



Mitake Sanso: A Shrine Stay in Okutama, Tokyo, Japan

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Okutama is the nature hub of Tokyo Prefecture, lying about two hours west of central Tokyo. The area is ideal for those who want to get away from the hustle and bustle of Japan's largest city and take advantage of the fresh-air opportunities available in Chichibu-Tama-Kai National Park: walking trails, forests, waterfalls, suspension bridges, power spots, small towns, temples, shrines and mountains.

Mt. Mitake (pronounced mee-tah-kay) stands as an adventure all its own, and a great way for visitors to envelope themselves in the experience is to stay at a shukubo, or pilgrimage accommodation, on the mountain.

Mt. Mitake is accessible by hiking a steep path, or more comfortably, by taking the cable car that arrives at the 831 meter (2726 feet) level in about 6 minutes. From the cable car station it's a short walk along a path and then up, up, up part of the mountain, to Mitake Sanso, the traditional Inn where we spent the night.

After a late afternoon check-in to a very large Japanese-style tatami room, the first order of business was to put on the complimentary yukata (robe) and jacket and head down to the public bath for a good, hot soak. Afterward, in complete relaxation mode we enjoyed a dinner that was nothing short of a culinary celebration of the local, seasonal foods for which Okutama is famous. The incredible array of colorful, delicious dishes began with chestnut covered in bright green tea noodles, with yuzu (a citrus fruit) and plump, boiled peanuts. This was followed by konnyaku (a taro-like vegetable), marinated persimmon salad, crunchy fresh pickles, a bowl of stewed pumpkin with burdock and tofu, a tureen of red pepper, avocado, onion, scallop and enoki mushrooms, and then a creamy vegetable au gratin. The main dish consisted of fresh caught river fish (ayu) garnished with rock salt and served with a side dish of tempura mushrooms, persimmon and shrimp. The final 'end-of-the-meal' dishes included wasabi rice, sumashi jiru (a kelp-based soup) and grapes. It was a perfect way

to indulge in a true taste of our surroundings, and to appreciate the value of a stay at Mitake Sanso.

After a great night's sleep on our futons, cocooned in plush comforters, we followed the steep path to Musashi Mitake Shrine. On a crisp autumn morning, the gorgeous sunrise over an amazing vista of mountains, showcased the beautiful red and gold shrine. Our 7:00 a.m. pre-arranged meeting with the Shrine priest was a warm, humorous and educational experience as he explained (through translation) some of the history and legends of the area.

After blessings and prayers we headed back to Mitake Sanso for an incredibly tasty traditional Japanese breakfast, before checking out and descending the mountain.

This was a memorable adventure, but made even more meaningful with a stay at Mitake Sanso and enjoying Okutama hospitality and truly amazing food. Plans for a return visit are in the works! ■

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