

At One with Nature



A group of *yamabushi* descend the stone stairway on Mount Haguro
 Photo: Courtesy of Shonai Visitors Association

At Dewa Sanzan in Yamagata Prefecture, the practice of ascetic mountain worship continues to be passed on from generation to generation.

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SHUGENDO is a religion that originated between the late-Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods, through the syncretic amalgamation of the ancient Japanese practice of mountain worship with the practices of various other religions, including Vajrayana Buddhism and Taoism, which were brought to Japan from China. Shugendo *shugyo* tests of religious devotion have been carried out at various mountains throughout Japan, but the most famous amongst them are the Dewa Sanzan (the Three Mountains of Dewa), consisting of Mount Haguro (414 m), Mount Gassan (1,984 m) and Mount Yudono (1,504 m), situated in central Yamagata Prefecture.

It is said that the Dewa Sanzan were chosen by Prince Hachiko, son of Emperor Sushun, as a place for performing his own *shugyo* around 1,400 years ago. Since then, many *yamabushi*¹ have visited the Dewa Sanzan to undergo harsh, rigorous *shugyo*. As a result of those *yamabushi* visiting various places around Japan and spreading their beliefs, the Dewa Sanzan came to attract a great many followers.

“Mount Haguro, Mount Gassan and Mount Yudono respectively represent the present, the past (which is viewed as the afterlife) and the future. A pilgrimage to all three mountains therefore signifies a process of death and rebirth,” says Haga Miyuki of Yamagata Prefecture’s Education Department. “At Mount Haguro, people pray for happiness in the present; at Mount Gasso, they pray for happiness in the afterlife;

¹ *Yamabushi* undergo rigorous *shugyo* trials in the mountains based on the teachings of Shugendo, and carry out religious activities to save people using the abilities and knowledge they obtain through their *shugyo* experiences.



Yamagata Prefecture

- 1 Goju-no-to pagoda on Mount Haguro
- 2 The Saikan lodging on Mount Haguro
- 3 A serving of *shojin ryori* at Saikan

Photos: Satoshi Tanaka

and at Mount Yudono, they pray to be reborn into this world once again.”

During the Edo period (1603-1867) in particular, large numbers of worshippers visited the Dewa Sanzan, and inns and lodgings where these visiting worshippers could stay began to spring up in the surrounding areas. The Touge district in the foothills of Mount Haguro was home to over 300 *shukubo* temple lodgings during the Edo period. At these temple lodgings, worshippers ate *shojin ryori*, food prepared without using any meat or fish. The *shojin ryori* offered at lodgings in the Dewa Sanzan was based on food created by the yamabushi in order to survive in the mountains. By eating this *shojin ryori* prepared using ingredients such as wild mountain vegetables and mushrooms, the worshippers cleansed their bodies and prepared themselves to head into the mountains.

“Even today, in Touge, various religious festivals are still held by the local people,” says Haga. “Through such festivals, yamabushi culture and ancient beliefs about the Dewa Sanzan are passed on from generation to generation.”

During the Edo period, it was not possible to enter the Dewa Sanzan without the accompaniment of a yamabushi guide. Today, however, people are free to climb the mountains without a guide. At Mount Haguro, a stone stairway of 2,446 steps continues for a distance of around 2 km from the entrance to the mountain summit, lined on either side by Japanese cedar trees, aged between around 300 and 400 years old. As visitors head towards the summit, there stands the five-story Goju-no-to pagoda, said to have been built during the tenth century and rebuilt in 1372, which is listed as a Japanese National Treasure. Before the summit stand the Saikan, where yamabushi once lived. Visitors can stay at the Saikan and eat *shojin ryori*. The Haguro-san Sanjin-Gosai-den temple that sits at the mountain summit venerates the spirits of all three of the Dewa Sanzan mountains.

Near the summit of Mount Gassan lies a marsh that is referred to as Midagahara, meaning Sukhavati, the Pure Land of Perfect Bliss in Buddhism. The marsh



is covered with alpine plants, which bloom between June and July. From there, after climbing over a steep slope and rugged rocky outcrop, visitors can reach the mountain summit, where the Gassan Shrine sits.

The Yudono-san Shrine at Mount Yudono venerates a giant rock, from the top of which gushes a hot water spring. At the waterfall near the Yudono-san shrine, a shugyo ritual that involves showering oneself in the waterfall’s icy cold water is still performed to this day.

“The Dewa Sanzan area has fantastic scenic views,” says Haga. “Visitors can experience for themselves the yamabushi world view of becoming one with nature, and being reborn anew.” 