

Japanese Alps

Yari/Hotaka/Norikura Mountain Range

Chubusangaku National Park

Kita Alps Traverse Route

Hiking Guide& Map

Birthplace of The Japanese Alps

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Hiking the Northern Alps

Chubusangaku National Park welcomes hikers to a majestic alpine landscape of towering peaks, snowy slopes, clear mountain streams, and diverse seasonal varieties of plant and animal life. The park offers a well-developed system of trails and mountain huts and challenging routes. It is home to 10 of Japan's 21 peaks over 3,000 meters. The tallest is Mt. Okuhotakadake, the third-highest mountain in Japan at 3,190 meters, and the most recognizable is Mt. Yari-gatake, whose 3,180 meter peak is said to resemble the Matterhorn. Mt. Tsubakurodake, at 2,763 meters, is popular with novice hikers. Most of the summits are accessible, depending on one's level of expertise, the time of year, and the weather conditions.

The following is a guide to hiking the mountains of the national park. Hikers are urged to check the latest trail and weather conditions thoroughly and gather as much information as possible before setting out. The local tourist associations are reliable sources of information, as are the local visitor centers. Hiking guides, some of them multilingual, can make the experience more enjoyable by providing with you local customs, route information, safety hints and knowledge of the natural environment.

Geography and Geology

The Northern Alps are one of three mountain ranges that divide the main island of Honshu. They were formed between 2 to 5 million years ago during the Pliocene epoch, when compression between tectonic plates resulted in a thrust-fault from the east, pushing the earth's crust skyward and forming this long series of mountains.

Besides volcanic and sedimentary rocks, many of the mountains here consist of granite pierced by crystalline rocks containing feldspar and quartz. Granite is created when magma cools and solidifies at a considerable depth below the earth's surface. The granite here is some of the newest in the world: for example, while most of Japan's granite was

Mt. Tsubakurodake with its beautiful granite forms

About Trails

The Northern Alps routes are divided into hiking routes suitable for hikers and mountaineering routes. The hiking routes marked on the map that are suitable for hikers in the snow-free season (roughly July through September) are laid as trails, with signposts in places such as junctions that indicate present location and destination. On mountaineering routes other than the hiking routes, special equipment such as ropes are essential, and it is dangerous for ordinary hikers to proceed. Take care not to enter a trail that is over your ability level.

The main hiking routes are graded by the level of difficulty in 5 ratings from A to E (refer to the attached map). There are some hiking routes that use chains and ladders to ascend and descend steep rocky places, and the use of helmets is recommended on those routes.

Popular hiking routes can get crowded and jammed with hikers, particularly during high season in the summer and in weekends.

A well maintained hiking route

The Hiking Season

The best season for hiking runs from late July through early September, when temperatures range from 15°C to 25°C at lower altitudes and from 5°C to 15°C at higher altitudes. In earlier spring and autumn, lowest temperatures can reach below 0°C. Snow may fall in late September or early October at higher elevations. Winter comes to the mountains in late October, and the whole national park will be covered in snow until June.

Spring

Spring in the mountains begins at the end of April, usually around the holiday period known as Golden Week. Mountain lodges throughout the park begin opening their doors around that time as the melting snows allow. Since the higher peaks such as Mt. Yari-gatake, Hotaka mountains, and Mt. Jonedake, are all still completely snow-covered in spring, winter equipment and experience are required to hike these mountains.

Summer

The rainy season usually starts in late June and lasts about a month, and there are few hikers during this time. After the rainy season,

alpine flowers of all varieties begin to make their appearance, presenting a colorful contrast with the remaining snow.

In late July, mountains are snow free, and almost all trails can be accessible without any winter equipment. Summer is a good season with warm weather, but please be weather ready. Typhoons come often during this time, and thunderstorms can be a daily occurrence in the afternoons.

Autumn

From late September through mid-October, the forests change from the lush greens of summer to their autumn colors. The change begins at the higher altitudes first, then it comes down slowly as it gets colder. Karasawa, a popular destination for visitors, is a famous spot for autumn leaves, but you can find spectacular views throughout the park. The dark-barked or Ema's beech trees, are aglow with vivid yellows, while the most brilliant reds come from the leaves of the Japanese rowan.

In October, temperatures can drop drastically and snow can fall even at lower elevations. Bring warm clothing and prepare for the worst possible weather. During this period, snow makes the trails icy, which can easily lead to an accident.

This is also when the mountain lodges start preparing for winter. Some mountain lodges close their doors around mid-October.

Winter

At the beginning of November, almost all mountain lodges close for the season except *Enzanjo* and *Nishino-sanso*. After November 15th, all facilities around the bus terminal area close until the next spring comes in Kamikochi. Snowfall will see the majority of roads and trails are closed during the winter season throughout the entire national park. Only guides or experienced hikers will be able to access closed areas.

What to Bring: Hiking Equipment

1 Base layer

Light synthetic fabric or wool that will dry quickly.

2 Middle layer

Long sleeved and moisture-wicking shirt or sweater.

3 Backpack

Backpack size will depend on the length of the hike and whether you plan on carrying a tent. Putting the contents in plastic bags and using a rain cover for the pack is also recommended.

4 Hiking pants

Lightweight, quick-dry materials that are easy to move in.

5 Hiking shoes

High-top hiking boots with good ankle support and traction are best.

Warm clothing

A fleece, down, or synthetic jacket and warm hat and gloves are also recommended for the colder temperatures at higher altitudes.

Rainwear

Windproof and waterproof jacket with a hood and pants (breathable fabric recommended).

Helmet

Helmets are highly recommended on dangerous trails.

Map and compass

Always carry a detailed map of your route, as well as a compass. While the trails are well marked, a map and compass are useful if you get disoriented.

Avalanche Safety Equipment

Hiking equipment checklist

☐ Backpack

☐ Quick-dry underwear

☐ Hiking shirt

☐ Hiking pants

☐ Warm jacket

☐ Hiking socks

☐ Hiking boots

☐ Gloves

☐ Hat or cap

☐ Rainwear

☐ Gaiters

☐ Headlamp

☐ Sunglasses

☐ Sunblock

☐ Map

☐ Compass

☐ Cash

☐ Device charger

☐ Extra food/snacks

☐ Extra water

☐ First aid kit

☐ Emergency tent

☐ Beanie

☐ Neck gaiter

☐ Insulated puffy jacket

☐ Insulated water bottle

☐ Trekking poles

☐ Microspikes

☐ Crampons

☐ Ice axe

Additional items for early spring or late autumn

A Tradition of Japan's Mountain Lodges

The first Hotaka hut was built in 1925 (presently Hotakadake Sanso hut)

Mountain clinic opens during summer season at Yari-gatake Sanso mountain lodge.

There are about 100 mountain lodges throughout Chubusangaku National Park, offering meals, accommodation, safety support, and information. Some of these started their history in the early 1900's. Surprisingly, many of the lodges operating in 1934 when the area was designated a national park are still in operation today.

Until the advent of helicopters, food and any supplies were carried by *Bokka*, people who carry items on their back – and their loads usually exceed their own body weight. If you have ever hiked with

a heavy backpack, it's easy to imagine how difficult their job was. Now, thanks to helicopter deliveries and generators, guests can enjoy things like hot meals, beer, and even ice cream in some locations.

Every lodge has a deep connections with its area. The managers and their employees are walking encyclopedias who share their knowledge about the nature, trails, weather conditions, and much more. Most mountain lodges are family-run businesses and have lasted for generations, and they have built and taken care of the trails that hikers walk.

Hiking Tips

● On trails, hikers coming uphill have the right of way. If you're descending the trail, step aside and give space to the people hiking up.

● When a dislodged rock can endanger people below, hikers call out "*Raku!*" (an abbreviation of *rakuski* ("falling rock")). *Raku* is pronounced much like the word "rock."

● Stay on the trail. Stepping off trail can damage plants or animal species and can hurt the ecosystems that surround the trail.

● Be aware of wildlife. You might see some wildlife while you hike. Keep your distance from the wildlife you encounter.

● Stay informed. Get any updated information about trails or hazards in the park before starting your hike.

● Helmets are recommended for certain dangerous trails.

● The weather can change very quickly in the mountains. Be prepared and check forecasts often.

● Bring a headlamp on any hike, even short day hikes.

● As a legal requirement, the hiking itineraries should be submitted at the trailhead or online in advance.

At difficult passages, calling out to each other can help you pass in a safe place

Paint marks like this a used to mark trails.

Enjoying the Flora and Fauna

Hikers will come across all kinds of plant and animal life, some of which is indigenous to or found only in Japan.

Trees and Other Plants

The trees and other plant species that populate the forests of Chubusangaku National Park vary by area and altitude.

Veratrum

Veratrum, or *kobukeiso*, is a toxic flowering plant recognizable by its straight stems with multiple white blossoms. It is found in areas of damp soil and blooms every few years in midsummer.

Japanese Rowan (*Sorbus commixta*)

The Japanese rowan's name, *nankakumaki*, is made of two words meaning "sweet" and "oven," from the belief that it is such a slow-burning firewood it can be used in an oven seven times. Also known as mountain ash, it bears small white flowers in spring, followed by brilliant red berries and leaves in autumn.

Chinguruma (*Oxym pentapetatum, oxens*)

An alpine plant that frequently colonizes areas around snowy fields which symbolizes arrival of early summer. It blooms in one place after another as the snow melts and the ground is exposed, and since it blooms in short period of time, about 1 to 2 weeks, its flowering tells of the progress of snow melting. After the flowers stop blooming, the pale pink spikes fly away in the wind. The sight resembles childrenrichig's windmill (*Kazunuma*), and so the name *Chinguruma* was given. The leaves also turn color vividly in the fall, so it can be enjoyed in 3 different forms. Although looking like a grass, it is actually a tree.

Angelica pubescens

Called *shishudo* in Japan, this is a native plant with delicate white blossoms resembling fireworks that emerge from its tall stems in July and August.

Japanese Beech (*Fagus crenata*)

The Japanese beech, or *kuma*, is a deciduous tree native to Japan and can grow at altitudes of up to 1,400 meters. Its ability to absorb and store rainwater in its trunk and roots helps prevent erosion, and the evaporation of water through its leaves acts as a natural cooler and climate modifier. The tree's leaves turn yellow in autumn.

Japanese White Birch (*Betula platyphylla*)

The white birch, or *shirakaba*, is found throughout the mountains at altitudes of around 1,500 meters and can be recognized by its white, flaky bark and lime-green leaves that turn golden yellow in autumn.

Siberian Dwarf Pine (*Pinus pumila*)

Dense fields of Siberian dwarf pine (*haimatsu*) can be found at high altitudes near the tree line throughout the park, creating a safe haven for the Japanese rock ptarmigan.

Japanese Larch (*Larix kaempferi*)

The Japanese larch, or *karamatsu*, is the only deciduous coniferous tree native to Japan. It comes into leaf early in spring, and its needles turn bright yellow before being shed in autumn.

Komakusa (*Dicentra peregrina*)

Its pink flowers bloom in gravelly granite where other plants cannot live. The sight of its flowers rarely blooming in this harsh environment has earned its name of "Queen of the alpine flora." The name *Komakusa* (horse plant) is derived from the resemblance to a face of a horse. Parsley-like thin leaves send water directly to its own roots by changing moisture in the air into water droplets.

Birds

Bird watchers will find the park a habitat for migratory and nonmigratory species, including:

Japanese Rock Ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta*)

The Japanese rock ptarmigan (its Japanese name *ra-mu* means "thunder bird") is a heavy-bodied ground feeder about the size of a small chicken that is found in alpine areas of dwarf Siberian pine. It is noted for its pure-white coloring during the winter. Its survival at high altitudes made it a symbol of the mountain duties, and for most of Japanese history *ra-mu* were not hunted. Despite being a beloved bird, it is now on the endangered list. Since the birds are accustomed to humans, hikers spot them quite frequently.

Alpine Accentor (*Prunella collaris*)

With its streaked brown back, gray head and red-bell-lowered spotted breast, the alpine accentor (*haku-bari* in Japanese) is found in mountain areas with little vegetation. It can be found at elevations of over 2,000 meters but usually winters at lower altitudes, and is known for its beautiful song, warbled while in flight.

Spotted Nutcracker (*Urelops carpatocetes*)

The spotted nutcracker, or *hoshi gansu*, is a member of the crow family and feeds on insects, nuts, and pine cones. It is found in coniferous mountain forests and has an excellent memory, remembering hundreds of locations where it has buried food. Its distinct white-spotted pattern is elegant and eye-catching.

Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

A matured bird is blackish-brown all over with golden brown at the back of the head. The wingspan can reach up to an impressive 2m. They look majestic as they circle and fly on the rising air flow. Steep mountainous areas are its natural habitat, building nests on rock ledges or in large trees. The decline of its natural habitat and a fall in the breeding success rate and a reduction in surviving numbers. Designated as a nationally endangered wildlife species under threat of extinction, it will be precious experience if you spot it.

Mammals

The park is home to many creatures great and small, protected through conservation and awareness programs.

Japanese Least Weasel (*Hermelin leucis*)

Called *shika* in Japanese, this is one of the smaller members of the genus *Mustela*. While it looks adorable when standing on its hind legs, this furry creature is carnivorous and hunts small mammals and birds, like the rock ptarmigan.

Japanese Serow (*Capricornis capripes*)

Though its Japanese name, *kamoshika*, includes *shika*, which means deer, the Japanese serow is an even-toed hoarse, a kind of goat-analog. While not in danger of extinction, it is considered a symbol of Nagano and Toyama prefectures, and is therefore a protected species.

Asian Black Bear (*Ursus thibetanus*)

The Asian black bear, or *kuma*, is medium-sized and largely herbivorous, though it will feed on small mammals, birds, and insects. It sports a distinctive white patch in the shape of a crescent moon on its chest. Adults have an average weight of 135 kilograms but can reach 200 kilograms.

Japanese Macaque (*Macaca fuscata*)

The Japanese macaque or "snow monkey" can be found in many areas of the park, particularly in Kamikochi and at other high altitudes in the Northern Alps. Their diet includes leaves, bamboo shoots, insects, and nuts. Visitors from abroad are often surprised to find monkeys, which are more commonly associated with tropical areas, in such a cold, harsh habitat.

Making the Most of Your Stay: Tips for Lodging at Mountain Lodges

Unlike mountaineering national parks in Europe or North America, many of Japan's mountain lodges are located close to the highest peaks. Your cooperation is essential to operating these accommodations in such extreme locations, and it is important to follow the basic manners and rules. Review these tips before you go to ensure a smooth stay.

Start early, arrive early.

Mountain lodges usually ask all hikers to plan to arrive by 3:00 p.m. for their safety as an unexpected hazard or an emergency could cause delays. Additionally, the weather can change rapidly in the mountains. Arriving early helps to avoid thunderstorms which typically develop in the afternoon.

The Early Bird

Some hikers hit the trails while it is still dark, and almost everyone leaves by 6:00 or 7:00 a.m. Since breakfasts need to be prepared and served, this means an even earlier start for the lodge's staff. Evening meals are served early too, usually at around 5:00 p.m.

Lights Out/Lights On

At mountain lodges, the lights usually turn off at 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. and come back on at around 5:00 a.m. Many hikers often go to bed even earlier than the lights turn out, so it's good to be careful about talking too loud or making unnecessary noise. If you plan to leave very early, it's best to pack the night before to keep noise to a minimum.

Toilet manner

Since mountain lodges are in quite remote areas, washrooms have composting toilets, which utilizes a biological process with bacteria, or vault toilets, which carry the human waste out by helicopters. The toilet systems don't need much water to work, but toilet paper or any kind of trash may prevent the system from working properly, so toilet paper will need to go into a trashcan instead of the toilet.

If you stay at the lodges or campsites, the toilet fee is included. Other hikers are asked to contribute ¥100 per use of any toilet in this national park.

Reservations

Reservations are required to stay at any mountain lodges. If you plan to camp at a campsite, they mostly operate on a first-come, first-served basis. If you need to cancel your stay for any reason, be sure to inform the lodge. If someone fails to arrive at the lodge and has given no notice, the proprietor may worry that you had an accident or emergency.

Because of unreliable internet connections, almost all mountain lodges do not accept credit cards, so please be sure to bring cash for payment. You will also need small change to pay to use toilets. Additionally, there are NO ATMs in the national park.

Cash

A certain bedroom at a mountain lodge