

A Breath-taking Mountain Pilgrimage

Not far from Tokyo's 21st-century charms, the city's western mountains offer a traditional retreat featuring warm hospitality and a frigid spiritual ritual.

by Matt Schley

“I’m still in Tokyo,” I tell myself. I’m standing outside Mitakesan Station, the last stop on Mt. Mitake, a 929-meter tall mountain that is one of Tokyo’s signature peaks, some 90 minutes from the city center. I’ve just gotten off a cable car after a steep ascent that felt more like an elevator, and am now in a charming mountain village of cafes, souvenir shops and cottages surrounded by lush greenery.

Takigyo is the reason I’m here. I’ve heard it translated as “waterfall bathing,” but that doesn’t quite do it justice. In fact, it involves hiking deep into the mountains, stripping down to traditional Japanese underwear called *fundoshi* (think sumo wrestlers) and performing a spiritual ritual under an ice-cold waterfall (women are given a short white robe). Suffice it to say, I’m excited, curious and more than a little nervous. I decide to make a short trek to the local shrine to pay my respects.

According to legend, Musashi Mitake Shrine was founded over 2,000 years ago, its guardian spirit a wolf who once helped legendary prince Yamato Takeru navigate the mountain. Understandably, the shrine is very dog-friendly: I spot several canines happily trotting the shrine grounds with their human companions. Those who maintain this shrine seem to have struck a perfect balance between preserving tradition and incorporating a bit of fun—the site is dotted with statues and decorations featuring modern versions of classic Shinto figures.

Then it’s a quick walk to my inn. Komadori Sanso is a *shukubo*, a version of a Japanese inn closely associated with a temple or shrine. This one has been family run for centuries, and from the warm greeting I receive at the door to the cozy shared dining room, it feels like the home of an old friend.



A Shinto priest leads a series of chants meant to warm the body and give thanks to the mountain.

The writer pays his respects at the Musashi Mitake Shrine.



There are several *shukubo* in the area, but there’s a reason I’m here at Komadori Sanso. Yoshihiko Baba, the 17th-generation owner of this inn, is also a Shinto priest at Musashi Mitake Shrine and, most importantly, will lead me on my *takigyo* experience.

After a full-course spread of traditional cuisine prepared by Baba’s effusive wife and daughter (a surprise—I’d expected a *shukubo* meal to be more ascetic), I sit down for a chat with the owner/priest. I imagined a stoic man of few words, but I’m greeted by a verbose, larger-than-life figure who regales me with the history of the mountain, his inn and *takigyo*. The waterfall ritual, Baba says, is a part of *Shugendo*, the practice of intense ascetic mountain training, and is traditionally

reserved for its followers, the *yamabushi*.

Baba, however, has been leading sessions for the general public—including visitors from outside Japan—since 2000. I ask him why so many people are interested in standing under a cold waterfall in the near-nude.

“Who knows!” Baba responds with a laugh. “They often say, ‘That was great,’ and I always think, ‘What was great?!’” I’m not sure whether to be reassured or frightened by this comment, but regardless, it’s off to bed: tomorrow’s an early start.

I wake up before dawn and meet Baba, who’s decked out in white Shinto robes, and we make our way through a mountain pass to the waterfall, the only sounds Baba’s tinkling bell and the ever-increasing din of rushing water. Baba and I strip down to our *fundoshi*, and he leads me through a series of *shugendo* chants and stretches meant to both warm up the body and give thanks to the mountain.

Finally, it’s time. I wade into the ice-cold water, splash it over my head and shoulders to help my body adjust to the temperature, then stand under the waterfall and perform the ritual Baba has taught me, cupping and shaking my hands in order to literally rock my *tamashii*—my soul.

The shock of the ice-cold waterfall puts my body into adrenaline-filled survival mode—and I feel *alive*. *Takigyo* participants typically enter the waterfall three times, with short breaks in between, and I actually find myself more than willing to keep plunging back in.

As the adrenaline wears off, and we begin the trek back to Komadori Sanso, the feeling that comes over me is one of cleanliness—or maybe the better word is clarity. In the city, we’re constantly bombarded by a thousand stimuli,

The writer stands in the freezing waterfall, cupping and shaking his hands in the ritual he has been taught by the priest.



pressures and temptations, but for a brief moment, all those deadlines, Facebook invites and unanswered emails were washed away and the only thing that existed was me, my soul and the waterfall.

Takigyo isn’t to be taken lightly—it’s a taxing physical effort, and I’m amazed Baba does it nearly every day. I’m not sure I’ll take the plunge myself again anytime soon—but I *do* know the next time I need a spiritual detox, I’ll be back to visit this mountain retreat, so close to the hustle and bustle of everyday Tokyo, and yet a world away.

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The view from Mt. Mitake, one of Tokyo's signature peaks and only 90 minutes from the city center.