



Wrapped in brilliant green, Mt. Takao is only one hour from Shinjuku in central Tokyo.



The view from the top of the mountain overlooking the city center of Tokyo (above). Statues of *tengu* are to be found everywhere (right). The Yakuo-in Temple, dedicated sake barrels, the impressive *takosugi*, or octopus cedar (bottom, from the left).

## Mt. Takao: Tokyo's Friendliest Mountain

Enjoy a mountain day trip without leaving Tokyo.

Japan is a mountainous country, with around 70 percent of the landmass being covered in thickly wooded peaks and valleys. The northern and western limits of the Kanto plain—on which the Greater Tokyo Area sits—border on mountain ranges, with the legendary Mt. Fuji a couple of hours away, straddling the boundary of Shizuoka and Yamanashi prefectures. While many tourists find Mt. Fuji an irresistible draw, an equally enjoyable day out in the mountains can be had without ever leaving Tokyo.

Mt. Takao is a mountain in Hachioji City, in the west of Tokyo. At a height of 599 meters and boasting a three-star rating in the Michelin Green Guide, it is a popular hiking spot and sees more than two-and-a-half million visitors every year. Mt. Takao can be reached in under an

hour by taking a Keio Line train from Shinjuku Station in central Tokyo.

When stepping off the train at Takaosan-guchi Station, the change in environment from downtown Tokyo is a pleasurable sort of shock. The air is fresh, and the neon and concrete of the city are replaced by steeply climbing woodland and the overarching sky.

You are provided with three ways of scaling the mountain: there is a cable car and a chair lift that transport you up to a height of over 460 meters respectively, and also various trail routes (paved and unpaved) for the more enthusiastic visitors. The cable car ride takes six minutes—and boasts the steepest incline of any funicular railway in Japan—while the chair lift takes a comparatively leisurely

12 minutes. Whichever way you choose, you will soon find yourself enveloped in the lush cedar forests of the mountain, home to many species of flora and fauna.

Mt. Takao is a sacred mountain and various “power spots” can be found on its slopes. One such spot is *takosugi* (octopus cedar). This huge Japanese cedar tree is 450 years old and has gnarled roots that resemble an octopus. Next to the tree sits a friendly-looking octopus sculpture called “Hip-paridako,” which is said to bring good luck when stroked.

The mountain is closely associated with *tengu*, a mythical flying creature with a long nose. Imposing statues of *tengu* can be found at the Yakuo-in Temple near the summit of the mountain. The temple complex clings to the side of the mountain on different levels, connected by increasingly vertiginous staircases.

After paying your respects at the temple, press on even further and you will soon be rewarded with a panoramic view of Tokyo and the surrounding mountains. It really is a spectacular vista from the summit of Mt. Takao; all the more amazing for being so readily accessible.

On your way down, make sure to stop off at Kasumidai Observatory. You can enjoy an all-you-can-drink buffet at the Mt. Takao Beer Mount during the summer months, before deciding whether to carry on your descent on foot, or allow yourself the luxury of the cable car or chair lift.

From elementary school kids to the elderly, Mt. Takao is an extremely pleasant mountain to climb: imposing yet approachable, spiritual yet welcoming. Despite its popularity and the number of visitors, the hiking routes are clean and well-maintained, and the various sights and attractions well-signposted and accessible. Refreshments are readily available, and the whole experience can be enjoyed in a few hours, depending on your schedule.

There is one more pleasure to be had upon your return to Takaosan-guchi Station: an *onsen* (hot spring) facility. The entrance to the spa is part of the actual station building, so you can easily take a reinvigorating soak in the hot, natural spring water baths before heading back to the downtown lights. Congratulate yourself on conquering Tokyo's friendliest mountain.