

“ Suddenly the trees clear and there it is away to the south: the breathtaking sweep of Mount Fuji, Japan's highest and most famous peak ”

It gets light so gradually that I can't tell when the black outline of the mountain separates from the starry darkness, but suddenly it's there, where before there was only night. From the warmth of my sleeping bag I watch as dawn silhouettes Akadake's serrated peak against a changing canvas of colour: Prussian blue fades into ultramarine, cobalt to violet. For an instant the corner of the sky catches fire, and just as suddenly it is day. I struggle to pull clothes onto aching limbs, and stumble out of the tent into beauty.

I had woken in the pre-dawn dark, cursing myself. The slope of the tent site had pushed my hiking partner's weight into me; my camera dug into the small of my back. Other people take cruises. They stay in resorts with swim-up bars, espresso machines and spas. What was I doing here, with my head on a pillow of clothes and my muscles aching? Why had we chosen to drag our bodies over the rugged collection of peaks that makes up Japan's Yatsugatake Mountains, the line of peaks that, for 30 kilometres, marks the border between Nagano and Yamanashi Prefectures? Obviously, we were crazy.

But then it began to get light. We had risen at sunrise the day before, and caught the first train towards Kobuchizawa, breakfasting on the compact triangles of rice they call *onigiri*, considered essential to hiking in Japan. The tracks cut through forested hills and over paddied river valleys, before rising up onto the long and gentle slope that marks Yatsugatake's southern end.

From the tiny Chuo Line station at Kobuchizawa, it was a winding taxi ride to the trailhead, but we were happy to hand over ¥3,200 to the driver when we arrived. The other option is to walk along the road, adding several hours to the first day's hike.

The mountain's slope inclines steeply above the trailhead at Kanon Daira Green Lodge. To begin with, our hiking companions were an entire grade of a local junior high school. It didn't take them long to pass us. With tenting gear, clothes for warm days and cold nights, cameras and enough food for the five-day hike, our packs weighed more than a quarter of our bodyweights. (Travelling on a tight budget, we had decided to

carry in all our supplies, rather than rely on the mountain lodges.) In addition, I was out of shape. It was slow going.

In between the children's longer breaks, we passed and were passed by the group, the standard "ohayou gozaimasu" (good morning) or "konnichiwa" (hello) turning to more casual greetings of "ganbatte" or "ganbarre" (good luck, keep at it).

Coming from the very south of the range, the first ascent is relentless. The thick mixed forest gave way to pale-skinned birches with twisting trunks as we climbed. We kept at it. By noon my legs were trembling, but we'd reached our first summit.

VOLCANIC REMNANTS

Yatsugatake, simply translated, means eight mountains, and viewed from certain directions, there are indeed eight peaks. Move slightly one way or the other, however, and the ridges unfold into a completely different number of summits. Our route – planned to make the most of the campsites, rather than the more frequent lodges – would take us over 16.

The first of these was Amigasayama, formed during a violent eruption of the volcanic range. The summit – a roughly conical jumble of gigantic rocks – makes this explosive event feel recent: the rocks are bare, save for lichen and trail markers. Native rhododendrons and shrubby pines grasp a tenuous foothold on the thin soil between the boulders.

A scrambling descent brought us to the hut at Seinengoya. While my companion made lunch, I left my pack and followed the short track to a spring in the ravine above the hut. There were Japanese serow tracks in the damp ground where the water cascades into a brass basin. Despite the trails, huts and day-trippers, Yatsugatake is wild country. As well as the mountain goat-like serow, the mountains are reputedly home to the ptarmigan, red fox, spotted sika deer, marten, squirrel and Asiatic black bear.

The terrain is both steep and rugged, and it's easy to see why southern Yatsugatake is so popular with rock climbers. Without ropes of our own, we pulled ourselves across crumbling slopes on chains that are screwed into the solid rock, and climbed sheer cliffs on hair-

raisingly steep ladders. The last part of the long ascent to Gongendake is braced with metal like teenage teeth, the peak itself eerie with spires of ancient lava.

A long ladder took our wobbling legs down to Gongendake's shoulder. The afternoon light began to angle towards evening as we followed the steep path down through shoulder-high aspens. The air was hot and clear, and above us Akadake, the range's highest peak, was bright in the sun. My partner began to lag. I passed him and bribed him forward with pieces of chocolate and the promise of dinner and beer.

Foreign hikers often complain about the petrol-driven generators that power so many of Japan's mountain huts, but the engine's throb was a welcome sound when we finally heard it coming up through the trees. By the time we arrived at the Kiretto Hut the sun had vanished over the mountain and it was beginning to get dark. We paid our camp fee to the warden and put up our tent on the gently sloping campsite in the stand of fir trees below the building. We were both too tired to walk the few dozen metres back up to the lodge to buy beer. We made do with water, ate our pasta with gusto and fell asleep.

In the morning we're awake before the sun rises over Akadake's jagged peak. By the time the water boils for coffee and oatmeal, the day has warmed enough to shed a layer of clothing. We pack up the tent and I make breakfast; we've been doing this together long enough to have achieved a quiet efficiency. We eat in silence, too, watching the mountain take on its characteristic russet hue: Akadake means 'red mountain'.

Hauling our packs onto protesting shoulders, we set off uphill. The wildflowers around the hut give way to spruce and birch. Suddenly the trees clear, and there it is away to the south: the breathtaking sweep of Mount Fuji, Japan's highest and most famous peak.

Legend has it that Yatsugatake was long ago a single mountain, with a height to rival Mount Fuji's. Both mountains proudly believed themselves to be the tallest in the land. On being proven the shorter of the two, Fuji-san smote down her rival, breaking Yatsugatake's single peak to form today's rugged range.

Opposite: The trail leads towards Akadake's rough peak, at an altitude of 2,899m



WRITER PROFILE

Wanderlust is hard-wired into Skye Hohmann, 30. She has slept in Indian desert, watched an eclipse from a tiny Pacific atoll, ridden through Australia's Snowy Mountains, mushed huskies north of 60, and sailed tall ships across Canada's Great Lakes.

Japan peak to peak

Departing 24/7 life in Tokyo, **Skye Hohmann** heads deep into the Yatsugatake Mountains, where four days of hard hiking are rewarded with views of Fuji and soothing dips in hot springs...



Above: A small Shinto shrine marks Akadake's summit

Below: Shirakoma Ike's proximity to the road makes it popular with summer day trippers

From here, Mount Fuji seems close enough to touch, but within a few minutes the climb forces my eyes back to the path at my feet. The forest gives way to scrubby expanses of Siberian dwarf pine and the air is clean with the turpentine scent of the resinous needles. I come out onto the rusty red rock of the peak's steep shoulder, and my hiking partner, who has left me far behind, reappears in the distance. I'm struggling for breath when I finally reach the signpost where he's examining the map. Outraged at my own slowness, I snap at him for not waiting for me. "You said to go on ahead," he responds, calmly, passing me the water bottle.

It consequently takes a long time to convince him that he's trying to take us the wrong way at the junction.

By mid-morning we're at the top of the range: the slopes fall away in red and green troughs and peaks on all sides. All around us are mountains: the South Japan Alps blue in the distance, the volcanic Mount Ontake and smoking Mount Asama on either horizon. Mount Fuji shimmers like a mirage through the heat-haze of the plain below. We leave a small offering at the tiny Shinto shrine marking the pinnacle, stop at the hut to buy a souvenir – this is Japan, after all! – and then press on.

The afternoon takes us across a narrow scramble of ridges. Wild thyme and alpine campanula cling to the rock faces; we cling to chains bolted to the rocks. A mother with two pre-teen children passes

us from the other direction. The day clouds over and we pull on fleece jackets, step after step taking us slowly closer to our destination. We stop on the rounded peak of Iodake, admiring the sulphur-yellow curve of cliff where the side of the mountain blew away.

Although the range is entirely volcanic, none of the southern mountains is still active. Down below Iodake, what remains of the mountain's once-explosive volcanic heat is gentle enough to bathe in. We turn downhill at the Natsuzawa Pass, which separates the northern and southern ends of the range. By the time night falls, we find ourselves back below the treeline, setting up our tent at Honzawa Onsen, arguably Japan's highest hot spring.

The lodge is a rambling wooden building, and we follow the smell of sulphur down a long flight of stairs and into the small changing rooms. Stripping down, I leave my clothes in a basket and step into the thick steam of the bathroom. The partition between the men and women's baths doesn't quite reach the ceiling, so my companion and I share our soap, rinse thoroughly, and step into the scalding water to soak.

Stepping out into the cold night air, I've seldom felt so alive. We walk back to the campsite hand in hand. Stars wheel above the trees overhead, and I fall asleep to the sound of the stream that comes down from the mountain and runs into Japan's longest river, the Shinano.

ALONE IN THE MOUNTAINS

Northern Yatsugatake looks deceptively gentle. The frequent peaks are forested and far less rugged than southern Yatsugatake's bare rocky slopes, but the ground is often rocky and the ascents straight and unforgiving. Chains and ladders give way to jumbled boulders. The summits are punctuated by mountain lakes and marshes.

Early afternoon of our third day of hiking brings us to the campsite by

HIKING IN JAPAN

The Yatsugatake Mountains are accessible from a number of bus routes (many run from the Chuo Line's Chino Station) as well as from Kobuchizawa Station. This allows for shorter trips than the five-day hike Skye chose – although unless you're in superb shape you'll need more than one night in the mountains to summit Akadake.

DANGERS

Don't let the school children and grandparents fool you: Yatsugatake are real mountains, and unprepared hikers occasionally run into trouble when the weather turns bad. You'll need sturdy hiking shoes with ankle support, wet weather gear and plenty of layers. The altitude means that even when it's unbearably hot on the plains below, the peaks can be shockingly cold, particularly after dark. Stay hydrated and carry plenty of water with you. Remember to check what time the sun rises and sets, as you don't want to be on these mountain paths after dark.

WHAT TO TAKE

A good topographical map of the area is essential, though you'll need to get a bilingual friend (hotel staff in Japan are stellar at this sort of thing) to translate the place names for you. Lonely Planet's Hiking in Japan travel guide covers the Yatsugatake Range and is worth taking with you.

If you don't want to rely on the excellent food supplied by the huts, outdoor stores provide the same sort of food supplies in Japan as elsewhere. Japanese supermarkets are a surprisingly good source of lightweight foods, including excellent instant *ramen* noodles, freeze-dried fruit, *miso* soups and plenty of instant or nearly instant Western-style pasta dishes.

PREPARATION

Again, don't let the kids and grannies fool you: you'll need to be in reasonable shape even if you're not carrying your own tenting gear and food. Japanese hikers are generally friendly, but a few words of the language go a long way in assisting communication.



Shirakoma Ike, a shallow lake at the heart of a mossy evergreen forest. In the evening I take a walk. The thickly mossed woods hush everything; the air is moist and cool and perfectly quiet, and except for the occasional trill of birdsong, I am completely alone. It is hard to believe that just a few days ago we were in Tokyo. It's hard to believe this is the country of raked Zen temples and carefully ordered tea gardens.

Setting out the next morning we come out of the forest and cross the only road that cuts across the range, before heading up again towards the last remaining

active volcano in the Yatsugatake mountain range

Mount Kitayokodake last erupted 800 years ago, and I imagined smoking craters, but the only mist is from the few scattered clouds that cling to the rocky summit. There's a chair lift that brings day hikers to the area, and a few young women in stilettos mix with vacationing families on the flat ground below the peak. But we soon leave the crowds behind.

I count my way up the mountain: every footstep is a number. All I can hear is the sound of my breathing, the thud of my heartbeat in my ears. I aim for 200. I get to 50, lose count and start again. Sometimes I reach 120, 130, before losing track.

People talk about being alone in the wilderness, about being humbled by mountains. For me, the only thing I'm really alone with is my own thoughts: more than pushing my body up the hill, I'm pushing myself past a wall in my mind. I'm alone with my limitations, and the mountain is simply pushing my capabilities.

On the fourth day, we begin to pass other hikers. Stopping for lunch on the summit, I look back along the curved spine of the range. We've come all the way along it, over all those peaks.

Choosing the alternate route down from Kitayokodake's peak, we soon find ourselves scrambling over boulders. Somewhere in the afternoon we lose the trail, and the descent takes us twice as long as the two hours suggested on the map. Our trail comes down between

Futago Ike's twin lakes, and we're met by a contented retiree drinking beer on the lodge's balcony. "You came down the hard way," he chuckles.

The campsite is in a stand of tall pines, each tent site in a clearing of bamboo grass. We wash off the trail dust, standing knee-deep in the cool water and scooping handfuls over tired limbs. Our bodies steam in the cold air.

The next morning is cool, and we're soon in cloud. On top of Mount Futago's bald summit the winds bend us double. The path vanishes into fog and then, coming down again, into trees. Our last ascent is Mount Tateshina, the flat-topped peak that marks the northern end of the Yatsugatake Mountains. A long scramble up a steep path of boulders brings us onto the summit, where again we're met by lunching school children.

It's a long descent back to the road. We stop for bowls of buckwheat *soba* noodles at the convenient roadside restaurant, and consider waiting the two hours for the bus. In the end we follow the path downstream for another hour, emerging from the forest at a hot springs hotel just as it begins to rain.

We struggle with our boots at the door, and the concierge stows our travel-worn packs and gives us a copy of the bus schedule. We rent towels, pay our bath fees and go our separate ways to the baths. Neck deep in steaming water, the tiredness melts out of my muscles. I look up at the edge of the rain-soaked forest and sigh with contentment: in the end, I took the road less travelled, but the ending made it all worthwhile. ◀



Above: Looking back at the range from Kitayokodake's red volcanic peak.

INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Virgin Atlantic (www.virginatlantic.com), British Airways (www.ba.com), Japan Airlines (www.jal.com) and ANA (www.ana.co.jp) all fly direct to Japan from the UK, but various airlines also connect the two countries via a stopover.

VISAS

British passport holders do not require a visa for stays of up to 90 days.

HEALTH

Vaccinations against hepatitis A+B, Japanese encephalitis, rabies, tetanus and tick-borne encephalitis should be considered.

WHEN TO VISIT

The most pleasant times to visit Japan are during spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November). Summers can be hot and humid, while winters are especially cold on the northern island of Hokkaido.

FURTHER INFO

Japan National Tourism Organization
www.jnto.go.jp/eng