

# A WALK THROUGH TOKYO'S GREAT OUTDOORS

Tokyo is not just a concrete jungle. Take a bit of a jaunt and one can experience the great outdoors, stunning scenery blessed with water and greenery. Tokyo is also home to world natural heritage sites where treasured natural environments still remain.

*The Japan Journal's* Osamu Sawaji reports.

Nejire no taki in Okutama. This waterfall has around a 10-meter drop and is two-tiered with an upper and lower portion. Viewing it head on, the water flow looks as if it is spiraling down from left to right and then from right to left.

## Okutama

“This place really does not seem like Tokyo! I also visited here last week, and since it was such a great place, I brought three of my friends here today.”

A woman in her sixties in hiking shoes and a backpack speaks cheerfully in front of the Nejire no taki waterfall that surges downstream. These four people got on a two-hour train ride on the JR Ome line from Shinjuku Station in Tokyo, got off at the end of the line at Okutama Station, and instead of getting in a car, walked on a trail for two and a half hours along the river to the waterfall.

There are two waterfalls close to Nejire no taki: Mitsugama no taki, a three-tiered waterfall with an 18-meter drop, and Otaki with a 23-meter drop. The Unazawa Santaki trail has been set up to lead to these waterfalls. Very close to this trail is a mountain stream, with beautiful mossy rocks. Here, people enjoy an activity called canyoning, which involves traveling in canyons using techniques such as climbing, scrambling and sliding.

Starting from JR Okutama Station, which is a base for the Okutama area, there is the Unazawa Santaki trail, but also a number of mountain climbing and hiking spots that cater to people of all ages along the Tamagawa river and its tributaries. For example, there is the Okutama Mukashimichi hiking trail that stretches around 9 kilometers from JR Okutama Station. The Okutama Mukashimichi trail was



A sweeping view of Okutamako is visible from Aometachi Fuduson Yasumidokoro. The mountains are imbued with red foliage in the fall.



A view of the gorge from Shidaraku-bashi

originally created during the Edo period (1603–1867), and thus, there are shrines and Jizo statues that still stand, revealing the faith of the Edo period. One can get a sweeping view of the flowing Tamagawa from the trail, but especially impressive is the view of the Tamagawa gorge from a suspension bridge called Shidaraku-bashi. Simply walking on it will make this bridge sway, so one can also enjoy quite a thrill here.

The Aometachi Fuduson Yasumidokoro, which is located just before the end of the Okutama Mukashimichi trail, is a rest stop that is also a renovated private residence built over 100 years ago. One can enjoy handmade soba noodles and rice cakes here, and have one’s fill of the gorgeous views of the expansive Okutamako below.

“Not only the Japanese, but also tourists from Asia, Europe and the Americas take walks on these ancient paths. The other day, there was a woman who was here alone from Hong Kong and said she found the place on the Internet,” says a male employee at Aometachi Fuduson Yasumidokoro. “There are a lot of people who say Okutama is a great place to commune quietly with nature. But Okutama does bustle with people in the fall because the foliage is beautiful then.”

A sweeping view of Okutamako is visible from Aometachi Fuduson Yasumidokoro. The mountains are imbued with red foliage in the fall.

## Ogasawara Islands

The Ogasawara Islands, which consist of around thirty small and large islands in the Pacific Ocean, are said to be the farthest islands in Japan because of a decision not to build an airport from the standpoint of conserving the natural environment. The only way to get there is to take a 25-hour journey by boat from Tokyo, but the Ogasawara Islands are definitely worth taking the time to visit.

The value of the Ogasawara Islands is in its nature. The islands have been recognized internationally and were registered as a World Natural Heritage site in June 2011. One characteristic found in the natural environment of the Ogasawara Islands is the presence of numerous indigenous species. The Ogasawara Islands, since they were made, were never connected to a continent or another piece of land, so the life forms that have established themselves on the islands are descendants of those that travelled to the islands on birds, via the wind, ocean currents and driftwood. As a result, indigenous species that have paved their own evolutionary path now inhabit the islands, which is why they are also called the Galapagos of the East. It is also possible to see whales, birds and turtles that are close to extinction at the Ogasawara Islands.

Various types of eco tours are held in the Ogasawara Islands, such as night tours during which one



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A humpback whale in mid-air. It is possible to see humpback whales from the Ogasawara Islands from the end of December to mid-May.

can see the *Mycena chlorophos*, a type of mushroom that glows green in the dark in forests, or the Bonin fruit bat, which is indigenous to the islands and is designated as a natural treasure. Also, one can go whale watching to see humpback or sperm whales, or go swimming with wild dolphins. Of course, one can also enjoy fishing, scuba diving and marine sports like sea kayaking.

The temperatures are mild on the islands, with the average temperature at 23°C, so it is possible to swim outdoors all year round. The best season for swimming is from May through November. There is one ship that sails to the Ogasawara Islands (Chichijima) every week or so. The only inhabited islands in the chain are Chichijima (around 2,000 residents) and Hahajima (around 500). Camping outdoors is prohibited, so it is necessary to make reservations for overnight accommodations. 



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COURTESY OF OGASAWARA VILLAGE

(Left) A beach on Minamijima. Landing on the uninhabited Minamijima is limited as a way to protect the environment. It is only possible to go ashore with tour companies that have been certified by the city of Tokyo and Ogasawara Village.

(Right) Overlooking Chibusayama from Hahajima Minamizaki. It takes two and a half hours by boat from Chichijima to Hahajima.

# A City of Slopes

Nogizaka, Miyakezaka, Dangozaka.... There are said to be over 700 named slopes in central Tokyo, with many of them having been named during the Edo Period (1603–1867). Venerable slopes are accompanied by signs that provide an explanation of the origin of their names.

There are a lot of slopes named Fujimizaka because Mount Fuji was viewable from the sites. There are around twenty Fujimizaka slopes in central Tokyo alone (out of these, there are two slopes from which Mount Fuji can still be seen today; Mount Fuji is around 100 kilometers from Tokyo).

One of the famous slopes in central Tokyo is Kagurazaka. Kagurazaka is also the name of the area. There are various views on the origin of the name: some say it is because sacred Shinto music and dancing (*kagura*) were performed on this slope, while others say that the sounds of *kagura* were heard on this slope. Zenkoku-ji temple, which is located on Kagurazaka, has been



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One can savor the ambience of traditional Japan by just taking a step onto an alleyway off of Kagurazaka.



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A view from Yuyake dandan just above Yanaka Ginza

attracting worshippers since the end of the Edo period, and ever since, the area around Kagurazaka has developed into a busy shopping area.

Even today, there are traditional restaurants around Kagurazaka on elegant cobblestoned alleyways where one can enjoy geisha performances while dining.

There are several slopes in the Yanaka, Nezu and Sendagi areas (in Bunkyo Ward and Taito Ward) that have become popular recently and are reminiscent of the Edo period and the Meiji period (1869–1912). Of these, the slope (steps) Yuyake dandan (*yuyake* means sunset) is known to be a place where, literally, a beautiful sunset can be viewed. The shopping street Yanaka Ginza is at the foot of Yuyake dandan. It is a traditional shopping strip that frequently appears on TV and in magazines, and is lined with stores like confectionary stores, fishmongers and butchers. This is a great place to learn about the life of the masses in Japan.