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MOUNTAINS OF DELIGHT

Heavenly vistas in Japan

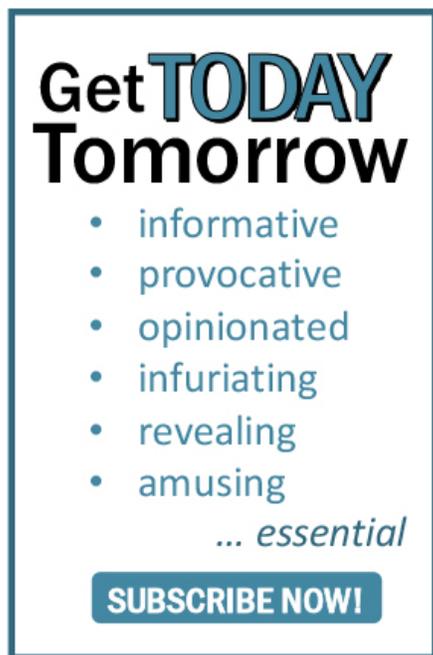
Steve Gillick

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08 JAN 2018: As we hiked through the Sinai Mountains many years ago, we came upon a beautiful, old grove of gnarled olive trees. Noga, one of the members in the group, remarked how dramatic the trees looked and asked that we stop to take photos. When one of the other group members commented that “it’s just a bunch of

trees”, Noga retorted by looking up at the spectacular vistas surrounding us, saying “David, that’s like saying ‘if you’ve seen one mountain, you’ve seen them all.” David was quiet after that.



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Travellers, trekkers, photographers and I’m sure outdoor adventure enthusiasts would embrace Noga’s philosophy on mountains. You don’t have to climb a mountain to be lured into a state of fascination and awe of the snow capping, the jagged peaks, the ridge of trees, the unfathomable heights and the wonderment about what it would be like to stand on top and look down. Many mountains take this sense of reverence to an even higher level when they inspire local legends in their capacity as the abode of gods, goddesses and demons.

In Japan’s Tohoku region, the Namahage Museum in Oga pays tribute to the horrific demons that march down from the mountains on [New Year’s Eve](#) to ensure that children in the local villages are planning to change their ways for the better in the year ahead.

But the most famous mountain in the country, Mt. Fuji, takes on a more auspicious provenance as the home of the Shinto gods Kokiji and Niniji, the latter being the grandson of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess (note the 'circle of the sun' on the Japanese flag), and the great-grandfather of Jimmu, the first Emperor, who in turn, is directly related through 125 generations to the present Emperor, Akihito. One of the compelling reasons for Tokyo becoming the new capital of Japan in 1868 was its proximity (only 132 km) to the revered Mt. Fuji.

While Mt. Fuji's perfect shape is admired 12 months of the year, upwards of 300,000 people ascend to various levels during the climbing season from early July to early September.

However, on the western edge of the Greater Tokyo Area, Mt. Takao attracts 2.6 million visitors each year. I'm sure that most of them were there on November 4, 2017 when I decided to visit during the long weekend. Some walk to the 599 meter high summit while others take either the cable car or chairlift to see the panorama of distant mountains (including Mt. Fuji), visit the food and souvenir stalls and enjoy a picnic lunch. Many stop at the Yakuoin Temple to see the huge Tengu masks and statues, representing the mountain-dwelling messengers of the gods who will certainly bring grief to evil-doers, but rewards to those on the path to goodness.

With Japan Rail's new Hokuriku Arch Pass, travellers can explore a fascinating semi-circle of towns, attractions and even mountains that 'arch' north of Tokyo and west toward Kanazawa.

North of Tokyo in Gunma Prefecture, the city of

Takasaki has two main attractions. The Goddess of Mercy stands 41.8 meters high, and overlooks the city from Kannonyama Park. Visitors can climb inside the statue to the small, indoor observation level, passing by effigies of high priests, many in colourful ceremonial garb, thereby enhancing the devotional experience.

Nearby is Darumaji, the temple built to provide a home for Daruma dolls. The dolls represent Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism, and after ascending the many stairs; visitors can't miss the large collection of Daruma dolls outside the main temple, as well as the historical collection in the Museum. For those who wish to purchase a doll, the attending monk will chant a blessing and in the space left blank for the eyes, he will draw in the left pupil. When you return home, you make a wish and add a circle around the pupil. After a year, when and if the wish comes true, the right eye can be filled in, as now the Daruma doll has gained the ability to 'see'. There is also a Daruma Doll painting workshop in the area led by master artist Jun-ichi Nakata, who explains how the eyebrows are formed by painting two cranes and the doll's mustache really consists of two turtles; both creatures representing long life.

Along with Mt. Fuji, Mt. Tateyama is regarded as one of Japan's three sacred mountains, and is accessible via the Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route. A local bus brings visitors to Ogizawa where a Trolley Bus continues on to the Kurobe Dam with its amazing view of Mt. Akazawa-dake (2678 m). After walking across the dam you board the Cablecar for a short but steep ride to the Ropeway Station, which in turn transfers you to another Trolley Bus. This time you travel through a tunnel under Mt. Tateyama (3015 m) to Murodo Station

and the Hotel Tateyama (2450 m). We overnighted there in mid-November with temperatures hovering near 0C, and woke up to a major snowstorm that prevented us from leaving until the snowplows went to work. But the hotel is quite comfortable with an onsen (hot bath), a restaurant, souvenir shop and access to the outdoors. It's a four-season destination with waterfalls, hiking, snowscapes, landscapes, mountain vistas, colourful leaf adventures and photographic opportunities galore.

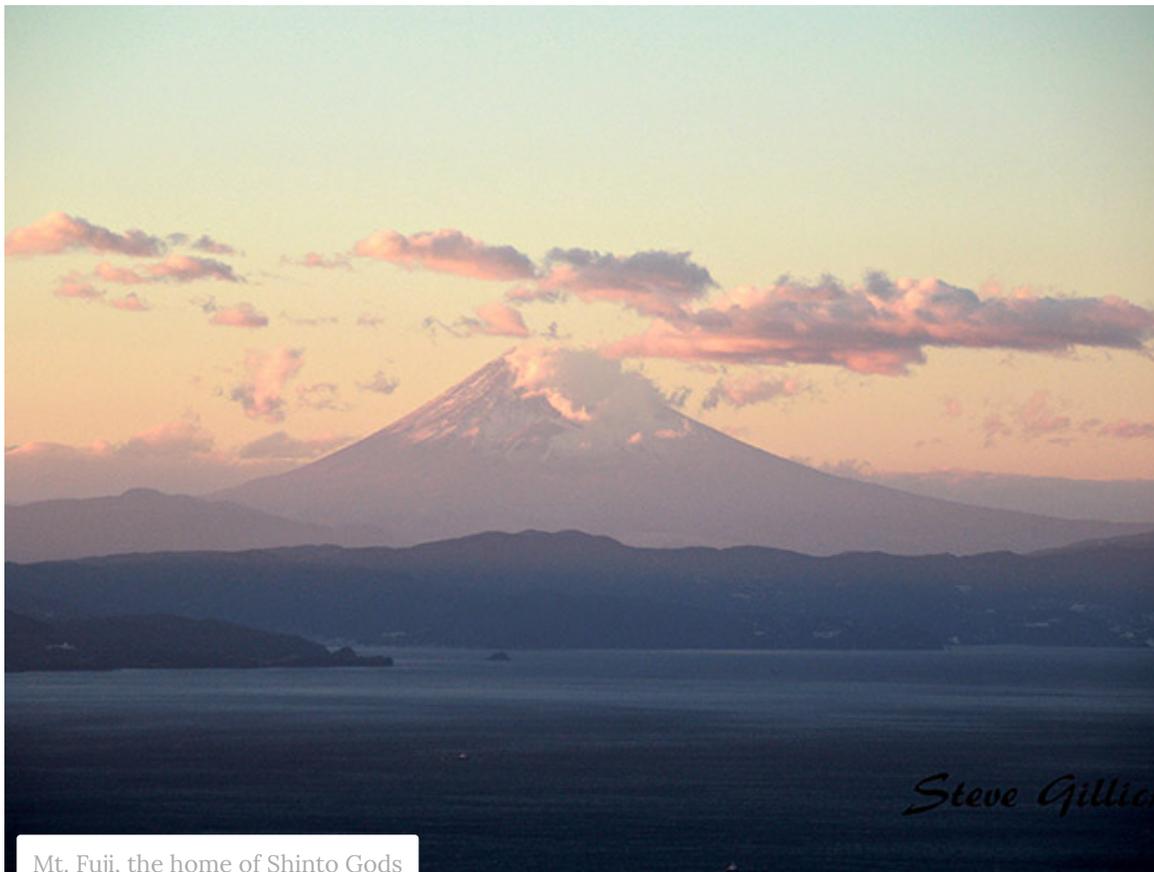
The key to mountain adventure in Japan is to identify place names that end in "Yama" which means 'mountain'. And one of the more popular destinations is Takayama (meaning "tall mountain"), located less than 2 hours by train from Toyama City, after visiting the Alpine Route.

Takayama is an old castle town, cradled in the Japanese Alps in Gifu Prefecture (formerly known as Hida). Having visited the city three times, I can vouch for the fact that this is a very friendly, picturesque place where old houses, shops and sake breweries line the narrow streets. The Hida River runs through the town and one of the two morning markets stretches along the river, while Tombis (Black-eared Kites) soar through the skies and dive for fish. The historic town is famous for its temples, shrines, the Springtime Sanno Festival with its colourful floats, the Karakuri (animated mechanism) doll museum, and an array of restaurants serving local Hida Beef.

We ate at Suzuya where Hobayaki (literally, 'to bake on a Hoba leaf') is cooked on the colourful porcelain grills that are set before each guest. On a large brown Magnolia leaf (Hoba), Hida beef, miso and vegetables fragrantly simmer. Side dishes of

pickles, vegetable tempura, rice and miso soup complement this tasty meal. It was a veritable mountain of food, but a fitting complement to the many other mountains we had already encountered on the trip.

In the world of mythology, mountains were often regarded as the link that connected the heavens and earth. Travelling outside of the standard Tokyo – Osaka route in Japan can literally provide travellers with mountains of delight, awe and wonderment. It's something to suggest to clients looking to further their understanding that when they've seen one mountain, there are still a thousand more heavenly vistas to appreciate.



Mt. Fuji, the home of Shinto Gods



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

[Read more from Steve Gillick](#)