



- Explore the regions -



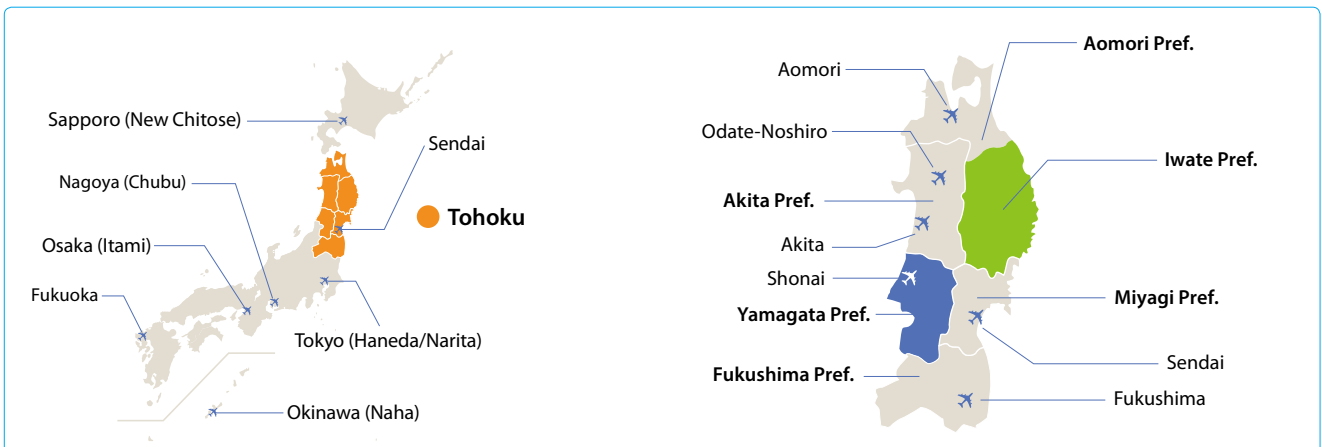
1 Mt. Haguro Otorii, soaring at the gateway to Dewa Sanzan pilgrimage, Yamagata Pref.

2 Oizumi ga Ike pond in the Jodo Teien, the Pure Land Garden, Motsu-ji, Iwate Pref.

Rich Culture of Spirit, Nature, and History

Many power spots of marvel and mystery are in Tohoku, a northern region resonating with the enduring values of sacred spaces, natural beauty, and historic drama. In Yamagata Prefecture, Dewa Sanzan has three sacred peaks and

a spiritual practice devoted to mountains. Hi-raizumi, of Iwate Prefecture, comprises a mountain site and temples—a frequent occurrence in Japan, China, Nepal—with notable history, architecture, and sacred legacies.



The imposing Five-Storeyed Pagoda, Mt. Haguro



Dewa Sanzan, Yamagata Pref.

Ascent to Sacred Peaks

Dewa Sanzan (Three Mountains of Dewa) names the natural array of Mt. Haguro (414 m), Mt. Gassan (1,984 m), and Mt. Yudono (1,504 m) located within Tsuruoka City in central Yamagata. A pilgrimage and travel destination, Dewa Sanzan also is the site of *shugendo*, a spiritual practice using the rituals and sutras of Shinto and Mystic Buddhism to revere its three mountains. It's a key Tohoku power spot that holds rituals for healing as well as trail ascent to sacred peaks, each at a particular time and season. The mountains of Haguro, Gassan, and Yudono symbolically stand for past, present, and future, the order in which pilgrimages proceed.

Entrance to this sacred domain from Mt. Haguro is via the gate of Zuishinmon, from which an ascent of 2,446 stone steps takes you past lush cryptomeria trees. Ideha Sanzan Shrine, atop Mt. Haguro's summit, has a huge thatched roof and altars for Mt. Gassan and Mt. Yudono. A national park occupies the zone from the eighth stage to

the peak and its Gassan Shrine, with some 350 species of mountain vegetation growing from spring through autumn. When you enter the Main Hall to worship at Mt. Yudono, remove shoes and be ready to observe a cleansing ritual. Ascending the three peaks and three time phases has been venerated and performed by locals since the Edo period (1603–1868) as a ritual rebirth. The pilgrim lodgings (*shukubo*) on Mt. Haguro, built in the Edo period, offer vegetarian cuisine featuring fresh mountain greens from Dewa Sanzan's slopes. Savor this delightful food and you may feel the mountain's power within.

Getting There: ANA serves Shonai Airport with several flights from Tokyo (Haneda). Travel from the airport by bus to Tsuruoka City takes 30 min.; to Mt. Haguro, 50 min. (a distance of some 30 km); to Mt. Gassan, about 1.5 hr. (47 km); to Mt. Yudono, about 1.5 hr. (50 km).

The Hondo (Main Hall), Motsu-ji, Hiraizumi



Hiraizumi, Iwate Pref.

Historic Realm of Spirituality

The culture of Hiraizumi derives from three Fujiwara clan lords: the first, Fujiwara Kiyohira; second, Fujiwara Motohira; and third, Fujiwara Hidehira. The clan held rule from the late 11th to the end of the 12th century over the Oshu region (present-day Aomori, Iwate, Miyagi, Fukushima and part of Akita prefectures). When battle for power was constant, Kiyohira was intent on creating in Oshu a place of Buddhist calm and peace, without pain or suffering—where people are led after death, according to Jodo (Pure Land) sect philosophy. He constructed the temple of Chuson-ji, now the head temple of the Tendai Buddhist sect of Tohoku, to commemorate the casualties of war. Perhaps the most expressive relic of that construction time is Konjiki-do, wrapped entirely in gold leaf and thus known as the Golden Hall. From the beams to the raised altar, nearly every surface is adorned with *raden* lacquer inlay of green turban shell, *urushi* lacquer, and lacquer painting, a grandiose collaboration of the period's craftsmanship.

Another Tendai temple is Motsu-ji, whose construction began in Motohira's time and was completed under Hidehira. It remains a

remarkable temple with Pure Land garden and pond in classic Japanese landscape design, many halls and repositories, and over 500 monk residences. Both Chuson-ji and Motsu-ji are listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, among the "Historic Monuments and Sites of Hiraizumi." Other listed sites include Muryoko-in, a temple built by Hidehira as homage to Kyoto's Byodo-in, and Mt. Kinkei, between Motsu-ji and Chuson-ji, a sutra-burial site whose summit offers a panoramic view of Hiraizumi City.

Getting There: ANA serves Sendai Airport with several flights from Tokyo (Narita) and Osaka (Itami), and one daily flight from Sapporo (New Chitose), Nagoya (Chubu), Fukuoka, and Okinawa (Naha). Travel by bus from the airport takes about 2.5 hours to Hiraizumi. From Tokyo, it takes a little over 3 hours by Shinkansen and Tohoku Main Line to Hiraizumi Station, from which Motsu-ji and Chuson-ji are in walking distance (about 10 min. and 20 min., respectively).

Looking Ahead

The next theme of Get to Know Tohoku is "History," set for May, when we feature the Jomon Archaeological Site in Aomori Pref. and Aizu Tsuruga-jo Castle in Fukushima Pref.

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