

The Mountais of Oita

(Article written by Richard SIMPSON, July 1988 issue of Oita This Month)

For the mountain walker, no other prefecture in Kyushu has such a fine variety of mountains as Oita. The major ones are all accessible by car within one or two hours from Oita City and do not exceed 1800 metres in height, so they provide relatively easy day-trips. Furthermore, climbing is possible throughout the year, with the exception of the rainy season (early June to early July). In winter, the only hindrances are occasional snowfall in January (about 30 cm at the top) and a prevailing north-westerly wind (December to March) which may be extremely chilling in exposed places. Suitable warm clothing is essential. In summer, from May to October, the sun may be powerful and often it is very humid. If you have delicate skin, sun protection is essential, and if you intend to move quickly, you must carry an ample supply of water.

Many approaches to these mountains are through remote, rugged and beautiful countryside. The visitor can get a good idea of a style of Japanese life hardly imaginable if he were never to venture out of the city. For the most part, one will encounter few other climbers; indeed, if you avoid the principal routes, you may be entirely on your own. Crowds tend to form on Kuju on summer weekends, and on popular routes there is always the danger of running into a large school party. Three hundred children inevitably move slowly, and much patience is required on a narrow path. At least the foreigner will have abundant opportunity to practice his "Konnichi-wa" or "Hello"!

The principal mountain groups are; Kuju, Daisen and Kuro-dake in the Aso Kuju National Park; and Sobo and Katamuki in the Sobo-Katamuki Quasi National Park.

Mt. Kuju is but one peak in a group of about eight over 1700 metres. In fact, the highest is Naka-dake. Kuju is mostly bare of trees and still has volcanic activity and in places a sulphurous atmosphere.

There are several ascents providing opportunities for a variety of circuits. The standard route is from Maki-no-to Pass on the Yamanami Highway. This route is easy, but by no means the most interesting. A better approach is from Chojabaru (also on the Yamanami Highway). Follow the jeep track which leads to Sugamori Pass, but be sure to find the short-cuts, which are signposted for climbers. Refreshments are available at Sugamori Hut. From here you enter Kita-Senri, a weird volcanic crater, billowing smoke on one side. Alternatively, descend to Hokke-in Onsen, where baths and refreshments are available, and climb back up between Naka-dake and Mt. Inaboshi. From Kita-Senri, approaching Naka-dake via Kuju-wakare, you

will come upon a most beautiful lake almost at the summit. Here, or on the ridge above it, is the place to rest and have lunch. Those with energy to spare can also include Mt. Mimata (a trio of peaks), best ascended from Sugamori, and Mt. Inaboshi, the most south-easterly peak. From Chojabaru a delightful path leads east to Ame-ga-ike, then south-east to Bo-ga-tsuru. This is ideal for jogging as it does not climb steeply. From the campsite at Bo-ga-tsuru (a very fine spot) there is access to Mt. Daisen. Kuju can also be climbed from the south, near Kuju Town. This route is interesting and little used, and a spring awaits you at the top.

Kuju offers many fine routes, and much is suitable for jogging. If you prefer to avoid crowds and simply enjoy nature on the mountain, this is often possible. However, you will have to hurry. There are rumours of a cable-car being built, which would be an inexcusable desecration of a beautiful natural reserve.

Mt. Daisen and Kuro-dake are close to Kuju. Mt. Daisen can be climbed easily from Bo-ga-tsuru, but this approach is long. The normal route to Kurodake and also Daisen begins to their north at Oike. This is reached by turning off Route 210 at Yunohira. Oike is a delightful spring and pool in a glade of natural forest with many interesting trees. The riverside path is also enchanting. The climbing path is nearly all in the woods, cool in summer, and so the atmosphere is quite different from Kuju. Between Kuro-dake and Daisen is a pot-hole with a deliciously chill air, called Kaza-ana. Beware of falling in, since it is deep and narrow.

For Kuro-dake, one must climb steeply from here. For Daisen, having found the correct path just beyond Kaza-ana, the path brings you eventually to the lip of a crater, which must be skirted. This is difficult, as you must push sideways through the rhododendron bushes, which in early summer cloak this mountain in red and pink and purple. At the summit there is a spectacular view of the Kuju range, and if you are lucky you will hear nothing more than the friendly call of a cuckoo. The descent from Daisen can be accomplished with little trouble via Kita-Daisen and Hiji-dake.

Mt. Sobo and Mt. Katamuki lie to the south, beyond Taketa City and Mie Town, on the Miyazaki border. This country is more remote than Kuju, and from the ridge unfolds a vista of the rugged heartland of central Kyushu. However, there are several paths into these mountains, and historically there was considerable mining activity, whose traces can still be seen. Furthermore, intensive forestry has altered the face of it in many parts.

Mt. Sobo is most rapidly approached from Taketa City via the good road to Kobaru and the car-park a few kilometres above. The walk is easy to Gogome Hut, and the forest and river have a splendid atmosphere. The flora is described en route. The climb via Kunimi-toge to the summit is steep but pleasant. In the snow it is particularly effective. A small hut lies a little way along the north-west ridge. The more adventurous can bear left at Kobaru. Be sure to visit Ana-mori Shrine nearby. Then head up the forestry road to Men-no-tsura Hut (in

disrepair). From here follow the small cairns in the stream-bed, then climb to the ridge which leads to the main ridge near the hut. This route, however, is lonely and indistinct. The other route to Hatcho-goe is impassable half-way up!

The ascent from the Taketa-Takachiho road is comparatively uninteresting. Much better are the ascents from Obira. This is difficult to reach without getting lost: turn south off Route 10 just east of Asaji Town. Turn right at the T-junction outside Ogata Town. Cross the traffic light (Taketa-Mie road), then head due south for about 20 km. It is an exciting road, and the upper part is dominated by the huge escarpment of Mt. Sobo. Here is a true mountain scene! From the car-park at Obira, walk upstream to a suspension bridge where the path divides. Both routes are rewarding, but the north-west ridge (reached by crossing the river) is perhaps preferable.[\[1\]](#)

Mt. Katamuki is also usually reached from the Obira road. The entrance is marked, and one can drive to Tsuzura where there is an old mine and room to park. Climb southwards to Tsuzura-goe, then turn left for the summit. As you approach it, you will see the impressive cliffs that guard the north side of the mountain. A round trip can be accomplished by descending to the north, taking the easterly path where it divides near the summit to avoid the cliffs, taking care however not to lose the path. The alternative approach to Mt. Katamuki from Shirotani on the north-east side is also very attractive.

The standard routes on these mountains are well enough marked, and there is little danger of going astray. However, signs are almost entirely in Chinese characters, which may be bewildering for foreigners. The only English sign I recall seeing was the delightful one erected far above Kobaru on Mt. Sobo by an enthusiastic local high school exhorting 'Let's Clean Mt. Sobo!' Still, the natural beauty of Oita, and in particular the mountains I have mentioned, is such that this is an eminently worthy sentiment.

Since it is important not to get lost in the mountains, and navigation often depends on recognition of Chinese characters, I append a glossary:

Kuju	久住
Daisen	大船
Kuro-dake	黒岳
Maki-no-to	牧ノ戸
Chojabaru	長者原
Sugamori	すがもり
Kita-senri	北千里
Hokke-in	法華院
Naka-dake	中岳
Inaboshi	稲星

Mimata	三俣
Ame-ga-ike	雨ヶ池
Bo-ga-tsuru	坊ガツル
Sobo	祖母
Katamuki	傾
Oike	男池
Yunohira	湯平
Kaza-ana	風穴
Hiji-dake	平治岳
Kobaru	神原
Kunimi-toge	国視峠
Ana-mori Shrine	穴森神社
Men-no-tsura	メンノツラ
Obira	尾平
Asaji Town	朝地町
Ogata Town	緒方町
Shiro-tani	白谷
Gogome	五合目
Hatcho-goe	八丁越
Tsuzura-goe	九折越

[\[1\]](#) As of 1988