreshed by soaking in the hot springs after a long time.

After that, I read books and watch the Olympics while drinking the beer I bought at the bus center. I look for a restaurant on the map the inn staff gave me when I checked in, and I go to a nearby ramen restaurant at around 8:00 pm. It's a ramen *izakaya* (Japanese-style public bar) named "Yadoriki," and several groups of travelers sit at the counter. While having lemon sour and hormone ramen, I look at my photos today and check out tomorrow's routes. After strolling back to the inn in the quiet nighttime hot spring resort, I watch the Olympic news on TV and then go to sleep.



It was past 5:00 am when I woke up. I have overslept since I wanted to leave at 4:30. It takes about 20 minutes by car from here to the starting point, so I am hurriedly leaving. Thanks to the preview yesterday, I have arrived at the starting point a little past 5:30 am.

However, the parking lot that I thought I could afford to park at this time of morning has already been full. There is almost no parking space as people park their vehicles in lines at the edges of the mountain pass. Still, I have managed to find a space to park my car and set off before 6:00 am.

As I enter the narrow starting point and walk through the forest zone, the ground is quite muddy. I remember a bulletin on TV last night about a heavy rain warning, so it seems that it rained a lot during the night.

I don't have fatigue from yesterday, so I increase my pace and overtake the climbers in front of me. When I come out to a small square, I can see Mount Yake's north and south peaks.



Mount Yake is the only active volcano in the Northern Alps and consists of the north and south peaks at an altitude of 2,455 meters. The south peak is forbidden to climb because of its crumbling rocks, but it can also be climbed on snow. There are several mountain trails, and while many people climb from the Kamikochi side of the mountain, the route from the Nakano-yu hot spring at Abo Pass, which I have chosen this time, is also popular.

The slope is gradually getting steeper, and I can clearly see the volcanic smoke near the summit and smell the sulfur. I hear one climber coming down saying she took a wrong turn on the way up. That's why I climb carefully, but I feel safe because there are other climbers before and after me.



When I touch a rock near a fumarole, I can feel the heat of it. I continue to climb while thinking that this mountain is worthy of the name “Mount Yake” (meaning burning peak). I have reached the summit in just two hours after I started climbing. It’s almost an hour earlier than the course time printed on the map.

Although the mountains of the Northern Alps are covered with clouds, the scenery is clear and spectacular. Looking down far below, I can clearly see Kamikochi and the Azusa River flowing beside it. Just below my feet, I can see Shoga Pond, a crater lake, and the plume of smoke rising from the nearby rocks.

The summit is spacious and crowded with people who have already reached the top. I don’t need to worry about the space, so I take a break here to have a meal.



As I am eating my meal while looking at the view of the crater lake, an older man a short distance away asks me like, "I may be wrong but weren't you at the top of Mount Norikura yesterday?" I answer, "Yes, I was there certainly." He seems to have climbed Mount Norikura yesterday, stayed overnight, and been here just as I have acted. I haven't noticed him, but it is the first time for me to see someone again on another mountain. When I ask him where he comes from, the man tells me that he is from Tokyo and lives in the next town over, so we get excited and spend some time talking. He comes to Nagano for climbing for the first time within the decades. These days, the roads are better than ever, and the climbing clothes and equipment are improved, so it becomes easier for him to climb.

According to him, the best way to regain strength on the summit is to drink miso soup, and he prepares instant miso soup with hot water. It is a fun time at the summit for both of us.



I got a pin badge of Mount Norikura yesterday, so I also checked that of Mount Yake before climbing and found out that it is sold at the Mount Yake hut. The lodge is opposite the route I have climbed, so I have to go down from the summit to the visible cabin far below the summit. It would take me two hours to get there and back, but I have decided to go since I have come this far.

The summit is so broad that it is hard for me to know where to start going down, and I go this way and that. Meanwhile, I hear a conversation about Kamikochi. I speak to the group of three women who are talking that and ask if they know the direction I should go down. One of them checks the map on her watch and tells me the direction. They say they are going to Kamikochi from now.

I have descended to the lodge in about 40 minutes. After purchasing the pin badge, I have nothing else to do in this place and quickly head back to the route I have just come. A man resting in front of the hut looks at me curiously.

After a while, I run into the group of three women I talked to earlier, and when I tell them that I have only come here to buy a pin badge, they look a little surprised. The women say they took a taxi to the Nakano-yu starting point at the Abo Pass, climbed up to the top, and then go down to Kamikochi to relax and return. I think that's a pretty good plan.

I have returned to the summit after a tough climb. This is my second summit of the day. Since the surrounding mountains are completely obscured by gas, unlike the view two hours earlier, I'm glad I could climb the summit a little while ago. It is more challenging climbing than yesterday, but it has become unforgettable mountaineering because of the encounter at the summit.



When I come down to the parking lot at the starting point, the number of cars has dwindled slightly, but there are still quite a few parked there. Then, a man with a huge insect net is wandering around, and he asks me, “How was the summit?” When I ask him, “What are you catching?”, the man shows me the butterfly called the greater large blue (or Ohgomashijimi in Japanese), which he has just caught, and he explains its wing pattern. The greater large blue is a semi-endangered species and a scarce butterfly in the family Lycaenidae.

The man says he moved to Matsumoto City from the Kansai region and has been collecting butterflies for about thirty years. The group with insect nets that I saw yesterday were the people on tour to collect the greater large blue. To my surprise, he tells me that the annual income of a veteran butterfly collector can be over ten million yen.

According to the information I obtain later, Abo Pass is a famous spot for collecting the greater large blue and is visited by dozens of people every day. Also, specimens of the greater large blue are sold in online auctions.

Incidentally, the scarce large blue was additionally designated as a rare species of wild animal and plant in Japan in January 2021. Since the greater large blue is also decreasing, the man says he only collects male butterflies so that the number of butterflies does not diminish.

Even while I am talking to him, he is catching butterflies as they fly by, and if they are not the ones he wants, he let them go. Drivers passing by ask him what he is catching. I want to listen to more of his stories, but I have decided to say goodbye to the man who is patiently waiting for the butterfly and head home. I happen to hear an exciting story from someone I encountered, and it is interesting for me to know the world I have never known.



Extra Episode 02: My Tokyo Marathon Experience



My thoughts on full marathons

I've always hated running long distances and never considered participating in a marathon race. However, I became interested in marathons after hearing a story of a climber I met at a particular mountain lodge who had run a full marathon. It made me want to run a full marathon someday. I decided that if I was going to run a marathon anyway, I would make it a big race and participate in the 2020 Tokyo Marathon.

Since the Tokyo Marathon is very popular and the chances of winning the lottery are quite low, I decided to apply for the charity category. If you donate a certain amount of money for it, you can get the right to run on a first-come, first-served basis. But this category is also trendy and closes soon after the application period begins.

I tried to sign up online at the designated date and time, but the line was so busy that I could not connect at all for about two hours. Still, after many attempts, I could finally register to run the race. I had mixed feelings of anxiety and anticipation, wondering how hard the full marathon would be, how far I would be able to run, and in what condition I would be.



Advancing my training

I started running seriously around November 2019 for the race in March 2020. I usually ran 4-5 kilometers on the river bank several times a week and 10-15 kilometers on weekends. Also, I collected information about marathons from books, magazines, and the Internet and ran longer distances, little by little. I used to run about 150 kilometers a month at most.

If you apply for the charity category, there are various benefits depending on the organization you donated to. One of the benefits of the group I applied for was that I could train with and receive instruction from the Ekiden coach of a regular university that participates in the Hakone Ekiden every year. I did the training menu that the coach instructs his students to do. I not only jogged but also did exercises that I would not have done on my own, such as a full-speed dash. In addition, I received guidance on how to run and practice before the race and was able to ask him about any concerns I had about the full marathon.



COVID-19

In 2020, I began to hear the new word “COVID-19” in the news, but I didn’t pay much attention to it, thinking only of the marathon race and running it whenever I had time. One month before the race, I ran the actual course from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building to Asakusa as a trial run, bought platform sole shoes, and steadily prepared for the race.

At that time, I had no idea that “COVID-19” would have such an impact that it would change societies worldwide. First, two weeks before the Tokyo Marathon, the news came out that the general runners were canceled, which was too shocking for the runners who had been training for this event. When I learned about it from Yahoo News, I couldn’t even stand up for a while.

But that was only the beginning of the stagnant society that followed. The infection of COVID-19 spread throughout the world. The number of infected people continued to increase, masks were unavailable, and a state of emergency was declared during Golden Week, transforming our society into one we had never experienced before.

Then, professional baseball and other sports games were held without spectators, summer high school baseball games and the Tokyo Olympics were canceled, and almost all marathons were canceled.

Runners who were supposed to run the Tokyo Marathon would be given the right to run in future Tokyo Marathons. Still, after I found out that I would not be able to participate, I lost the will to run at all.



Tokyo Marathon to be held

Even in 2021, the following year, COVID-19 showed no signs of abating, and the world remained stagnant. My weight had increased because I had not been running. But around October 2021, there was a questionnaire asking those who had the right to run the Tokyo Marathon when they would like to participate in the race (2022 or 2023). If it were too far ahead, my motivation would not last. I wanted to run as soon as possible, so I decided to participate in 2022 and started running little by little. However, even in 2022, COVID-19 showed no signs of abating. Although the Tokyo Marathon was supposed to be held, most marathon events were not. I thought the Tokyo Marathon would probably be canceled as well, so I was unmotivated, and my training volume was not even half what it had been two years before.

Those running in the Tokyo Marathon had to record their physical condition on the app for two weeks leading up to the event, and they also had to take a PCR test before running the race. If the test result was positive, of course, you would not be allowed to participate. Also, if you did not keep a record on the app, you could not join the race. So, I was very careful not to forget to keep a daily record. While I was anxious about whether the marathon would really take place, I continued to run, even if it was a short distance.

1 事前に準備すること



体調管理アプリをダウンロード、プロフィールと写真画像を設定しましょう。



10 DAYS
10日前(2月24日(水))から毎日検温して体調管理アプリに検温結果を登録し、登録画面をランナー受付・大会会場に提示しましょう。



ランナー受付(3月3日、4日、5日)
WEIDでランナー受付の事前予約をしましょう。事前予約はメールにてご案内します。



PCR検査
①事前に検査キットをお取りします
②当日にweb既部を完了してから会場へ
③会場に到着した場合は会場に設置した検査ブース、メール及びマイエントリーにて連絡
④検査の結果は当日中にメールにてお知らせします。

みんなで安全・安心な大会を作っていくしましょう!



2 WEEKS
3月20日(月)までは体調管理アプリに入力し、3週間検温を継続していきましょう。



3週間検温を継続して検温しましょう(フィニッシュロープを配布します)。



更衣の際は必ず指定された更衣エリアを利用してください。共用施設や更衣室での更衣は禁止です。



ランナーサービス(給水、完走メダル等)は各自でピックアップしてください。



フィニッシュ後は必ずマスクを着用し、手洗い消毒をお願いします。

TOKYO MARATHON 2021

2022年3月6日(日)

新型コロナウイルス感染症対策

安全に完走するためのお願い

ランナー編

このご案内は、オフィシャルパートナー 花王(株)に手洗いや手指消毒に関するサポートを受けながら作成しています。

2 大会当日の流れ (3月6日)

1. 起床から入場ゲート
起床後から検温・セルフチェックをしましょう。
更衣エリアはありません。手荷物預かりは行いません。

2. 入場ゲートにて(7:30開場)
アスリートビブスと体調管理アプリを提示しましょう。
37.5℃以上の場合は入場をお断りします。

3. 入場ゲート～ウェーブスタート
会談・大声を避けるようにしましょう。
1m以上の間隔を保ちながらゆっくりスタートしましょう。
気流や感染対策を考慮してランニングベスト・ランニングバック(薄手の防寒着・着替えの下着)を準備し、自分に合った栄養補給品を用意しましょう!

少しでも体調に不安を感じたら無理をしない

3 スタート～走行中～フィニッシュ

トイレの際はマスクの着用、手洗い・手指消毒を必ずしう!

給水コップは必ずごみ箱に1秒の給水は持ち帰ります。

給水サイン
給水サインは、ランニングコースで指定されたテーブルから受け取ってください。

1m以上の間隔を保ちましょう。

スタート直前(1分前)までマスク着用。走行時の着用は不要です。マスクは途中で必ず着用してください。

4 フィニッシュ(大会終了後)

Three days prior to the race and the day before

Registration started three days before the race. When I went to Tokyo Big Sight, the registration site, on the night two days before the race, many working people were there after work. I submitted the PCR test I had done in advance and completed the procedures at the reception counter.

This place was not just a registration site but also an event venue. I saw a large monitor showing a video of the marathon course and many booths of various manufacturers. Although I was anxious about

whether the race would really be held, my spirits were lifted as I purchased gloves and other goods to commemorate the event.

The following day I received the result of the PCR test by e-mail. If the result had been positive, all my previous practice would have been in vain. But fortunately, it was negative, and I was relieved.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, there were a number of restrictions in place this year that differed significantly from those in the past.

- **No baggage will be checked at the starting point, so runners should come dressed for running.**
- **Wear a mask when you are not running.**
- **You will be asked to check your physical condition on your smartphone, so bring your smartphone with you when running.**
- **Water must be taken after sanitizing your hands and fingers at the designated water station indicated by your bib number.**

Such conditions were lined up.

Full marathons are very strenuous, so many runners use a method called “Carbohydrate Loading,” which involves eating carbohydrates anyway in the days leading up to the race. While eating a lot of rice and pasta, I was enjoying the tension and fun of my first full marathon. Running a long distance the day before would only leave me feeling tired, so I ran only a few kilometers lightly.



On the day of the race

The race day was clear, sunny, and perfect for a marathon. I left by car with plenty of time to spare, changed my clothes at a coin-operated parking lot in Nishi-Shinjuku, and ate castella and bananas to replenish my energy. I also brought a few energy gels and some light food to replenish my energy during the race.

The area around the starting point was quite crowded with runners and supporters. The registration area differed according to the bib number, and there was a strict security system with baggage inspection like

an airport. I stood at the starting point early, did some warm-up exercises, and waited for the start of the race.

The course was slightly changed from last year, but it was the same with the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building as the start and Tokyo Station as the finish line. The number of participants was about 19,000, about half the previous years. Top runners and celebrities, including men's and women's world record holders as well as Japanese record holders, participated in this year's event, and some runners were dressed in costumes. The Tokyo Marathon attracts a lot of attention because you can enjoy the race just by watching them.



The starting gun

Even though the number of runners was smaller than in previous years, the starting area was crowded, and this year's race was divided into three separate starts, with me in the second group. When the starting gun for the first group sounded at 9:10 am, the runners around me applauded.

As we runners walked in a crowd and lined up on the street in front of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, I saw an electric guitar performance, which was quite lively. Fifteen minutes after the first group, the second group's gun sounded, and the race was finally underway. In front of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, the Governor of Tokyo waved us off.



Right after the start, it was dense for a while, and I ran at the same slow pace as those around me. While the distance between the runners gradually increased, I could run at my own speed comfortably on the main streets of Shinjuku, where we could not normally run. It was announced to refrain from cheering along the road, but quite a few people were cheering us in and around Shinjuku.



After starting the race and entering Yasukuni Street, a gentle slant continued for about five kilometers. I heard that picking up my pace too much here would affect the second half of the race. So I kept my speed low and enjoyed the streetscape, which we usually could not run. I was concerned about the tightness of my shoelaces, so I had to re-tighten them several times every few kilometers.

As we reached Tokyo Station and headed toward Asakusa, I saw the top group of runners coming back on the other side of the road. They must have already run 30 kilometers, but I could see the difference in their level of performance in their powerful running.

After running for a while, there was a spot where we could see the Tokyo Sky Tree ahead, and many runners were taking commemorative photos. Around the Senso-ji temple in Asakusa, which was about an 18-kilometer point, there was a lot of cheering along the roadside, which was especially lively. I knew the course because I had done a trial run before, and I was still going well with no fatigue.



Turnaround point

The 21-kilometer point, the halfway point, was located on Kiyosumi Street near Ryogoku. About two and a half hours had passed since the start, but I still had plenty of energy to spare. I would enjoy the run without worrying too much about the time.

Water stations were set up every few kilometers, and I looked for the one with my bib number. It was a bit troublesome to sanitize my hands and fingers before taking them, but the volunteers waved and cheered me on. In addition to water supplies, there were some places that distributed yokan, candies, and glucose jellies, which provided ample support for the runners. I had brought some energy gels and chocolates to replenish myself in case I ran out of energy. But since I had overeaten right before the race, I rarely used them. There seemed to be no concern that I would run out of energy.



After the 25-kilometer point

I kept running at the same pace, listening to uplifting music when I needed a change my mood. There were several toilets for the runners, some of which were quite far from the marathon course, so I chose a place as close to the course as possible. While waiting in line for the toilets, we had to wear masks. In the meantime, I rested and caught my breath.

They were handing out disposable Air Salonpas (cooling spray) in a park where we could cool our bodies and legs. I cooled my entire leg over my tights and pulled out my shoes to cool the soles of my feet as well. I was starting to feel fatigued. Refreshing there, I recovered a bit.

As I was leaving the park, I was about to check my smartphone and found it was not in my hand. I walked back to where I had used the cooling spray and noticed it had fallen among the many runners. I must have left my smartphone behind when I got up. It was a terrible waste of time.

Seven gates were set up to check runners for this race. Runners who did not pass through them within a set time would be placed on a bus. I saw the pick-up buses slowly approaching on the other side of the road and some runners inside them. With the fear of the approaching buses, I hurried ahead to avoid being accommodated.



After the 30-kilometer point

I had reached the 30-kilometer mark. I had run up to 30 kilometers while resting in practice, but finally, it was uncharted territory for me from this point on. Then, I suddenly felt my legs noticeably heavier, which was different than before. I could not move my legs as much as I wanted to.

I realized this was the “wall at the 30-kilometer point.” It is said to be a phenomenon in which the legs stop moving as the carbohydrates stored in the body have been depleted after 30 kilometers of running. During the practice at the charity event before the race, I asked the Ekiden coach how I could overcome the “wall at the 30-kilometer point.” He said I should try to think positively, like, “I only have ten kilometers left to run, so let’s enjoy it.” But my legs were hurting so much that it seemed difficult to think that way. I was not sure if I could make it to the finish line, as there were still no less than ten kilometers to go. I kept stopping every kilometer, bending over, and starting again. Many runners did the same.

I ran slowly so as not to walk and got through a boulevard in Ginza, taking in the attention of the spectators. Although I could see Tokyo Tower before the 40-kilometer point, I no longer had room to enjoy the view. It was the toughest part of the race, but I would get my spirit again since I was almost there.



After the 40-kilometer point

I had a little more than two kilometers to go. It seemed difficult for me to finish within 5 hours. I tried to speed up for a last spurt, but my legs were cramping up and would not move as fast as I wanted them to. My heart and lungs were fine, and my breathing was not disturbed, so I felt frustrated that I could not my legs the way I wanted. I just kept running even though it was slow.



Goal

As I passed the 42-kilometer point and entered the straight road, the goal gate was in my sight. I thought, “I’m finally done!” My time was five hours and eleven minutes. It was a mundane time for marathon runners, but I was happy to finish the race.



After finishing the race

My first experience of running a full marathon amid the coronavirus pandemic was different from a typical race in that there were various restrictions, but I managed to finish it. Before the race, I was intimidated by the length of the distance. Still, once I tried, I could run unexpectedly long.

I never felt like I didn’t want to run again after finishing the race. After the 32-kilometer point, there was pain with every step I took, but it was still fun for me. It was a restricted race, and I was simply out of practice partly because I was not sure if the event would be held. However, being able to complete the race gave me confidence and made me want to run a full marathon again someday.

I used to think that marathons were simply running, but as I prepared, I discovered that they are very in-depth and learned about running, breathing, practicing, eating, etc. After the race, I disposed of the books and magazines about marathons by selling them. There were many helpful things, but I think my own experience is the most useful.

It all started when I heard an experience about a marathon from a climber I met by chance at a mountain hut. I became interested in it and actually took action, allowing me to experience the unknown and expand my world. I want to continue to cherish each and every encounter.



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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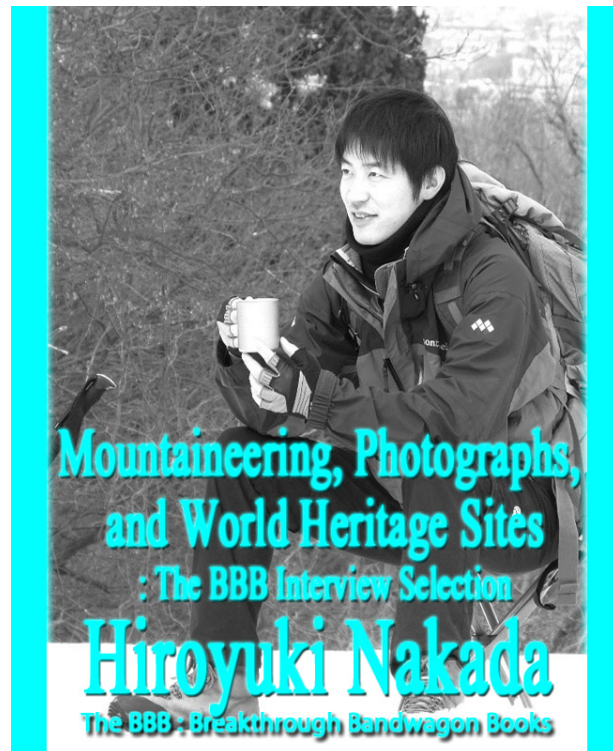
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