



Tōhoku 東北

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the alpine plains of **Akita Koma-ga-dake** and winding down to rustic traditional hot springs at Nyūtō Onsen (p221)
- Walking in the footsteps of Japan's mountain pilgrims across the sacred peaks of **Dewa Sanzan** (p208)
- Capturing stunning views from the rocky peaks of coastal volcanoes such as **Iwaki-san** (p231) and **Chōkai-san** (p217)
- Exploring the marshlands and hot springs surrounding **Hakkōda-san** (p229) and **Hachimantai** (p224)
- Stumbling over the ridge at **Zaō-san** (p213) to come across the vista of the colourful **Okama** crater lake
- Taking in the relaxed ambience of the **Bandai-san** lakes area before walking right over the site of recent massive destruction (p205)

Tōhoku, situated in northern Honshū, is comprised of six mountainous prefectures – Fukushima, Miyagi, Iwate, Akita, Yamagata and Aomori. The region offers some of the country's best hiking routes and vast areas of unspoilt natural scenery. Sparsely populated, Tōhoku is also rich in its variety of traditional rural life.

The region boasts picturesque lakes, waterfalls and superb mountain vistas, as well as a myriad of hot springs. The six vast national parks and numerous quasi-national parks attract outdoor enthusiasts from spring through autumn, but especially during the summer months. In winter, ski resorts kick into gear when snow blankets the alpine areas.

However, the mountains of Tōhoku are largely volcanic and some of them are deemed active. Iwate-san is a textbook conical volcano and has only been completely reopened to hikers since 2004 – all trails to the top were closed from 1998. Experiencing regular earthquakes this region feels like life in the hands of nature's mercy. Large earthquakes during the early summer months of 2008 had disastrous effects: tremors wreaked havoc on mountain roads and hot spring resorts but left the stoic friendly folk of this area, long accustomed to hardship, completely unperturbed.

The beauty of Tōhoku's natural environment has been widely romanticised, perhaps most memorably in the travel journals of Matsuo Bashō (1644–94), Japan's beloved haiku (epigrammatic Japanese verse in 17 syllables) poet, who travelled around the region on one of his epic 17th century journeys.



HISTORY

Originally this region was inhabited by the Ezo, who are believed to be related to the Ainu of Hokkaidô. Tôhoku was settled during the 7th to 9th centuries by southern Japanese migrating northwards in search of arable land to cultivate. The heyday of the area was during the reign of the feudal Lord Date Masamune, who constructed a magnificent castle in his trading stronghold of Sendai in 1601. Masamune's reign ended with the Meiji Restoration and Tôhoku began to suffer from its relative isolation to become *inaka* (a rural backward area). Although to Tokyoites it may still seem *inaka* the label is unfair as the region is now vibrant and tourism plays a big part in the economy.

CLIMATE

As with most of Japan, Tôhoku has four distinct seasons and the region witnesses dramatic changes in weather throughout the year. Long, harsh winters are the norm, and at higher altitudes large tracts of snow remain throughout summer, despite the heat and humidity lower down. The summer temperatures are altogether more comfortable than further south, making hiking here a more attractive activity and a great escape from the oppressive stickiness of other lower latitudes.

The Ôu mountain range creates a natural climatic border right down the centre of Tôhoku. The Japan Sea region to the west receives the brunt of the winter snow and cold temperatures. The more protected Pacific Ocean side has warmer temperatures and markedly less precipitation.

PLANNING

When to Hike

Being an area that gets well and truly snowed-in during winter, the hikes of Tôhoku that go above 1500m can still have snow early in the season and you should be prepared to be walking through stubborn pockets of snow when venturing high. The rainy season ends in late June, bringing on the peak hiking months of July to October.

Maps

Japan: Tôhoku 東北 is a handy fold-out map of the region with snippets of travel information on major sites and festivals,

natural recreation areas and transportation routes. It can be picked up free at the main Japan National Tourist Organization (JNTO) information centres (see p27).

PLACE NAMES

More than variations in place names, one of the trickiest things about travelling in Tôhoku is how local people pronounce them and speak their particular version of Japanese. *Tôhoku-ben* (the Tôhoku dialect) is perhaps the most difficult regional dialect to grasp in Japan, and even Japanese travellers have trouble understanding just what the local Tôhoku folk are saying.

Books

Lonely Planet's *Japan* gives the full low-down on what to see and do in the Tôhoku area.

Jan Brown's *Exploring Tôhoku* is now rather dated but is still relevant in that it delves deeply into the area's appeal and is full of both historical and practical travel information. The translated memoirs of best-selling author Ishizaka Yojiro, *My Days, My Dreams*, is a nostalgic journey back to the author's childhood in Hirosaki at the base of Iwaki-san.

Information Sources

There are local tourist offices in major centres throughout the region. Nuts and bolts tourism literature in English is sparse, but the situation is improving constantly.

JNTO's extensive website (www.jnto.go.jp) offers useful English-language links to local sites in all six prefectures. These sites can turn up some interesting regional leads for hikers.

TÔHOKU'S HIGHEST

The region of Tôhoku reaches as far south as Nikkô and Oze, both of which are popular hiking areas close to Tokyo. Oze is a renowned alpine marshland towered over by the peak of Hiuchi-ga-take (2356m). This peak is technically speaking Tôhoku's highest mountain and anyone who revels in the details of mountains – and Japanese are avid note takers – will tell you this. However, Oze being so close to the capital, it has been included in the Tokyo Region chapter.