

Shirakami-Sanchi —A Beech Forest “Natural Museum”

Beech forest

Waterfall on the
Anmon Gorge trail



Shirakami-Sanchi, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a mountainous area where a beautiful virgin beech forest and a diverse array of flora and fauna coexist.

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SHIRAKAMI-SANCHI is the general name for a mountainous area of some 130,000 hectares straddling the border between Aomori and Akita Prefectures in the Tohoku region of north-east Japan. In December 1993, 17,000 hectares of the most pristine natural beech forest in Shirakami-Sanchi was registered by UNESCO as Japan’s first World Natural Heritage site. The registration also took into consideration cultures unique to the area such as the hunting culture of the Matagi people who live in the mountainous areas of the Shirakami-Sanchi and hunt in the traditional way, and the mountain worship of Shirakami-dake (height 1,253 meters). Six rivers thread through the steep terrain of mountains over 1,000 meters high, and many waterfalls can be seen. What’s more, due to the harsh climatic conditions, with snow covering the area for around half of the year, barely any human activity occurs other than Matagi people hunting bears, gathering edible wild plants and mushrooms, and making charcoal. As a result of this minimal human impact, the forest has been preserved in its primeval state.

All photos: Courtesy of Shirakami-Sanchi Visitor Center



Rare species endemic to Shirakami-Sanchi include the perennial *Silene aomorensis* (left) and black woodpecker (right)

Enveloped in quiet, the natural beech forest is a habitat for species endemic to the region, including plants such as *Silene aomorensis* and *Tsugaru misebaya*, fish such as Japanese char and dace, birds such as the black woodpecker and golden eagle, and mammals such as the Japanese serow and Japanese black bear. It's like a "natural museum" that preserves and exhibits the virgin forest. When beech trees, which are said to have a lifespan of around 200 years, decay over time they gradually become nourishment for the soil and nurture the forest. This soil has been found to contain Shirakami Kodama yeast, suitable for baking bread. Shirakami Sasara, a lactobacillus, has also been found, and research is underway to utilize it in future biotechnology business. The nutrients from the mineral-rich beech forests are eventually carried down mountain streams and from there to the sea, where they become nutrients for plankton that nurture a variety of seafood and algae. The delicious fish nurtured in these rivers and sea waters are branded as "Shirakami Fish."


The most appealing aspect of Shirakami-Sanchi is undoubtedly the scenery that changes with the seasons.

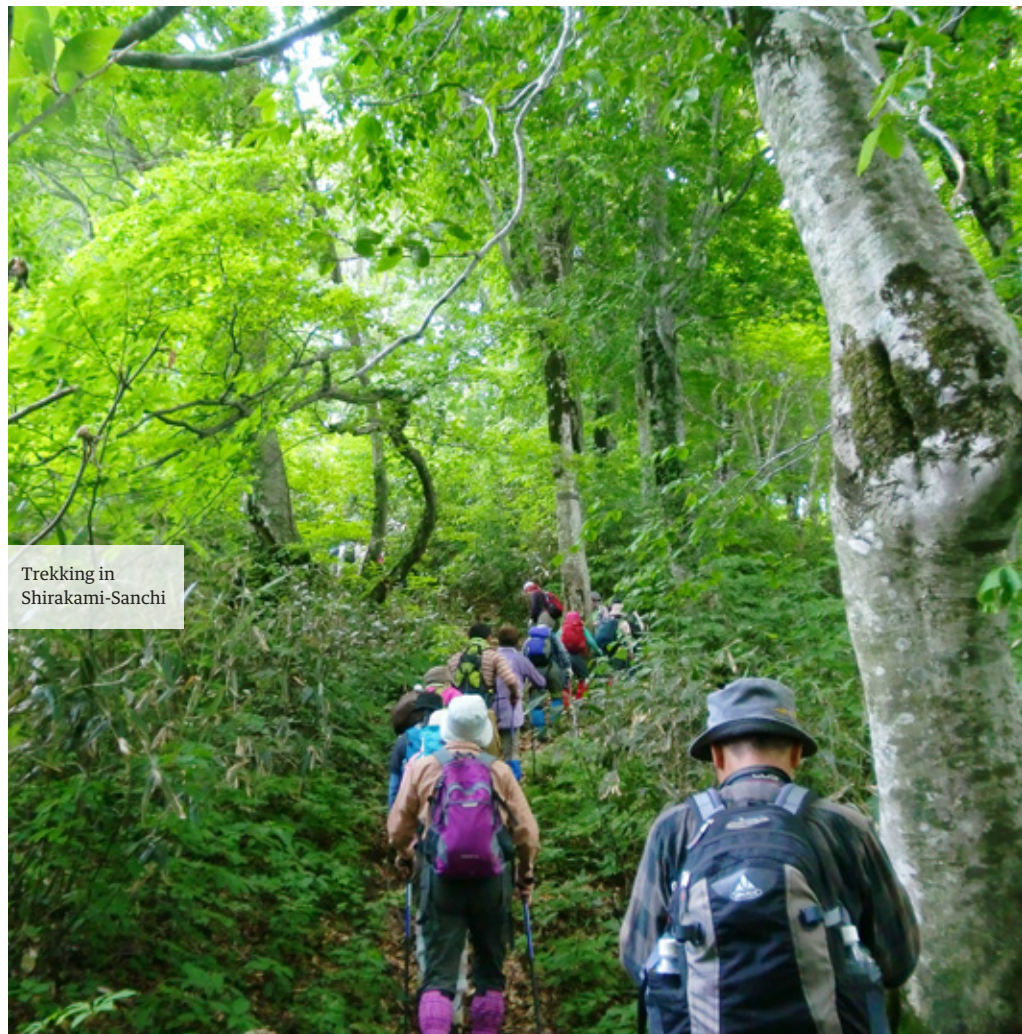
"Each of the four seasons is wonderful: spring when the young yellow-green beech leaves bud, summer when fresh breezes blow, autumn when the entire mountain is ablaze with red and yellow foliage, and winter with a blanket of snow," says Tsujimura Osamu, director of the Shirakami-Sanchi Visitor Center in Nishimeya Village, Aomori Prefecture.

The Visitor Center runs guided tours suitable even for novices. There are seven walking trails to choose from, including the Beech Forest Walking Trail, an easy way to experience the beech forest; the Anmon Gorge Trail, taking in three waterfalls; the Shirakami-Sanchi Lookout Trail, with panoramic views of Shirakami-Sanchi to enjoy; and the

Juniko Lakes (Twelve Lakes) Walking Trail, where visitors can enjoy *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing) (see *Highlighting Japan*, August 2019 issue). In addition, there are seven climbing trails ready for mountaineers. Visitors can feel the breath of the beech forest, listen to the song and chatter of birds, and admire the pretty flowers at their feet.

As well as working to train the younger generation of guides, the Visitor Center is proactive in holding extra-curricular classes and welcoming school excursion parties to impart an appreciation of Shirakami-Sanchi by delivering a fun learning experience about the forest, traditional foods, and crafts.

Tsujimura says, "We would like to expand opportunities for as many people as possible to experience Shirakami-Sanchi." 



Trekking in Shirakami-Sanchi