

Mountains and Mountaineering in Yezo, Japan

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YEZO, better known as the Hokkaido, is the second largest island of Japan, being a projection of Japan Main Island and a bridge to Saghalien Peninsula. Only slightly smaller than Newfoundland, or somewhat larger than Ireland, it is the least known part of Japan, and in spite of its fine climate and magnificence of features it has received but little attention from travelers and writers other than Japanese. The following notes and observations were made during the course of a 1,450-mile journey through the island in July, 1930.

Of the mountains of Yezo, none equal those of the Japanese Alps in the main island. The highest range, that of Taisetsu-zan, does not exceed 8,000 ft. in height, and no peak except Mt. Asahidake, is covered with snow throughout the year. Nevertheless, because of their splendid panoramas, their volcanic characteristics and their relative neglect in the mountaineering records of Japan, they deserve a word of tribute and description.

A glance at a topographic map will show that the mountainous backbone of Japan proper is a continuation of the Saghalien system which forms the main cordilleras of Yezo and northern Honshu. Yezo itself is a triangular island having as a median the four chief ranges of Teshio and Yubari, and Kitami and Hidaka. The Kitami and Hidaka ranges, meeting at a focal point in the very center of the island, compose the highest group of mountains, the Taisetsu-zan group. In the Yezo system, as elsewhere in northern Japan, tertiary formations predominate, so that coal seams of economic importance and great extent, especially in the Yubari range, exist. Oil-fields occur in the younger tertiary, in northern Yezo and the Saghalien peninsula.

TAISETSU-ZAN GROUP

An expedition to Yezo for purposes of mountaineering would properly take one to the Taisetsu-zan group, or "Great Mountains of Snow." It consists of a cluster of volcanic mountains occupying an area of about twenty miles from east to west and fifteen miles from north to south. They attain an average height of 6,500 ft., though Mt. Asahidake, the highest peak is 7,513 ft.; Tokachidake is 6,815 ft., and there are others but little lower.

These mountains were early known to the primitive Ainu aborigines of the island; their various implements and relics have been found far up in the mountains. The first exploration took place about 1852, when the virgin wilderness at the base of the mountains was penetrated, and the splendor of the now-famous Sounkyo Canyon discovered. In 1874 a thorough exploration of the region was made by officials of the Hokkaido colonial government, under the leadership of an American, Dr. Benjamin Lyman, who was then head of the Government Geological Survey. Accompanied by American and Japanese geologists, he explored the upper parts of the Ishikari River and the Sounkyo gorge; and did some pioneering in the mountains in that region.

The Taisetsu-zan group is composed of a number of ancient and moribund, if not extinct, volcanoes, having all the geological characteristics of craters, crater lakes, steaming fumaroles and hot springs, and the botanical characteristics of beautiful Alpine flora. The movement of clouds over the mountains, the lingering snows even in midsummer, and the verdant plateaus suitable for camping spots, rich in Alpine flowers and insect life, give this region a surpassing beauty.

The mountains are reached from Asahigawa on the Hakodate main line, by branch line and motor car to Matsuyama Spa, and thence to Asahidake from the southwestern side. Or they may be reached from Asahigawa by branch line or motor to Kamikawa and thence by motorbus to Sounkyo Hot Springs, at the entrance to the Sounkyo Canyon; from the Hot Springs Inn there is a path leading up to Mt. Kurodake at the southeast corner of the range. These two routes meet at the top of the massif. The best time for climbing is from the beginning of July until the end of September; although the stone sheds used for climbers are closed from the beginning of September. The ascent of Mt. Asahidake can be made in three hours from the foot; and offers no serious difficulty if the main foot-path is followed.¹

The second highest mountain in Hokkaido is Mt. Tokachi, or Tokachidake, which rises to a height of 6,815 ft. This is an active volcano, situated on the boundary of Ishikari and Tokachi provinces,

¹ No guidebook or descriptions of the Taisetsu-zan group are available in English. For those who read Japanese, however, the best book is "Taisetsu-zan; a Guide for Climbing," by Hideo Koizumi (Yen 2.00). This is a detailed scientific study, amply illustrated with photographs and charts, of the whole region, and deserves attention.

to the southwest of Mt. Asahidake. There is no vegetation on the upper part and only rugged rocks tower into the blue sky, while from the depths of the crater continuous white smoke rises. The lower slopes are profusely rich in Alpine plants.

The principal starting points for climbing are the villages of Furano, on the Furano branch line from Asahigawa, and Takikawa. From Furano station to the foot of the mountain is a tramp of about 5 hours. A horse-drawn carriage (*basha*) may be hired for this trip, but no motor transportation is available. From the foot to the summit is a two hours' climb; so that if the whole distance from Furano Station is covered on foot, it would be a difficult one-day's journey. In the middle part of the mountain, however, there is a small hot spring and inn, the Fukiage Onsen, where a bed without meals may be had for about 70 sen or a daily rate of Yen 2.00 is charged. The mountain is formally opened for climbing on June 1st, and continues open until the beginning of October.

Another mountain in the central region of Yezo is Mt. Asahibetsu or Asahibetsudake (5,660 ft.). This is not very frequently climbed, although there are many places of interest here for alpinists. There is no shed or refuge on the way, and unless the descent is made the same day, it is necessary to carry bedding and supplies for the night. Climbers usually get off at Yamata station, on the Nemuro line just south of Furano junction; and from the station to the summit is a distance of about twelve and one-half miles. The climbing season is from the middle of July to the end of August. Mt. Asahibetsu is the highest peak in the Yubari range, and overlooks to the southward the extensive series of hills and valleys in which the most valuable coal-fields in Japan are found.

SOUTHWESTERN GROUP

Perhaps the most appealing of all the mountains in Yezo is the superb Mt. Shiribeshi, commonly known as Mt. Fuji of Yezo.² This is a symmetrically shaped conical mountain, an extinct volcano 6,211 ft. in height, standing solitary and proudly in Shiribeshi province in southwestern Hokkaido. An unforgettable sight is the view of this superb mountain, almost a duplicate of Fujiyama, as

² Both Terry's "Guide to the Japanese Empire" and the Imperial Japanese Government Railway's "Official Guide to Northeastern Japan" make the error of stating Mt. Shiribeshi or Yezo Fuji to be the highest peak in Hokkaido. There are, in fact, about eight peaks higher than this mountain. This obvious mis-statement even in the revised editions, is inexplicable.

seen from Mt. Usu on Volcano Bay or across Lake Doya. Kutchan, famous for its iron ores, is the usual starting point, but Hirafu Station is nearer, being only about two miles from the mountaineering bureau at the foot of the mountain, whence the summit is reached in about three and a half hours, the distance being a little over five miles. A superb experience is to climb during the night and witness the Alpine glow just before sunrise; this beauty is indescribable. At the summit there is a crater 2,600 ft. in diameter and 1,000 ft. deep. A magnificent view of the mountains, the lakes, and the ribbon-like rivers of nearly half of Hokkaido may be had on a clear day; the prospect is practically unobstructed on all sides, as Mt. Shiribeshi stands solitary in an extensive valley.

Mt. Usu, south of Shiribeshi, near Lake Doya, is an easy and popular climb only 2,382 ft. in height. The azure sea to the south, the exquisite circular, island-studded Lake Doya at the foot of the northern slope, and the imposing form of Fuji of Yezo in the northern distance form a sight not to be forgotten. Just below the summit of Mt. Usu lie some small craters, which send out jets of steam like a simmering tea-kettle. One of the earliest travelers to visit this mountain was Miss Isabella L. Bird, who in 1878 whilst visiting the British Ambassador, Sir Harry Parkes, explored some little known parts of Japan and Hokkaido. In the course of a horseback tour of this region, she accidentally came across this mountain; "the Ainos said it was 'a god' but did not know its name, nor did the Japanese who were living under its shadow." She describes Mt. Usu thus:

"There, confronting me, within a distance of two miles, was this grand, splintered, vermilion-crested thing, with a far nobler aspect than that of 'the' volcano (Komagadake), with a curtain range in front, deeply scored, and slashed with ravines and abysses whose purple gloom was unlightened even by the noon-day sun. One of the peaks was emitting black smoke from a deep crater; another, steam and white smoke from various rents and fissures in its side; vermilion peaks, smoke and steam, all rising into a sky of brilliant blue, and the atmosphere was so clear that I saw everything that was going on there quite distinctly, especially when I attained an altitude exceeding that of the curtain range. At some distance from it in the interior rises a great dome-like mountain, Shiribetsu-san and the whole view is grand."^a

^a "Unbeaten Tracks in Japan," 1881. Vol. II, p. 131.

SOUTHEASTERN GROUP

Another mountain, Mt. Meakan or Meakandake (5,200 ft.) is, because of its greater distance eastward than the mountains so far mentioned, less well-known to climbers. It is, however, almost as noted as Asahidake, Komagatake and Usudake, because of its commanding position and superb outline. The locality has been recommended for a national park; and as Yezo becomes better known and transportation facilities are extended, it will certainly become a popular center for climbers and other travelers.

The foot of the mountain is most easily reached from Kitami-Aioi station, which is on the line now being completed connecting with the Abashiri line at Bihoro. Another approach is from Yubetsu station, on the private line of the Yubetsu Mining Company running as a northwesterly spur from Kushiro. From these stations up to Rubeshibi is about sixteen miles; and to the base of the mountain is about four miles more. The ascent to the summit is some nine miles from the foot, so more than one day is needed to make the climb and return. The great brown bear, the "grizzly" of America, lurks in the forests of this region, but unless hungry, frightened or attacked, is usually ready to make a retreat if encountered. August is the best season for climbing Mt. Meakan, though July offers clear days and good visibility.

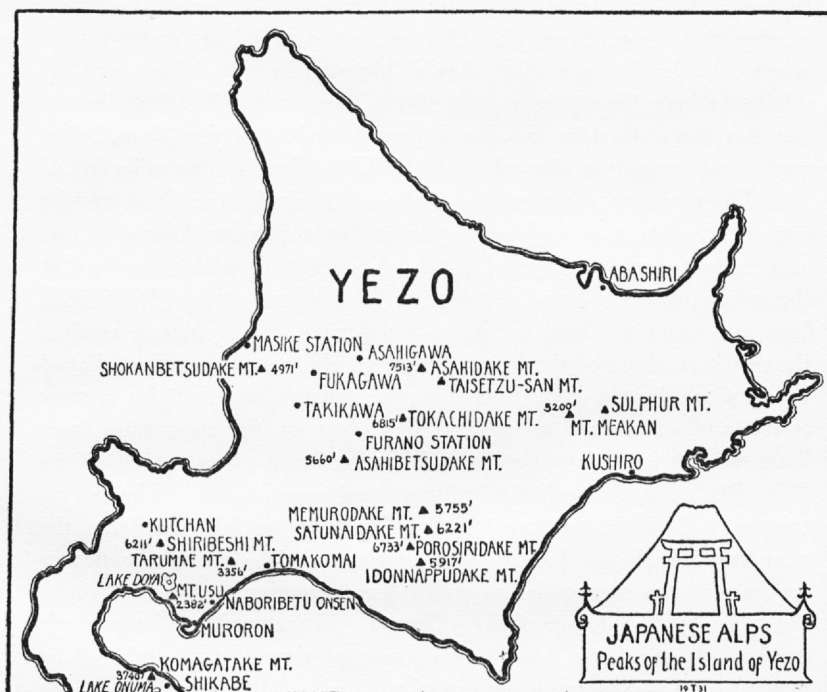
WESTERN GROUP

If one is traveling in the western part of Yezo, there is a noted mountain due west of Asahigawa, toward the Japan Sea, Shokanbetsudake (4,971 ft.), so difficult for climbing that it is rarely ascended. It is an inactive volcano, the summit consisting of lava piled high upon lava, and rising in two peaks. Here are found many points of geological as well as scenic interest, and the view of the Ishikari plain stretching southward, of the Japan Sea coastline to the west, and of the upper basin of the Ishikari River eastward toward Fukagawa, offers a magnificent compensation for the rigors of the ascent. From Fukagawa, the branch line to Rumoi is taken to Masike station. If one remains overnight here in Masike village, the summit is reached next morning, and the return is completed the same evening.

ACTIVE VOLCANOES

Practically all of the mountains so far described are extinct or inactive volcanoes, although in Japan almost any volcanic mountain may become resuscitated and commence a new period of activity. The notes that follow deal with two of the better-known and more recently active volcanoes Mt. Tarumae, and Mt. Komagadake.

The most famous of these, from a mountaineering point of view, is undoubtedly Mt. Tarumae (3,356 ft.). This is a double



volcano located in the southern part of the valley of Lake Shikotsu, near Tomakomai on the Muroran northern line. It is notable among geologists as the example of what is known as the Tarumae type of double volcano. When the last great eruption took place in 1909, new lava was formed in a crater about 500 ft. high on the top of the old lava and on the rim of the old crater, which was filled up.

If one gets off at Tomakomai, the location of the famous Oji Paper Mills, and takes the company's branch line to Shikotsu Lake,

the approach may be made from Choshiguchi in Chitosegawa. The distance from Tomakomai is about fifteen miles and may be covered in just under two hours. Several hotels are to be found at the lake side. About two miles by boat across the lake, Morappu may be reached, and from here the ascent is made. From the foot to the top is a distance of about five miles, which can usually be covered in about three hours.

In 1878, Miss Bird, the English traveler, described Mt. Taru-mae as "a calm-looking cone, whose skirts are draped by tens of thousands of dead trees. So calm and grey had it looked for many a year that people supposed that it had passed into endless rest, when quite lately, on a sultry day, it blew off its cap and covered the whole country for many a mile with cinders and ashes, burning up the forest on its sides, adding a new covering to the Tomakomai roofs, and depositing fine ash as far as Cape Erimo, fifty miles off."*

Those whose early perambulations in Yezo take them to the exquisite beauty spot of Onuma Lake, destined some day to be one of the most popular national parks of the island, will gaze long at the low-lying jagged-peaked form of Mt. Komagatake (3,740 ft.), bare and cinder-covered on its upper slopes. This volcano borders the northern shore of the larger Onuma Lake, whose heavily foliated banks discredit the reflection that the upper summit hides a very active and dangerous volcano. The view of the mountain from Volcano Bay is also impressive and has intrigued every traveler since Miss Bird first wrote her adventures and even before. The mountain is reached either from Onuma Park station lake, or from the next stop north, at Komagatake station, which is slightly nearer the base of the mountain but much less attractive.

The top of Komagatake offers a full reward. The summit consists of more than ten craters, most of them active and full of menace, with white smoke continually rising. Although Komagatake is frequently swathed in low-hanging clouds, the views on a clear day are unforgettable. Komagatake erupted violently on June 17th, 1929, and half buried the popular little resort of Shikabe under nearly a foot of cinders and pumice, some pieces as large as water-melons. Two persons were killed and several injured. The vicinity of this hot-spring is now arid, desolate and scorched, and offers a striking and woeful contrast to the rich greenery and verdure of the other side of the mountain, which escaped the effects of the

*Unbeaten Tracks in Japan," 1881, Vol. II.

eruption. Little does the present aspect of Komagatake, somnolent and peaceful as it stands reflected in the tranquil lake, suggest its awful outbreak less than a twelve-month ago. Yet the local residents tell of the terrible day when the mountain began suddenly to belch black smoke, which lasted for sixteen hours, to thunder and vomit and flare, and to spew out masses of dust, cinders and enormous rocks, which fell twenty miles away.

SOUTHERN GROUP

There is a great stretch of mountains, with many fine peaks of considerable height, in the south central part of Yezo; and this region, owing to lack of railway connections, remains largely unexplored and entirely unknown to foreign travelers and even to most Japanese mountaineers. The peaks of Memurodake (5,755 ft.), of Porosiridake (6,733 ft.), of Satunaidake (6,221 ft.) and Idonnappudake (5,719 ft.), to mention only a few of the more prominent, will someday become accessible and popular, especially with those who have no time to reach the central mountain groups further north.

Yezo is full of invitation to the explorer and mountaineer, and the appeal of the unknown will be heard before long by the more intrepid and venturesome of those whose feet draw them to high places.