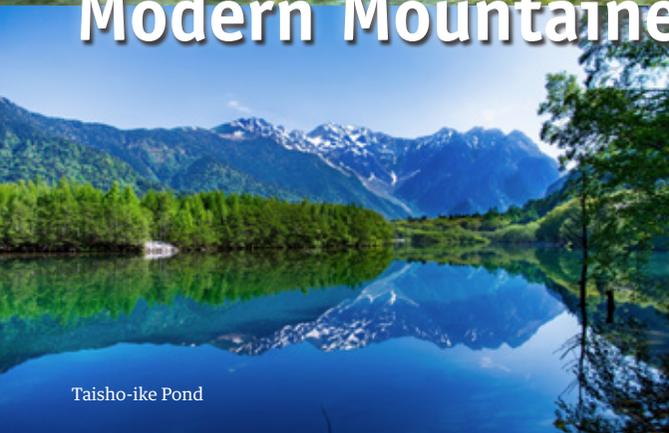


The Hotaka mountain range viewed over the Kappa-bashi Bridge and Azusa-gawa River

# Kamikochi and the Father of Modern Mountaineering in Japan



Taisho-ike Pond



A camp site in Kamikochi

**Englishman Walter Weston introduced the beautiful mountains of Japan to the world while also helping to popularize mountaineering as a form of recreation in Japan. His achievements are praised at Kamikochi in Nagano Prefecture, a mountainous area he loved, and even today, the Weston Memorial Festival is held there each year.**

## MAO FUJITA

**K**AMIKOCHI, located in Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture, is a 1,500 meter high picturesque mountain area that is also designated a national cultural resource as a Special Place of Scenic Beauty and Natural Monuments. There are many popular spots, including the Hotaka mountain range as seen from the Kappa Bridge, which spans the Azusa-gawa River, and Taisho-ike Pond, formed from an eruption of

All photos: Courtesy of Kamikochi Resort Hotel Association

Mt. Yake-dake in 1945 that stopped the flow of the Azusa-gawa River, with over one million people visiting each year. It takes about 1.5 hours to get here by bus from downtown Matsumoto City. Driving into Kamikochi by private automobile has been regulated year-round since 1975 to protect the abundant natural environment of the area.

“You can enjoy the beautiful scenery of the Hotaka mountain range with its lingering snow from the Kappa-bashi Bridge in early summer. The waters of the Azusa-gawa River are cool even in summer, and this is because the melting snow from the Hotaka mountain range flows into the river,” says Itsuo Yonekura, Shinano Section Chair of the Japanese Alpine Club.

Descending from the Kappa-bashi Bridge, one of the symbols of Kamikochi, for about 20 minutes along the righthand side of the transparent Azusa-gawa River, we arrive at the Weston Memorial Square

The relief of Walter Weston



overlooking a beautiful mountain range. There is a relief of Walter Weston (1861-1940) set into the granite stone facing the Square.

Between 1888 and 1915, Weston stayed in Japan three times for extended periods as a missionary, climbing the Japanese Alps - made up of the Hida, the Kiso, and the Akaishi mountain ranges in the Chubu Region of the main island of Japan - Mount Fuji, and many more mountains. The Hida mountain range is also called the Northern Japanese Alps and Kamikochi is a trailhead for mountain climbs here.

Weston published *Mountaineering and Exploration in the Japanese Alps* in 1896 during his three extended stays in Japan, and in this book, he talks about his own personal experiences with mountaineering at Kamikochi, the Hotaka mountain range, Mt. Yarigatake, and other mountains while also introducing the folklore and customs of Japan at the time.

The interactions between Kinjiro Okano, a young mountaineering enthusiast who read this book, and Weston led to the 1905 founding of the Japanese Alpine Club.

“When Weston was climbing the mountains of Kamikochi, mountaineering was considered an activity done for faith and spiritual training in Japan, as well as something done to hunt or otherwise survive. Weston, who was a member of the Alpine Club in England, introduced and spread the idea of mountaineering as a form of leisure or sports for people in the modern day to enjoy,” explains Yonekura.

Ten years after the founding of the Japanese Alpine Club, the idea of mountaineering for fun with a goal of climbing the mountain itself was spreading among Japanese people, and Weston came to be known as “The Father of Modern Mountaineering in Japan.” In 1937, the Japanese government praised his achievements, granting him a decoration, and the Japanese Alpine Club established the Weston

Relief in commemoration of this event. The Weston Memorial Festival is held on the first Saturday and Sunday in June each year at the Weston Memorial Square. First, on Saturday, participants follow the roughly eight-hour mountain path that crosses the Tokugou-toge Pass where Weston once walked. On the following day, local children lay flowers by the Relief at the Weston Memorial Square, and a ceremony is held where poems are read and songs are offered to honor Weston. At the end, all participants remember Weston and observe a moment of silence in his honor.

“The 73rd Weston Memorial Festival was held in June, 2019. We hope that we can continue his achievements and inherit the same magnificent scenery that he saw,” says Kaitaro Furuhashi, Secretary General of the Japanese Alpine Club Shinano Section.

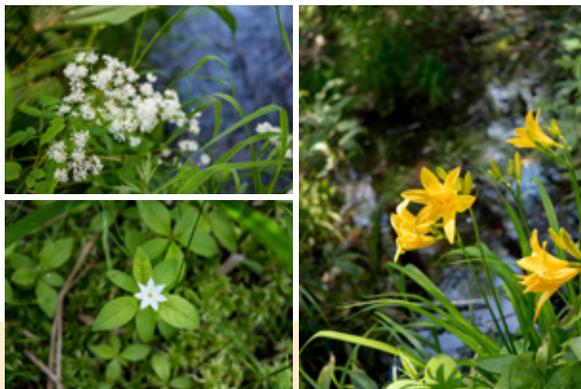
In recent years, more and more people from countries outside Japan have been staying overnight at Kamikochi to enjoy mountain climbing in the Northern Japanese Alps.

“Staying overnight at Kamikochi, surrounded by its magnificent nature, produces a feeling of gratitude towards one’s health and nature itself. I think overnight guests are able to have a special time here that can’t be experienced through just a day trip,” explains Yonekura.

In his book mentioned earlier, Weston writes the following about the sight of the Azusa-gawa River he saw when climbing the summit of Mt. Yake-dake in the Northern Japanese Alps.

*Clear streams of water, deliciously fresh, coursed down the slopes to find a common union in the torrent at the bottom of the valley.*

These words capture the unchanging beauty of Kamikochi and the surrounding mountains even today. 



Wild flowers in Kamikochi