

September 4, 2025

## Adventure through the Nature, History and Resilience of Tohoku



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This issue of Japan Tourism Spotlight focuses on adventure travel in Tohoku — a treasure trove of destinations still relatively undiscovered by international travelers.

Adventure travel is a type of tourism that, through immersion in the nature and culture of a region, will expose them to diverse unfamiliar values and foster transformative experiences within their inner selves. The Adventure Travel Trade Association, a global industry organization, is hosting Adventure Week 2025 this month in Tohoku in collaboration with the Tohoku Tourism Promotion Organization and JNTO — the second such event co-hosted by JNTO in Japan following one in Okinawa last November — reflecting the growing worldwide interest in the region.



The Michinoku Coastal Trail, developed as part of the reconstruction effort following the earthquake and tsunami 14 years ago, is a hiking trail stretching over 1,000 km along the Pacific coast. The Dewa Sanzan mountains in Yamagata Prefecture for centuries have been a center of mountain asceticism by Yamabushi monks and popular faith in the “journey of rebirth.” In Akita and Aomori in northwestern Tohoku, efforts are afoot to preserve the thousand-year-old tradition of “Matagi” mountain hunters.

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## 1. Adventure Awaits at the Michinoku Coastal Trail



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Stretching over 1,000 kilometers from Hachinohe in Aomori Prefecture to Soma in Fukushima Prefecture, the Michinoku Coastal Trail is more than just a patchwork of stony paths, rocky cliffs, and craggy beaches. It is the region’s monument to recovery, resilience, and the unbreakable spirit of community.

The trail is a part of the “Green Reconstruction Project” launched by the Environment Ministry following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. In a collaboration among four prefectures — Aomori, Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima — along with 29 municipalities and private groups, the trail was completed in 2019.

“Michinoku” is an old name for Tohoku, which means “the end of the road.” But in truth, it was anything but the end. The project aims to promote the natural and social beauty of the Tohoku east coast: the scenic vista of the Pacific Ocean and the connecting waterways; the surrounding forests, mountains, and hills, as well as the craggy cliffs and rock formations along the coast; and most importantly, the history and culture of local communities who managed to show that life can come back after a tragedy.

Aizawa Kumi, who has been involved in building and running the Michinoku Coastal Trail since 2015, sees her job as connecting the visiting hikers with host community members, a mission that she believes will contribute to the region’s recovery. Such exchanges are exactly what the trail — which runs through not just beaches or mountainous areas but also the streets of small towns and fisheries villages where the residents spend their daily lives — is meant to facilitate. In 2017, Aizawa set up the Michinoku Trail Club, a nonprofit organization responsible for managing the hiking trail, and currently serves as its managing director.

You can either take the southward route that starts in Hachinohe, or walk the trail northward

from Soma. There are a variety of ways to enjoy hiking on the trail, depending on your physical capabilities or fields of interest. You may take a thru-hiking along the whole trail in one season, or divide the 1,000-km course into several sections and walk each one at different times of the year.

[Michinoku Coastal Trail](#)

[Michinoku Trail Club](#)

### **Tanesashi Coast: Life blooms anew post-disaster**



From the north, the trail begins in Hachinohe. This section's highlight is the Tanesashi Kaigan, a rugged coastline unique for its grassy meadows and rock formations. Each season, the meadows are dotted with various colorful wildflowers like nikko-kisuge (day lily) and hamagiku (Nippon daisy). This combination of rocky features and meadowy landscape belies the impact of the disaster. But life finds its way back; this strip of coast is again home to wild flora and fauna, particularly black-tailed gulls and other species of birds.

### **Jodogahama: Quiet beauty of wild nature**

Taking the trail down to Iwate, hikers will reach Jodogahama Beach. Named "Pure Land Beach," this coastline looks as pristine as it did hundreds of years ago. Verdant pine trees sway in the breeze atop white rocky formations that stretch to the Pacific. These cliffs form a narrow inlet that leads to a small white pebble beach, now part of Sanriku Recovery National Park. In autumn, popular activities include boat cruises and sea kayaking, both of which allow visitors to see the vista beyond the beach.

### **Kesennuma Oshima: Island of beauty and resilience**

The trail's southern half starts in Kesennuma, a town known for its distinctive ria coastline. Right across from it lies Oshima, the largest inhabited remote island in Tohoku, connected to the mainland by a 356-meter bridge. The island boasts many activities and attractions, including Odanohama Beach, which was once ranked second in the Ministry of the Environment's Best Beach 100. The beach was restored to its former beauty by the local community.

## From coast to coast: Australian finds a new home in Iwate



At first glance, one might think she's just a tourist soaking in the beauty of Tohoku's countryside. But Katy Shina is no newcomer. She is a resident and tour guide with Three Goats LLC.

What began as a brief study visit became an 18-year love affair with Japan. Originally from Brisbane on Australia's east coast, she now works for a tour company that specializes in Tohoku, including the Michinoku trail.

Katy's passion for travel, appreciation for Japanese culture, and fluency in its language were her tickets to Japan's northern frontiers. She initially worked at a hotel in Hokkaido. But her life changed after the 2011 disasters. As if by fate, she moved to one of the most affected prefectures, Iwate.

Now a seasoned pro with a warm personality, Katy has walked the trail in all four seasons and knows the best activities in every area. During the tour, she shares her knowledge of the local people and culture and helps people connect with the locals.

For adventurers, she recommends the northern section of the trail and the Jodogahama beach area, where she hypes sea kayaking as "absolutely amazing." For those who want to enjoy the natural beauty, she loves the flowers of Tanesashi Coast. "Not just coastal flowers — they've got Alpine flowers, which you normally wouldn't be able to see in that kind of spot."

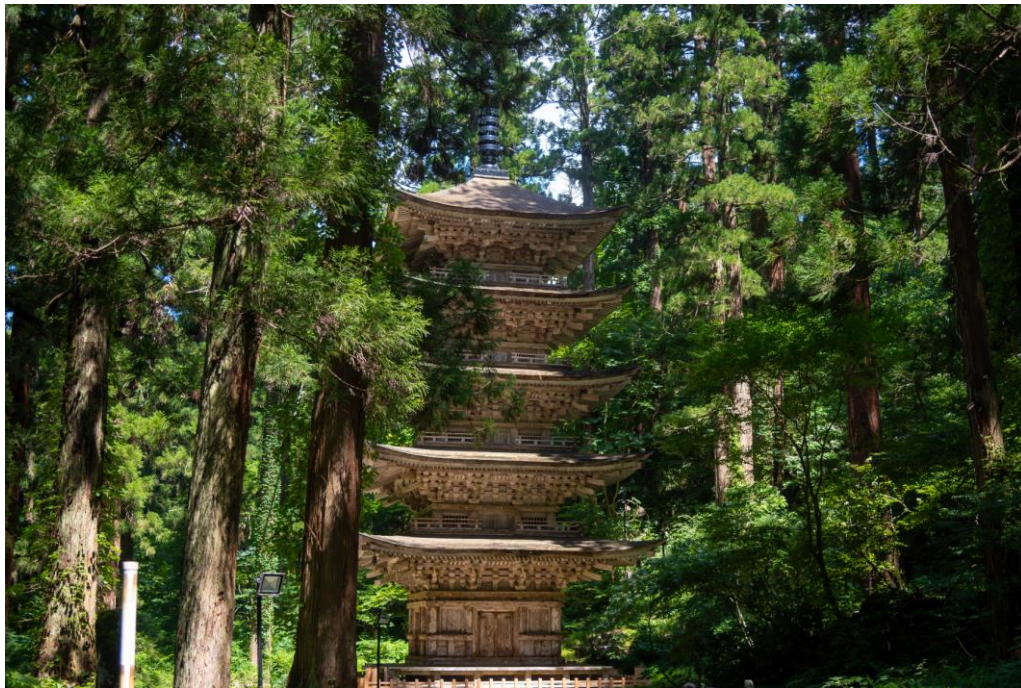
According to Katy, many overseas travelers to the Michinoku Coastal Trail hope to get in touch with the host community residents. Some hikers were attracted to the Michinoku trail after learning of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. So in planning a hiking tour, she will try, if possible, to set aside time for visitors to listen to the locals talk about their experiences of the disaster.

Tour organizers must take care to respect the host residents' sentiments — so that they would not feel too much of a burden, she says, adding that close communication with host communities is important in arranging for such exchanges.

Still, she believes that interaction with the visitors can be a rewarding experience for the residents themselves. By witnessing the hikers become enchanted with the familiar landscape along the trail, the residents can also feel proud of what their community has to offer the travelers. In guiding tours on the Michinoku trail, she hopes to facilitate such mutually satisfactory experiences for both the hikers and the residents.

Three Goats LLC.

## 2. Pilgrimage of “rebirth” at Dewa Sanzan



Since ancient times, people in Japan have worshiped mountains as a holy land where divine spirits reside and new life is nurtured, believing that mountains and gods are one and the same.

Dewa Sanzan (Three Mountains of Dewa) — Mt. Haguro (414m), Mt. Gassan (1,984m) and Mt. Yudono (1,500m) in central Yamagata Prefecture — has been the center of Haguro Shugendo mountain asceticism practiced by Yamabushi (mountain monks) for some 1,400 years. During the Edo Period, it also became a popular destination of “pilgrimage of rebirth” among the general public.

In the journey of “rebirth” faith, Mt. Haguro stands for the present and the current life, Mt. Gassan the past and the afterlife, and Mt. Yudono the future and rebirth. Climbing the three mountains symbolizes being reborn as a new soul while still alive, allowing pilgrims to regain their youthful vitality.

The shiro-shozoku (white garments) worn by Yamabushi during training is said to indicate that they consider themselves “deceased” as they enter the mountains and roam “the other world.” They “bury” their worldly self and undergo rigorous training — celebrating as they become one

with the mountain's spirit — so that they can become “reborn” as they emerge again from the mountains.

[The Three Mountains of Dewa](#)

## A quest to let the world know about Yamabushi's ways



Sara Millot, from France, works as the business manager of Tsuruoka Tourism Bureau (DEGAM). She leads the Yamagata Prefecture city's tourism development, promotion, and sales of travel products. Since she arrived in Yamagata eight years ago, she has devoted herself to promoting the cultural, spiritual, natural, and touristic value of Dewa Sanzan and the Yamabushi pilgrimage.

“To understand the Dewa Sanzan is to understand the spiritual foundation of Japan. These mountains have shaped how people here view life, nature, and even death. They are places of awe and reverence, where blessings and dangers coexist,” she said.

The pilgrimage mirrors Sara's life journey in Japan: slow but deliberate. Her connection with the country began at age 13, when she came upon a CD of a famous Japanese singer. The love spell was instant. Later on, she taught herself Japanese. She knew she wanted to be in Japan, so she majored in Japanese Studies at Toulouse University and became an exchange student at Waseda University.

But her first stay in Japan was not the Ghibli-esque charm she had envisioned; instead, she met the “bright, loud, and fast-paced” features of metropolitan Tokyo. She yearned for the “Japan of her dreams,” which was full of nature, spirituality, and community. When she returned to France, she took a master's degree in Japanese studies. Through the JET program, she got a job in the Tsuruoka city office as an international relations coordinator in 2017.

Duality — Japan's hypermodernity and tradition coexisting, the mountain's capacity to nurture and destroy life, Sara as a modern-day foreigner trying to revive Japan's ancient traditions — is at the heart of the Yamabushi practice.

“Mountains are both sacred and perilous. To train there is to embrace the idea that life holds joy and hardship in equal measure. That's why Yamabushi say ‘uketamo’ — ‘I accept’ — not just to the commands of their masters, but to whatever life may bring, good or bad.”

Through her role at the bureau, Sara has designed several spiritual and culinary tours. She guides the tourists herself. She describes this role as a bridge that connects visitors directly with Yamabushi monks. The travelers join from start to finish, where they can join a prayer ritual to learn the Shinto perspective on Yamabushi philosophy.

“By doing so, travelers are not just ‘visiting.’ They’re stepping into a living story shaped by centuries of evolving belief systems,” she said.

One of her proud projects is women-only pilgrimages. Historically, sacred mountains were off-limits to women due to religious reasons. But with support from the Dewa Sanzan Shrine, she helped create tours inspired by “miko-shugyo” (training for children of gods), a Yamabushi-style training for women.



“We wanted to create a safe, inclusive space where women could discover the power of this sacred land, and perhaps even reconnect with their inner strength, just like the Yamabushi men have been doing for centuries,” she said.

Despite her small victories along the way, the journey remains long and arduous, like the pilgrimage itself. The Dewa Sanzan region faces challenges, like the lack of resources — in terms of both financial and human resources — and depopulation. But she remains hopeful. Like the mountains that have stood the test of time, her dreams to help revitalize the region remain steadfast.

“My dream is simple: to help preserve the soul of Tsuruoka, the Dewa Sanzan, and Tohoku for as long as possible — the people, the culture, the traditions, and the spirit of the mountains. I believe tourism can be a quiet yet powerful force to keep the countryside alive.”

### **Yamabushi training and “journey of rebirth” tours**

Various tours are being organized by local tour agents for visitors to try on Yamabushi training and the “rebirth” pilgrimage. Ishidan Stone Pilgrimage is a tour designed to enable anyone to experience the “journey of rebirth” by climbing the 2,446 stone steps along Mt. Haguro’s approach. Participants wear a white sash —believed to serve as a spiritual boundary that wards

off evil spirits. By walking along the path at their own pace, the tourists can feel the surrounding nature and be reborn as a new self, says its organizer.

[Ishidan Stone Pilgrimage](#)

### 3. Discover the thousand-year-old Matagi culture



Matagi, Tohoku's mountain hunters upholding ancient practices, are woven into Japan's cultural mythology and folklore. Dating back over a thousand years, a handful of descendants remain today to preserve their storied traditions.

The Ani area in Akita Prefecture, with its isolated, rugged landscape around Mt. Moriyoshi, is known as the "home" of Matagi culture. According to the legend, this is the place where the first Matagis are believed to have settled, and from which the Matagi spirituality and lifestyle spread to other regions in eastern Japan. This locale has largely shielded the traditional winter hunting practices and spiritual rituals of the Matagi from modern encroachment, preserving time-tested techniques to hunt revered black bears, the use of tools like traditional knives and snowshoes, and rituals honoring nature and mountains.

More than hunters, they are the guardians of the mountains, living in harmony with nature and honoring its gifts through spiritual rituals and sustainable practices. With only about 200 Matagi remaining due to urbanization, strict hunting regulations, and an aging population, their heritage is fading fast. As times have changed, there are no longer any full-time Matagi hunters. Those who remain engage in agriculture, forestry, or other jobs outside the hunting season (winter to early spring).

In Ani, travelers can view the basics of Matagi life at the Matagi Museum exhibits at Utto Onsen Matagi no Yu. Here, the visitors learn about the "kebokai" — a ceremony honoring the spirits of hunted bears and the mountain goddess. Performed at a mountain shrine or hunt site with offerings like sake or dried fish, it reflects the Matagi's commitment to using every part of an animal — meat, fur, bones — ensuring nothing is wasted.

Another Matagi pocket is found in the Nishimeya village in Aomori Prefecture, within the Shirakami-Sanchi UNESCO World Heritage Site. A group of guides known as Shirakami Matagisha leads tours through pristine beech forests along the Aomori-Akita border.

These tours include foraging for wild vegetables and mushrooms and trekking through untouched, serene landscapes, where autumn transforms the foliage into vibrant yellows, oranges, and reds. With no roads in the Shirakami mountains, trekking along the footpaths and staying in traditional wooden cabins offers visitors a chance to appreciate the ecological wisdom of the Matagi.

Experiencing Matagi life fosters a deep appreciation for a lifestyle that is a world away from the instant gratification of society and the modern comforts of big cities. This tangible engagement grounds travelers in authentic, real-world interactions, cultivating mindfulness, sustainable practices, and a stronger understanding of self-sufficient skills. These experiences, blending adventure and education, support the preservation of the Matagi's revered heritage while offering travelers a meaningful connection to an endangered legacy worth preserving.

[Matagi Museum](#)

[Learn about the traditions of the Matagi](#)

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