

Summiting Japan's 3 highest mountains

Japan is more than sushi, shopping and shinkansen. Every summer after the ice melts away, the Japanese Alps become thronged with hikers and climbers. While Taiwan has more mountains taller than Mt. Fuji, Japan's well-run mountain lodges mean one can climb without having to worry about lugging up tents and food.

There is no need to apply for permits unlike in Taiwan (show proof of one's fitness with your photo at any 3000m point) or apply to climb with a group. The Japanese philosophy that the mountains are there for all to enjoy but at the same time all must be mindful of safety and collectively take care of the environment is a beautiful one. This and the extensive train and bus networks make Japan a climber's paradise within Asia. And so it is over 2 summers, with a few Japanese acquaintances, we climbed Japan's 3 highest mountains.

Japan's tallest - Mt Fuji

Fuji san as is affectionately known to Japanese is open for climbing in July and August. The Yoshida trail is very popular with many buses connecting to Shinjuku, Tokyo just 2 hours away. Almost everyone starts at Fuji 5th station, itself a major tourist attraction with shrines, restaurants, souvenir shops and even pony rides.

With a group of local students, we set out in August after the busy Obon holidays, thinking the newly crowned World Heritage site would be less crowded. Only to be amazed by the large number of hiking groups there. After leaving behind the tourist crowd at the 5th station, we ended up tailing a large group of secondary students from Kyoto. The hiking groups we met along the way are very disciplined, all moving at the same pace. Because the trail was crowded, we only managed 4 hours of hiking and everyone agreed to rest early at one of the many huts and to continue early next morning.



leaving the camera totting tourist crowd behind at Fuji 5th station



Fuji shaped sweet by the 8th station mountain lodge



Resuming at 3am, the first sight that greeted us was a little girl decked out in cold gear accompanied by her father, both climbing through the night to catch sunrise at the top. So begins the slow trudge to the top for all of us.



some really tired out climbers near the top



5am during summer and a full moon to greet our final push to the very top

Frankly, the vista from the highest point in Japan was ordinary. The crowd meant it was more a start stop walk than a climb. But the experience of hiking along Japanese people of different age groups is a unique one. Climbing Fuji is never a lonely experience. We get to see the disciplined and orderly side of its people, and their determination to summit their most iconic mountain.



A portion of the Kyoto secondary students at Fuji's crater. It did feel like the whole school was there.

Kita dake and a postcard view of Mt Fuji

Ask any Japanese which is Japan's second highest mountain and they may be stumped. The wonderful thing about climbing Kita dake in minami alps is that there is no Mt Fuji crowd to jostle with and one may be rewarded with a postcard view of Mt Fuji at the top, *if* the weather cooperates. Kita (which means north, minami is south) dake can be climbed from Yamanashi prefecture's capital Kofu. The climb does not require any technical skill.

Kofu is only a 2 hour bus ride to from Shinjuku, Tokyo. During climbing season, there are regular buses that wind its way to the highlands for 2 hours to Hirogawa, the starting point. Since we started climbing early and it took 5 to 6 hours, there was ample time to reach the first of two mountain huts before nightfall.

The first hour or two of climbing is rather steep and energy zapping. Luckily as much of it is under forest canopy, we were not exposed to the sun. As is the common practice with hiking in Japan, everyone greets each other politely with 'konnichiwa' on the way, sometimes abbreviated into "chiwa." The verdant forests and summer flowers made the steep climb easier.



the first 2 hours of climbing is steep but under tree canopy



After we refilled our bottles with spring water at the halfway point, we pushed past the treeline and gradually found ourselves among cool swirling clouds close to the bare, bleak rocks along the ridgeline. Routes on Japanese mountains are clearly marked. Painted signs on the rocks indicate where to and more importantly, where *not* to go. O marks the correct path and X means do not follow. Arrows are also used to show directions to follow. Along the way, a few of us were lucky enough to spot thunder birds, a protected species that live high up in the Alps.

As we approached kata no goya, the lodge before the summit, Mt Fuji came into view in the background. Just like Hotaka sanso, this large mountain lodge somehow defies logic and manages not to slide off the mountain. From here, it is only a half hour climb to the summit, where Fujisan and his symmetrical cone stood handsomely before us.



campers outside the lodge with Fujisan in the background. It's an admirable feat to carry their own tents up and prepare their own meals.



kata no goya mountain lodge resting on the minami alps ridge, somehow managing to stay there

We chatted with summer vacation students who were camping outside. We were told Kita dake is what Mt Fuji used to be before the crowd sets in. Dinner was thankfully more sumptuous than the standard curry rice and pickles on Mt. Fuji.

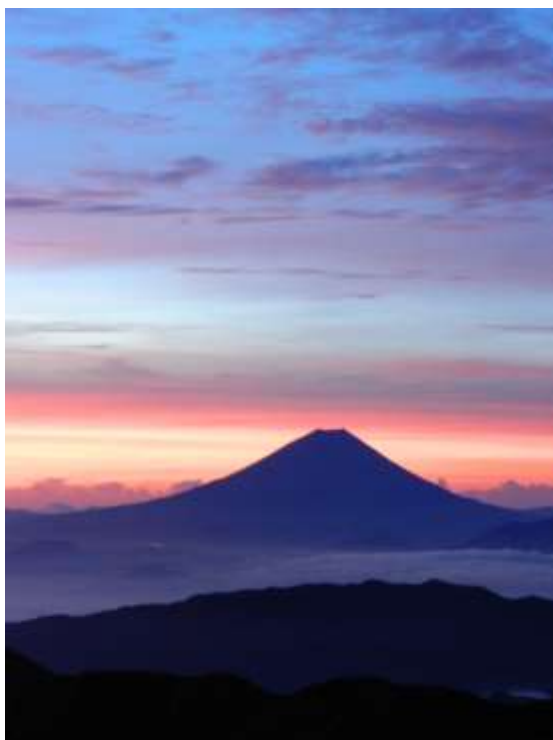
After dinner, following Japanese mountaineering practice, everyone slept at 8pm so as to get up early for breakfast and to catch the sunrise. At first we didn't realise why there was a mad rush to exit early. Gradually we understood that it is a safety habit for everyone to leave early and have ample time to head for the next destination. In Hotaka sanso, the staff would gently usher us along when we loiter.



No.2 looking at No.1

views of Japan's tallest mountain from Kita dake. The best view so far of the 3 summits.

From Kita dake, one can hike to other ridges for a multi-day hike. The minami (south) alps are less crowded than north alps centred around kamikochi



For those with time, you can turn this into a multi-day hike. The Minami (South) Alps is not as treacherous as the Kita (North) Alps that is part of Hotaka dake. From Kita dake, one can move on to other peaks and exit down to an onsen town to have a soak before heading back to Tokyo.

Japan's No. 3 - Oku Hotaka dake, a real mountain

Kamikochi is a popular highland resort and also the starting point for Hotaka dake. There are overnight buses from Shinjuku. We chose to stay over at Matsumoto town 3 hours from Tokyo by train and travel to Kamikochi on the first train. On hindsight, we should have stayed in Kamikochi even if it costs more, as the morning trip set us back by 2 hours.



view of the kita alps from Kamikochi



takes a whole day to get there

Unlike Fuji or Kita, where there is time to reach the top, it takes about 9-10 hours to get to Hotaka sanso. We had postponed the trip earlier due to typhoon and rain prediction. It didn't take long to realise we were the last on the trail. And we have to ponder turning back or continuing.

Before heading to Kamikochi, I was reminded by a Japanese acquaintance that while there are many mountains in Japan, Hotaka dake is a real mountain. While there are no particularly treacherous spots, we had never come across that many ladders and chains. The steep climb up never seemed to end and is one of the longest in the Alps.



many metal chains and ladders along the way. It would take at least 4 hours to gain elevation





harsh and rather bleak landscape on the ridgeline



Perhaps it is the reputation of Hotaka, we met many Japanese seniors on their way down. They all look fit, and huff and puff less than us. After 4 hours of gaining elevation, we reached the ridge line. By then the clouds had come in. Luckily as forecasted there would be no rain. It would take another 2 hours to get to Oku Hotaka dake, the 3rd highest point in Japan. As the temperature was dropping I was more keen to get to the lodge than celebrate summiting.



We were all elated when the lodge finally came into view after 9 hours on this harsh mountain. Climbing down to the hut just as the sun begins to set, we were determined to start early next morning. By far, Hotaka sanso serve the most sumptuous dinner with lots of Japanese tea. There's even fish on the menu.



6 to a room.
warm but can't
sleep with all that
snoring.

fish on the menu
for dinner



it takes half an
hour to climb up
from the lodge to
start retracing our
steps for our
journey down.

Yari ga dake
(spear) is further
down ... our next
climb trip



The mountains are not for the young only.
We encountered many seniors on the way
up and down. Very admirable.

Window into Japanese behaviour

Climbing Japanese Alps is more than a physical experience. It offers a small window into Japanese behaviour. Every body carries their own trash down the mountain. Group norms on arriving early, sleeping early and leaving early are followed by all. They seem to dress the same too. Even in the harsh landscape of the mountains, one still experiences the restraint and consideration that is very much a Japanese trait.

Trip planning

1. Summer climbing season typically starts in July and ends in early November. Outside climbing season, the huts are closed and extreme weather conditions make it dangerous except for professional mountaineers.
2. Accommodation in a mountain hut is around ¥8000, with dinner and breakfast provided. It is not cheap, but bearing in mind that supplies are all delivered by helicopter.
3. Mt Fuji climbing season is shorter than Kita dake or Hotaka dake

Climbing gear and Safety

1. While I have seen foreigners wearing shorts to climb Mt. Fuji, no Japanese would be caught short changed. Hiking shoes, cold and wet weather gear is a must. Weather can be unpredictable in the mountains.
2. Injuries and deaths occur every year in the mountains. It is ok to postpone the climb if bad weather is forecasted.
3. Mt Fuji is not a dormant volcano. Seismologists say it is 300 years overdue for an eruption. The possibility of eruption *now* is rated low.
4. Typically, lights go out at 8pm at the lodges so that everyone can have enough rest.
5. It is always good practice to fill out your planned route form and submit it at the information centre before starting the climb. I am guilty of not doing so on a few occasions.

Useful information

1. Matsumoto tourism office has English speaking staff and good information on kita alps. <http://welcome.city.matsumoto.nagano.jp/>
2. Information for kita alps <http://kita-alps.yamagoya.gr.jp/pdf/pamphlet.pdf>
3. For Kita dake on minami alps, If you can read Chinese kanji characters, you can make sense of the bus schedule on this Japanese site. <http://yamanashikotsu.co.jp/>
4. For Mt Fuji, there is ample information online and access is very convenient from Tokyo.