

Rediscovering the sights of Aokigahara

[Daniela Amemiya]

Ever since I came to Yamanashi Prefecture I have always been interested in visiting the sights located in Aokigahara. I am sure that when some of you hear the name of this forest, the images that come to mind are not very good. However, its reputation does not reflect reality. The forest is fascinating and has many interesting caves and rock formations which allow us to learn about geology, history, culture and ecology while exercising our bodies.

This time, my wonderful partner, Kendra Evans, and I were guided by an expert professional guide, Mr. Hiromitsu Kurosawa (profile in the next page) who made our hiking experience much richer and funnier. Today, I am proud to share all his advice, and guide you on a wonderful adventure. Welcome to Aokigahara, and have fun!

Experiencing Aokigahara

In recent days, due to the growing interest in ecotourism, and thanks to the nomination of Mount Fuji and its surroundings as a World Cultural Heritage Site in June of 2013 by UNESCO, the number of visitors coming to Aokigahara has increased. Hoping to cater to public curiosity, Fujikawaguchiko Town provides the “AOKIGAHARA Nature Guide tour” which offers several guided hiking courses varying from 1 to 4 hours (more information in the box.).

For our adventure, we chose the 90 minute course, which included a visit to the Ryugu Lava Cave, Saiko Bat Cave and a walk in the forest. Before our visit, which was in late November, Mr. Kurosawa advised us to wear comfortable shoes and warm clothes.

Further, he was very strict in saying that he doesn't recommend walking in Aokigahara between



Kendra & I wearing warm clothes!

December and April, due to the snow. Another piece of advice we received was to stick to the designated trail. Aokigahara is an almost impenetrably dense forest; it makes us lose our sense of direction. So, let's keep Mr. Kurosawa's advice in mind for our own safety!

Our first stop was the Ryugu Lava Cave, a site designated as a National Natural Treasure. It is a large hollow with a diameter of 60 meters. Furthermore, it is cold inside the cave throughout the year, and even in the summer it is possible to



Upward view from the bottom of Ryugu Lava Cave



Here lives an enshrined god of water.

see ice on the walls. The scenery when you look upwards from the bottom of the cave is wonderful, and the sunshine entering through the entrance warms you and makes the scenery even more beautiful. It is something that you just have to experience.

In addition, in this cave lives an enshrined god of water who, according to legend, brings rain

Aokigahara Hiking Guided Tour Information:

Do you want to apply for a guided hiking tour?

Find all the information you need with the follow QR code or call Saiko Bat-Cave Information Center (+81 555-82-3111).



during times of drought. I believe Mr. Kurosawa introduced us to this place because praying here can bring good luck. One more piece of advice from Mr. Kurosawa: say your name and address before making a wish or saying a prayer, otherwise the god can't deliver it. As a side note, Mount Fuji and its surrounding area have many interesting and beautiful shrines; please take the time to visit some of them.

We moved on to our second stop by car, but you can also walk there or take the bus to the Kōmori Ana stop. If you know what Kōmori Ana means, perhaps you can guess that our next adventure was the Saiko Bat Cave! As suggested by Mr. Kurosawa, I also highly recommend bringing a flashlight! Even though the cave is well lit and maintained, with a flashlight in hand you can discover things and have much more fun! For example, you can observe cute bats sleeping in small holes in the cave's ceiling or walls!

After paying the admission fee of 300 yen (child's fee is half price), you are invited to walk a while in the Aokigahara Forest before reaching the main destination. During the walk, you can observe some interesting geological formations such as caves made from lava, where the volcanic gases built up and burst through the ceiling and animals' traces such as seed husks left by squirrels.



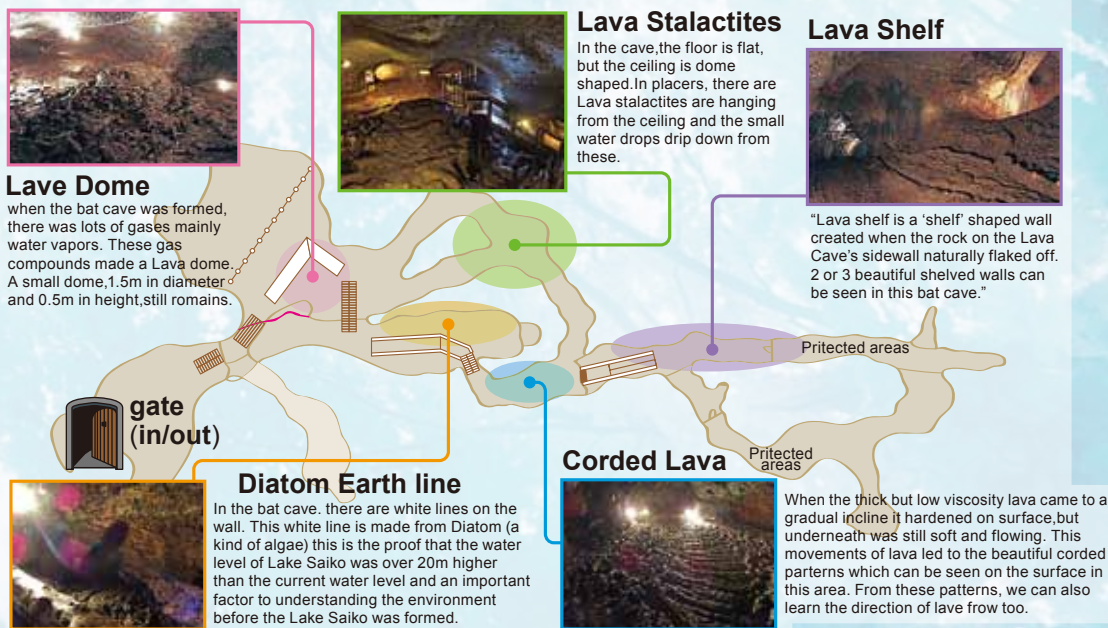
Mr. Hiromitsu Kurosawa's profile:



Mr. Kurosawa works for Fujikawaguchiko Town as a nature guide of Fuji Hokuroku, and for the Yamanashi Prefectural Government as a temporary worker responsible for inspecting constructions in the Fuji

Hokuroku area. He also used to be a guide at the 5th station of Mt. Fuji. Privately, he is making efforts to promote "Forest Therapy" and the charms of many places in Yamanashi, such as Mount Fuji and Yatsugatake for people of different ages from all over the world.

I was surprised that to access the cave, we had to pass through an iron gate, which I later learned is there to protect the geological and environmental system from vandals. We walked carefully down the slippery stairs and reached the main hall of the cave, an incredibly large space. From the first step inside, you are introduced to a whole new geological world. In other words, wherever you look, you face different and interesting geological formations such as lava domes, lava stalactites, lava shelves, loop lava and diatom earth lines (locations and explanations are detailed in the map). As a biologist, I couldn't help but be amazed by two things. One was the white line of diatoms (a type of algae commonly used as a tool for environmental monitoring) on the cave



walls, which prove that in ancient times this place was filled with water. The second was that the bats have a protected area at the back of the cave for avoiding unwelcome visitors who used to threaten them.



The last part of our adventure was a walk through Aokigahara Forest, starting from the trail route next to the Saiko Bat Cave parking area. This forest, covering almost 3,000 hectares, spreads around the northern base of Mount Fuji (from the west shore of Lake Sai to the eastern coast of Lake Motosu) and is located between 900 and 1,300 meters above sea level. It is known by most people as a “Sea of Trees”, because when observed from above it seems like a rolling sea.

It was an easy walk, and with every step Mr. Kurosawa showed us something new and explained the history, ecology and biology of the forest. According to him, 80% of Aokigahara is comprised of coniferous trees such as southern Japanese hemlock, Hinoki cypress, and other evergreen needle leaf trees. He also emphasized



Aokigahara forest ecosystem maintained by moss!



Homogeneous forest formed by evergreen needle leaf trees.

that this ecosystem is maintained by the moss which allows the plants to absorb water and grow. In addition, even though it looks like a splendid ecosystem to our eyes, it is still young with no trees older than 400 years old. This is because it took hundreds of years for the lava to cool down enough to allow these headstrong plants and animals to grow after the devastating eruption of old Mt Fuji during the Jogan Era in 864. Another lesson was how to recognize the landing zone of the Japanese giant flying squirrel on a tree trunk (an odd empty space without moss is a good sign).



Landing zone of the Japanese giant flying squirrel



Illustration of the Japanese giant flying squirrel by Masayuki Yabuuchi.

Everything we learned was interesting, but in my opinion, the most important lesson I had from Mr. Kurosawa was related to life. During our entire walk, he kept telling us to observe how the forest's nature is strong and fights for life. One example is the tree roots, which have had to spread out along the top of the forest floor due to the thinness of the soil (10 cm). They have faced



obstacles, but they overcame them and kept growing. According to him, during our life, we will also face many problems - but like these



roots, we are flexible and strong enough to overcome them. Furthermore, he highly recommends taking a "forest therapy" course, which coincidentally has become famous around the world thanks to the scientifically proven relaxing effects on mental and physical health, such as lowering stress levels and strengthening the immune system (free article download using the following QR code). "Forest Therapy" is, according to Mr. Kurosawa, a moment when you share all your stress, bad energy and worries with nature, and receive its power in return.



I would like to express all my gratitude to Mr. Kurosawa, who guided us and showed us several features of Aokigahara that most of visitors can't find out about by themselves. For that reason, I definitely recommend hiring a guide!



Nikkei Brazilian Daniela Miwa Amemiya is finishing up her 4th and last year as a CIR in Yamanashi. She has explored the prefecture to the fullest, and had a lot of unforgettable moments which made her stronger and smarter. Even though she won't be in Yamanashi anymore, she promises to never forget the kindness of the people and beauty of this prefecture.