

Japanese Alps

Yari/Hotaka/Norikura Mountain Range



Chubusangaku National Park

Hiking Guide& Map

Hiking the Northern Alps

Chubusangaku National Park welcomes hikers to a majestic alpine landscape of towering peaks, snowy slopes, clear mountain streams, and diverse seasonal varieties of plant and animal life. The park offers a well-developed system of trails and mountain huts and challenging routes. It is home to 10 of Japan's 21 peaks over 3,000 meters. The tallest is Mt. Oku-Hotakadake, the third-highest mountain in Japan at 3,190 meters, and the most recognizable is Mt. Yurigatake, whose 3,180 meter peak is said to resemble the Matterhorn. Mt. Tsubakuro, at 2,763 meters, is popular with novice hikers. Most of the summits are accessible, depending on one's level of expertise, the time of year, and the weather conditions.

The following is a guide to hiking the mountains of the national park. Hikers are urged to check the latest trail and weather conditions thoroughly and gather as much information as possible before setting out. The local tourist associations are reliable sources of information, as are the local visitor centers. Hiking guides, some of them multilingual, can make the experience more enjoyable by providing with you local customs, route information, safety hints and knowledge of the natural environment.

About Trails

The Northern Alps routes are divided into hiking routes suitable for hikers and climbing/scaling routes. The hiking routes marked on the map that are suitable for hikers in the snow-free season (roughly July through October) are laid as trails, with signposts in places such as junctions that indicate present location and destination. On climbing routes other than the hiking routes, special equipment such as ropes are essential, and it is dangerous for ordinary hikers to proceed. Take care not to enter a trail that is over your ability level.

The main hiking routes are graded by the level of difficulty in 5 ratings from A to E (refer to the attached map). There are some hiking routes that use chains and ladders to ascend and descend steep rocky places, and the use of helmets is recommended on those routes.

Popular hiking routes can get crowded and jammed with hikers, particularly during high season in the summer and in weekends.



A well maintained hiking route

When to Hike

From November to June, the mountain peaks in Chubusangaku National Park are covered in snow—inaccessible to all but the most expert climbers. The peak hiking season runs from late July until mid-August, when temperatures range from 15°C to 25°C at lower altitudes and from 5°C to 15°C at higher altitudes. Earlier in spring and later in autumn, temperatures can be more than 20 degrees lower.

Spring

Spring in the mountains begins at the end of April, usually around the holiday period known as Golden Week. Huts throughout the park begin opening their doors around that time as popularity demands and the melting snows allow. The higher peaks, such as Mt. Yarigatake, Mt. Hotaka, and Mt. Jonendake, are all still completely snow-covered in spring, so crampons, ice axes, and experience are essential.

Summer

The rainy season usually starts in late June and lasts about a month. However, even during this period, there are days when the skies are clear, and some experts believe these are the best times for hiking. There are few people on the trails, and alpine flowers of all varieties

begin to make their appearance, presenting a colorful contrast with the remaining snowfields. For rainy-season hikes, however, it is best to choose routes where mountain huts are already open, because the weather is fickle and some trails may not yet be fully restored after winter damage.

The peak summer climbing season begins after the rainy season ends, usually in mid- to late July. All the huts are open, the summits are snow free, and most can be climbed without any special equipment. Naturally, this is a popular time for people to visit. The best plan is to hike earlier in the day, as afternoon squalls are a regular occurrence.

Autumn

The next high season runs from late September through mid-October, when the forests change from the lush green of summer to their autumn colors. The change begins at the higher altitudes and works its way down as the days get cooler. Some of the most famous areas, such as Karasawa, attract large numbers of hikers, but you can find spectacular views throughout the park. The dakekanba, or Erman's beech trees, are aglow with vivid yellows, while the most brilliant reds come from the leaves of the Japanese rowan. The contrasts are even more breathtaking after light snowfalls, which begin in October and become heavier and more frequent as autumn progresses. During this period, snow makes the trails slippery, leading to an increase in accidents. Temperatures can drop drastically, so be sure to carry warm hiking wear to prevent hypothermia. This is also when the mountain huts begin closing for winter.

Winter

Snowfall is heavy in the Northern Alps, and approaches should only be attempted by highly experienced hikers. All but very few of the huts are closed. However, visitors can enjoy other activities, such as skiing and snowshoe hiking, at lower altitudes.



Spring: Snow remains through spring in the Northern Alps



Summer: Alpine foliage with Mt. Yarigatake in the distance.



Autumn: Foliage in Karasawa



Winter: Hotaka Mountain Range covered with deep snow

What to Bring: Hiking Equipment

1 Underwear, or base layer

Light synthetic fabric or wool that will dry quickly.

2 Middle layer

Quick-drying shirt (long-sleeved recommended).

3 Backpack

The size of backpack will depend on the length of the hike and whether you plan on carrying a tent. Putting the contents in plastic bags and using a rain cover for the pack is also recommended.

4 Hiking pants

Lightweight synthetic, unrestricting long pants (or shorts over tights).

5 Boots

High-cut hiking/trekking boots with good ankle support and traction, to be worn with heavy, warm socks.



Warm clothing

A fleece, down, or synthetic jacket and warm hat and gloves are also recommended for the colder temperatures at higher altitudes.



Rainwear

Windproof and waterproof jacket with a hood and pants (breathable fabric recommended).



Helmet

Helmets are highly recommended on some difficult routes. Ask at the mountain hut where you are staying. Some huts offer rentals.



Map and compass

Always carry a detailed map of your route, as well as a compass. While the trails are well marked, a map and compass are useful if you get disoriented.



Trekking poles

When used appropriately, these can be helpful, particularly for beginners, by distributing the impact on the legs and adding extra points of contact.



Cash

The mountain huts do not accept credit cards, so be sure to bring cash for payment. You will also need small change to pay to use toilets.



Emergency first aid kit



Headlamp



Emergency tent

Hiking Equipment List

Hiking shirt	○
Hiking pants	○
Socks	○
Gloves	○
Hat	○
Warm clothing	○
Hiking boots	○
Gaitors	△
Change of clothes	△
Rainwear	○
Backpack	○
Backpack cover	△
Headlamp	○
Spare batteries	△
Toiletries	△
Towel	○
Sunglasses	○
Sunblock	○
Map	○
Compass	△
Writing utensil(pen)	○
Emergency first aid kit	○
Toilet paper	○
Camping stove&fuel	△
Knife	△
Dishes&cutlery	△
Food/snacks	○
Emergency tent	△
Garbagebag	○
Trekking poles	△
Cash	○
Mobile phone	○

○Mandatory △Recommended



Geography and Geology

The Northern Alps are one of three mountain ranges that divide the main island of Honshu. They were formed between 2 to 5 million years ago during the Pliocene epoch, when compression between tectonic plates resulted in a thrust-fault from the east, pushing the earth's crust skyward and forming this long series of mountains.

Besides volcanic and sedimentary rocks, many of the mountains here consist of granite pierced by crystalline rocks containing feldspar and quartz. Granite is created when magma cools and solidifies at a considerable depth below the earth's surface. The granite here is some of the newest in the world: for example, while most of Japan's granite was formed 50 to 130 million years ago, the age of this

range's granite is under 5 million years.

The great, U-shaped valleys of these mountains, such as the one on the face of Mt. Yarigatake, were gouged out by glaciers during the most recent ice age that ended some 10,000 years ago. Further weathering by glaciers, rivers, and avalanches created steep slopes, leaving the mountain peaks sharp and ragged. The faces of the mountains also eroded, leaving many rocks and boulders of all shapes and sizes that dot the landscape and are used to mark the hiking trails.

The most famous active volcano in the Northern Alps is Mt. Yakedake (whose name in Japanese means "burning mountain"), at the entrance of Kamikochi. The region's many old volcanoes have contributed a rich legacy of geothermal springs, a source of great pleasure for tired hikers who soak in the steaming mineral waters.



Mt. Tsubakuro with its beautiful granite forms



Taisho Pond was created by the eruption of Yakedake in 1915.

A Historic View:

Climbing in the Birthplace of the “Japanese Alps”

Modern alpinism in Japan began in the Chubu-sangaku National Park with the arrival of European mountaineers in the Meiji era (1868–1912). But as in other regions of Japan, climbing in these mountains has its roots in the country’s indigenous religion, which deifies natural phenomena, including mountain peaks. Some areas had already become pilgrimage destinations or special sites where priests underwent strenuous ascetic training.

The first ascent of Mt. Yarigatake, the centerpiece of the Northern Alps, was made in 1828 by a Buddhist priest named Banryu. Besides ascetics, the mountains were also the domain of woodcutters and hunters, and one hunter named Kamijo Kamonji is now famed for guiding the first non-Japanese climber, William Gowland, to the peak of Mt. Yarigatake in 1877. Gowland was a British engineer and archaeologist, one of the many international experts invited to Japan to help with industrialization during the Meiji era. He was also an enthusiastic climber, and the first use of the term “the Japanese Alps” appears in his writings.



Portrait of Banryu,
owned by Jo-on-ji Temple



Walter Weston and Kamonji Kamijo

It was another British climber, a missionary named Walter Weston, who introduced Japan’s mountains to the world. After climbing several of the Northern Alps’ peaks, he wrote a book titled *Mountaineering and Exploration in the Japanese Alps*, which was published in London in 1896. Like his compatriot, he was guided by Kamonji, for whom he expressed high praise in the book.

Mountaineering became an increasingly popular activity as Europeans introduced alpine techniques and climbing gear into the country. The Japanese Alpine Club was founded in 1905, and the first university alpine club was founded at Keio University in 1915. The sport quickly spread all over the country, and peak after peak and route after route were conquered by enthusiastic climbers. Today, thanks to constant conservation efforts and the well-run system of trails and huts, there are innumerable destinations for hikers.

A Tradition of Supporting Hikers

Japan's Mountain Huts



The first Hotaka hut was built in 1925 (presently Hotakadake Sanso hut)

There are about 100 mountain huts in operation throughout Chubusangaku National Park, offering meals, accommodation, safety support, and information. Their origins may have been the small shelters built by loggers and hunters in the Edo period (1603–1867), but as mountaineering took off at the beginning of the twentieth century, huts began to focus on serving the needs of hikers. Some of the most famous have recently passed the 100-year mark: the Yarisawa Lodge opened in 1917, while Enzanso has been around since 1921. By the time the area was designated as a national park in 1934, most of today's huts were already in operation.

As the numbers of hikers increased, the huts grew

larger. Until the advent of helicopters, everything was carried up by hand, and anyone who has made the climb with a full backpack can well imagine how difficult this must have been. Now, thanks to helicopter deliveries and generators, guests can enjoy such offerings as draft beer, ice cream, and filling, hot meals.

The huts have deep connections with their alpine locations. The operators and their employees are living encyclopedias who share their knowledge about the natural environment, trails, weather conditions, and much more. Most huts have been in the same family for generations, the operators' ancestors having laid the trails that hikers still use. They take responsibility for maintenance, replacing washed-out bridges, restoring damaged paths, and cutting back foliage. They are often on the front lines when it comes to rescue operations, facilitating communications and, in some areas, supporting adjacent clinics that provide basic medical services.



Mountain clinic opens during summer season at Yarigatake Sanso Hut.

Hiking Tips

- When hikers going in opposite directions meet, those who are ascending have priority.
- Rocks on the trails are sometimes marked with a circle for the correct path or an X for a direction to avoid.
- When a dislodged rock can endanger people below, hikers call out "Raku!" an abbreviation of rakuseki ("falling rock"). Conveniently, raku is pronounced much like the word "rock."
- The mountain slopes can be very steep, and going off-trail may not only damage the environment but also place you in danger.
- Listen to advice from mountain-hut staff, who are knowledgeable about their surroundings.
- Helmets are recommended for some of the more difficult sections.
- The weather can change very quickly in alpine locations. Be prepared and check forecasts often.
- Headlamps can be lifesavers when hikers are caught by nightfall on the trail, or for predawn departures.
- A hiking registration form should be submitted at the trailhead or on the Internet. This is extremely important in case of emergencies.
- In the case of an accident, you may incur costs for searching and rescuing. It is advisable to take out mountaineering insurance or travel accident insurance that covers hiking (it is possible to apply for this at a vending machine in Kamikochi)
- A navigation app is effective to prevent losing your way (there is a free English version). It is best to install it on your smartphone in advance, and download map data of your destination.



At difficult passages, calling out to each other can help you pass in a safe place



Paint marks like this are used to mark trails.

Enjoying the Flora and Fauna

Hikers will come across all kinds of plant and animal life, some of which is indigenous to or found only in Japan.

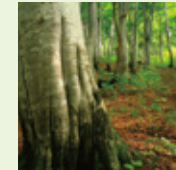
Trees and Other Plants

The trees and other plant species that populate the forests of Chubusangaku National Park vary by area and altitude.



Angelica pubescens

Called *shishiudo* in Japan, this is a native plant with delicate white blossoms resembling fireworks that emerge from its tall stems in July and August.



Japanese Beech (*Fagus crenata*)

The Japanese beech, or *buna*, is a deciduous tree native to Japan and can grow at altitudes of up to 1,400 meters. Its ability to absorb and store rainwater in its trunk and roots helps prevent erosion, and the evaporation of water through its leaves acts as a natural cooler and climate modifier. The tree's leaves turn yellow in autumn.



Japanese White Birch (*Betula platyphylla*)

The white birch, or *shirakaba*, is found throughout the mountains at altitudes of around 1,500 meters and can be recognized by its white, flaky bark and lime-green leaves that turn golden yellow in autumn.



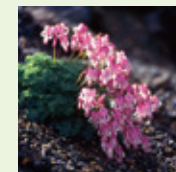
Siberian Dwarf Pine (*Pinus pumila*)

Dense fields of Siberian dwarf pine (*haimatsu*) can be found at high altitudes near the tree line throughout the park, creating a safe haven for the Japanese rock ptarmigan.



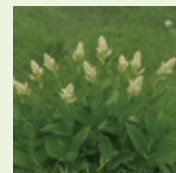
Japanese Larch (*Larix kaempferi*)

The Japanese larch, or *karamatsu*, is the only deciduous coniferous tree native to Japan. It comes into leaf early in spring, and its needles turn bright yellow before being shed in autumn.



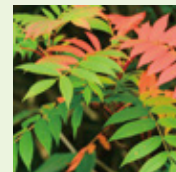
Komakusa (*Dicentra peregrina*)

Its pink flowers bloom in gravely granite where other plants cannot live. The sight of its flowers nobly blooming in this harsh environment has earned its name of "Queen of the alpine flora." The name Komakusa (horse plant) is derived from the resemblance to a face of a horse. Parsley-like thin leaves send water directly to its own roots by changing moisture in the air into water droplets.



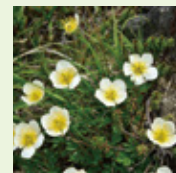
Veratrum

Veratrum, or *kobaikeiso*, is a toxic flowering plant recognizable by its straight stems with multiple white blossoms. It is found in areas of damp soil and blooms every few years in midsummer.



Japanese Rowan (*Sorbus commista*)

The Japanese rowan's name, *nanakamado*, is made of two words meaning "seven" and "oven," from the belief that it is such a slow-burning firewood it can be used in an oven seven times. Also known as mountain ash, it bears small white flowers in spring, followed by brilliant red berries and leaves in autumn.



Chinguruma (*Geum pentapetalum*; *avens*)

An alpine plant that frequently colonizes areas around snowy fields which symbolizes arrival of early summer. It blooms in one place after another as the snow melts and the ground is exposed, and since it blooms in short period of time, about 1 to 2 weeks, its flowering tells of the progress of snow melting. After the flowers stop blooming, the pale pink spikes fly away in the wind. The sight resembles children (chigo's windmills (kazaguruma), and so the name Chinguruma was given. The leaves also turn color vividly in the fall, so it can be enjoyed in 3 different forms. Although looking like a grass, it is actually a tree.

Information

Alpine Wonderland
(Chubusangaku National Park Southern Region)
<https://alpinewonderland.com/>
Kamikochi Visitor Center
TEL: 0263-95-2606
Kamikochi Information Center
TEL: 0263-95-2433
Norikura Visitor Center
TEL: 0263-93-2045
Sawando National Park Gate
TEL: 0263-93-3355
Shinhotaka Mountaineering Advice Center
TEL: 0578-89-3610

(JUNTO) National Parks of JAPAN
<https://www.japan.travel/national-parks/parks/chubusangaku/>
Matsumoto City Alps Sangakukyo
<https://alps-sangakukyo.jp/> TEL: 0263-94-2221
Azumino Tourist Association
<https://www.azumino-e-tabire/en/> TEL: 0263-82-3133
Omachi City Tourism Association
<http://www.kanko-omachi.gr.jp/en/> TEL: 0261-22-0190
Okuhida Onseno Tourism Association
<https://www.okuhida.or.jp/en/> TEL: 0578-89-2614
Hida Norikura Tourism Association
<http://www.norikuradake.jp/en.html> TEL: 0577-78-2345

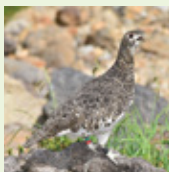
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e Japanese Alps

Birds

Bird watchers will find the park a habitat for migratory and nonmigratory species, including:



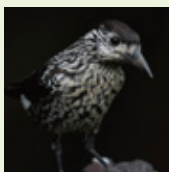
Japanese Rock Ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta*)

The Japanese rock ptarmigan (its Japanese name *raicho* means “thunder bird”) is a heavy-bodied ground feeder about the size of a small chicken that is found in alpine areas of dwarf Siberian pine. It is noted for its pure-white coloring during the winter. Its survival at high altitudes made it a symbol of the mountain deities, and for most of Japanese history *raicho* were not hunted. Despite being a beloved bird, it is now on the endangered list. Since the birds are accustomed to humans, hikers spot them quite frequently.



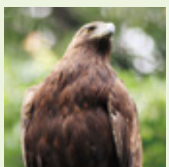
Alpine Accentor (*Prunella collaris*)

With its streaked brown back, gray head and reddish-brown spotted breast, the alpine accentor (*iwahibari* in Japanese) is found in mountain areas with little vegetation. It can be found at elevations of over 2,000 meters but usually winters at lower altitudes, and is known for its beautiful song, warbled while in flight.



Spotted Nutcracker (*Nucifraga caryocatactes*)

The spotted nutcracker, or *hoshi-garasu*, is a member of the crow family and feeds on insects, nuts, and pine cones. It is found in coniferous mountain forests and has an excellent memory, remembering hundreds of locations where it has buried food. Its distinct white-spotted pattern is elegant and eye-catching.

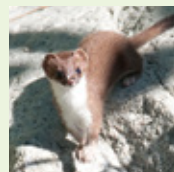


Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

A matured bird is blackish-brown all over with golden brown at the back of the head. The wingspan can reach up to an impressive 2m. They look majestic as they circle and fly on the rising airflow. Steep mountainous areas are its natural habitat, building nests on rock ledges or in large trees. The decline of its natural habitat and a fall in the breeding success rate and a reduction in surviving numbers. Designated as a nationally endangered wildlife species under threat of extinction, it will be precious experience if you spot it.

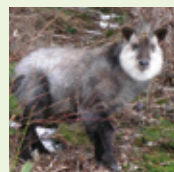
Mammals

The park is home to many creatures great and small, protected through conservation and awareness programs.



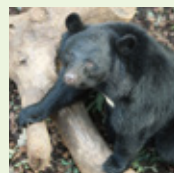
Japanese Least Weasel (*Mustela itatsi*)

Called *okojo* in Japanese, this is one of the smaller members of the genus *Mustela*. While it looks adorable when standing on its hind legs, this furry creature is carnivorous and hunts small mammals and birds, like the rock ptarmigan.



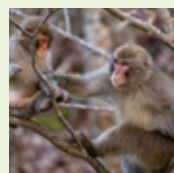
Japanese Serow (*Capricornis crispus*)

Though its Japanese name, *kamoshika*, includes *shika*, which means deer, the Japanese serow is an even-toed bovine, a kind of goat-antelope. While not in danger of extinction, it is considered a symbol of Nagano and Toyama prefectures, and is therefore a protected species.



Asian Black Bear (*Ursus thibetanus*)

The Asian black bear, or *kuma*, is medium-sized and largely herbivorous, though it will feed on small mammals, birds, and insects. It sports a distinctive white patch in the shape of a crescent moon on its chest. Adults have an average weight of 135 kilograms but can reach 200 kilograms.



Japanese Macaque (*Macaca fuscata*)

The Japanese macaque or “snow monkey” can be found in many areas of the park, particularly in Kamikochi and at other high altitudes in the Northern Alps. Their diet includes leaves, bamboo shoots, insects, and nuts. Visitors from abroad are often surprised to find monkeys, which are more commonly associated with tropical areas, in such a cold, harsh habitat.

Making the Most of Your Stay

Unlike most mountain lodges in Europe, many of Japan's mountain huts are located close to the highest peaks. Operating accommodations in such extreme locales requires a lot of hard work and the cooperation of guests. Most Japanese hikers are already aware of the basic customs and schedules of the lodges, and hikers from overseas can ensure a smooth stay by learning in advance how things are done.

The Early Bird

Some hikers hit the trails while it is still dark, and almost everyone leaves by 5:30 or 6:00 a.m. Since breakfasts need to be prepared and served, this means an even earlier start for the hut's staff. Evening meals are served early too, usually at around 5:00 p.m. In order to prepare the correct number of meals and make room assignments, most huts expect hikers to arrive by 3:00 p.m. Arriving late creates additional work and problems for the staff.

Observing the customary arrival time may seem unnecessary to hikers who are renting a tent space and making their own meals, but latecomers will very likely find most good tent spots already occupied. The weather often deteriorates later in the day, and thick clouds and sudden rainstorms occur frequently.

Please keep in mind that another crucial reason for early check-in is the importance of daylight for any rescue operations. Conditions such as altitude sickness and hypothermia require a quick response.

Tips for Lodging at Mountain Huts

Lights Out/Lights On

Depending on the hut, the lights will be turned off at 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. and back on at 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. Many hikers are in bed even earlier than 8:00 p.m., so everyone tends to quieten down by then. It is also customary to pack early the night before so as not to wake others with noisy preparations.

Water: The Source of Life

Water is an extremely precious resource at high altitudes. The availability and quantity at the huts depend on how close they are to a water source, but all of them strive to conserve water. Some may even charge for its use, depending on the collection method.

Reservations

Where possible, reservations should be made in advance. Not all mountain huts accept reservations, however, so carefully researching your options in advance is a must. If you have a reservation but decide to cancel your stay due to bad weather or for any other reason, be sure to inform the hut. The nonarrival of guests with reservations raises concerns about possible accidents on the trail.

Waste Not

Everyone is asked to carry out any garbage they generate. Toilet rules vary from hut to hut. Some require used toilet paper to be placed in a waste basket next to the toilet. Toilet waste is either carried out of the park or broken down through a waste-treatment system, both of which require considerable effort. While guests staying at the huts and campsites can use the toilets free of charge, others are asked to contribute ¥100 per use.

Too Close for Comfort

The huts can get very crowded during peak season and on weekends. They never refuse anyone in need of shelter, so sharing a futon mattress is a possibility. If you fear becoming claustrophobic, avoid weekends and the peak seasons.

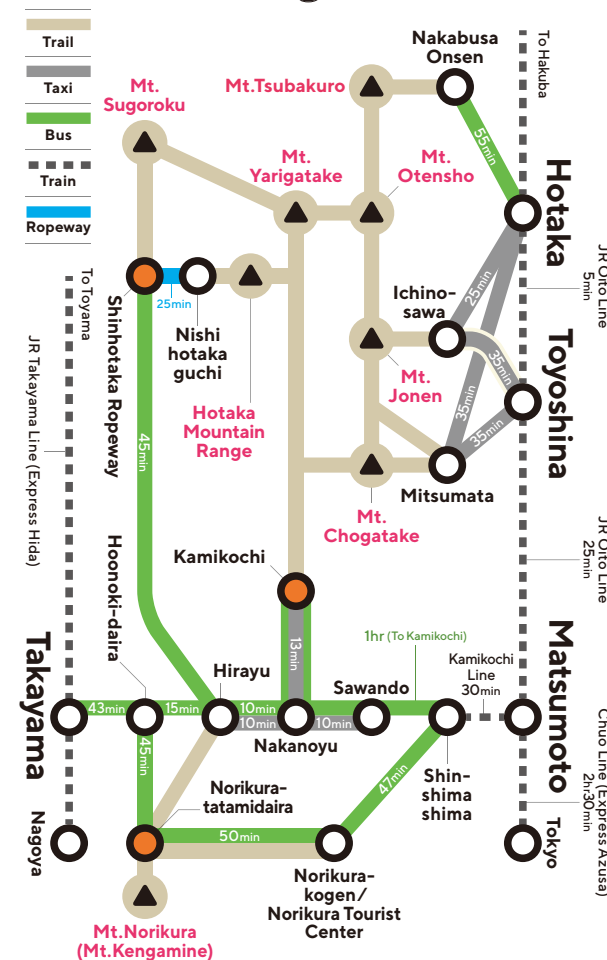
Cash

The mountain huts do not accept credit cards, so be sure to bring cash for payment.



A certain bedroom at a mountain hut

Getting There



Matsumoto City in Nagano Prefecture and Takayama City in Gifu Prefecture are starting points for accessing Chubusangaku National Park Southern Region. You can get to various trailheads using railroad, bus and taxi.