



On Top of the World

Visiting the Shimokita Peninsula

At the northern tip of Honshu is the axe-shaped Shimokita Peninsula, a mountainous blade connected to the mainland by a narrow, flat haft. Being almost an island – surrounded by the fish-rich waters of the Pacific, the Japan Sea, Mutsu Bay and the Tsugaru Straights – tends to create cultural differences. Like Sado Island, this peninsula was used for political exile during the late Tokugawa Period (or Edo Era, 1603-1868). Modern travel, however, has brought this outlandish place much closer.

It is a very rural, wild and mysterious land that endures long hard winters and is off-track for modern economic venturing. The main shopping street of Mutsu, its regional capital with a population of 50,000, has many shuttered and floundering stores with bleak future prospects – besides the nuclear-power industry, tourism and fishing. People live mainly around the coast. However, amid the highlands and green valleys are crystal waters for fishing, *onsen* hot springs and leisurely solitude amid still-virgin forests.

Although being the world's northernmost habitat for monkeys, the most famous aspect of this region is a sacred, dormant volcano called Osorezan (Mount Fear). A Buddhist "Mecca" for pilgrims to tour the lofty gateways to heaven and hell around the cratered Lake Usuri; where the spirits of dead children hang around, awaiting entrance to heaven, blind shaman women (*itako*) act as spiritual portals and the crows peck open packaged offerings to the dearly departed. There are also hot briny baths to soak away whatever ails and a newly reconstructed temple.

Over a thousand years ago, a Japanese monk dreamt about this volcano while studying Buddhism at a Chinese temple. Upon his return, a slow northward trudge finally revealed the very last range of mountains, from which a peak rose into the clouds, forming a bridge between earth and sky.

Climbing up through the thick forests to the crater rim presented a breathtaking view and a whiff of bad eggs for early pilgrims. These still remain in almost pristine condition, if the

paraphernalia of modern tourism is discounted. Wooded crater slopes look down upon the deep, still lake around which lava hillocks lead bleakly to sandy beaches, as sulphurous gases belch from cracks and the yellow bile of hell can be seen and sniffed at. To the errant monk Ennin, it seemed a heaven-sent place to establish a temple.

The patron “saint” around here is Jizo Bodhisattva, a benign spirit devoted to the salvation of dead children. His many small statues are adorned with red bibs and articles of children’s clothing – a custom copied all over Japan. Along the entrance road is the small Sanzu-no-kawa, a Japanese Hades crossed by an arched red bridge for escaping souls. This volcanic meeting point of life and death now serves mainly as a place for dead children awaiting the demise of their parents, so that they may enter paradise together and for communicating with the spirit world. At the main entrance to the grounds is the large figure of Jizo, beneath which a stock of colorful, whirring windmills are for sale. These bright spinning wheels are placed around the site, and complement the children’s shoes and toys left there for “young souls” to enjoy. The profound sadness of parents losing children seems to have permeated the venue. It is believed that the childish spirits play by building small piles of lava, which wicked demons try to pull down. Visitors are encouraged to rebuild them and leave sweets, food or money (mainly ¥1 coin) on these small shrines.

Osorezan attracts both ageing Buddhist pilgrims and picnicking tourists as a “spiritual” theme park. Especially in July and October, when the supernatural forces are said to strongly arise and the *itako* converge to hold séances with departed loved ones. Girls, usually blind from birth, are selected for long and intensive training as *itako*. Whether they are just reading the minds of their clients or actually speaking with the spirit world is not important. What matters most is the satisfaction of those consulting them. The long lines of believers during the high season give ample testament to the popularity of these *itako*, even though the temple authorities cannot publicly sanction such acts of faith. A young

man told this writer that he was a bit dubious about the experience at first, as the *itako* asked about his relationship with the deceased and when they died, before using the prayer beads and chanting in a very low voice. “It was monotonous, and lasted a long time. Then she whispered a message from my grandfather that my parents are still looking after the hometown but I should write to them more, and I must get married and start a family. It felt as if it was right on target, so I was satisfied.”

There is an optional delight of soaking in an *onsen* fed by milky volcanic waters from the deep bowels of earth for ¥500. These baths are housed within an ever-musty, decaying building and reputed to heal scars, skin diseases, athletes foot and other bodily ailments. Close, prolonged soaking amid such afflicted folk may not be so advisable.

For non-believers, Osorezan presents both natural magnificence and wild beauty. A five-minute trek across the lava rocks, away from the crowds, brings you to barren foreshores where the sky and crater peaks reflect on the dark water surface. It is a desolate landscape, yet higher up the slopes is the rich beauty of trees and plants. This balance between life and death is the enlightenment that all Buddhists seem to seek.

Local mothers tell their children of scary stories about Osorezan. There are many strange tales associated with this spiritual transit point. One reputed taxi driver was asked by a woman to drive to the volcano late at night. When he arrived, he discovered that his passenger was not there, only a pool of water on the rear seat. Mysterious drownings, ghostly apparitions and such stories all add to its eerie nature. When the departing sun leaves the crater in deep gloom, visitors scurry away quickly – as imagination goes into overdrive and demons start to awake. It is with a sense of relief that one crosses that little red bridge back to earth.

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