

# Climbing the Tallest Mountain in Japan

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Every summer, visitors from all around the world challenge themselves to reach the top of the 3,776 meter (12,395 foot) Mt. Fuji, otherwise known as Fujisan in Japanese.

Recognized as a World Heritage Site since 2013 under the title, “Mt. Fuji: Object of Worship, Wellspring of Art,” this mountain has been a pilgrimage destination and has inspired countless pieces of artwork and poetry since ancient times. The number of climbers increases year by year, and near the summit the routes can become extremely crowded before dawn, when long lines can be seen from afar as the head lamps of climbers illuminate the trails, in the middle of the pitch black mountain. Many difficulties stand in the way between the point of departure and the summit, but none seem to faze those whose desire it is to reach the top of tallest mountain in Japan.



## To Climb or Not to Climb Mt. Fuji?

**F**irst off – to climb. Mt. Fuji's unique cone shape and its intermittent volcanic activity make it a sacred place for Shintoism, the Japanese ethnic religion, and for ascetic Buddhism. Shrines, and temples dedicated to the worship of Mt. Fuji can be found in the surrounding areas as well as throughout Japan. Therefore, the journey to the top of Mt. Fuji is considered by many to be a spiritual one. To others, it is a way of demonstrating resilience, a challenge for the body and mind. And for some it is simply a visit to the highest point in Japan.

There are many reasons that might lead one to climb Mt. Fuji, but this is a task not accomplishable without a certain degree of preparation. During 2017's summer climbing season, more than 172 thousand people climbed Mt. Fuji through the Yoshida Route, in Yamanashi Prefecture, from a total of 285 thousand climbers. Most of them are far from experienced climbers, and this fact leads to a common misconception among travelers that reaching the top of Mt. Fuji is an easy task.

But it is not that simple, and difficulties involved can be a determining factor for one not to climb. Without adequate hiking gear, not to mention physical strength, it is unlikely that one can make it. The sheer height itself is a challenge that not many are willing to accept. The weather in the mountains



also can change rapidly; the difference in temperature between the 5th Station, where most people start climbing, and the summit can be 15 °C (59 °F) or more. Trails, too, can become tricky to navigate at certain points, requiring one to be in good physical condition as well as the use of sturdy boots, gloves, raingear, and so on. Finally, it is not uncommon for there to be sudden rainfall, which can cause less-than-desirable climbing conditions and pose a danger even to experienced climbers.

It is not unusual to spot unadvised climbers wearing flip flops and summer shorts climbing Mt. Fuji. These are the climbers who find themselves struggling the most, or even getting injured, due to their inappropriate footwear and inadequate preparation. Especially in the upper parts of the mountain, where it is hard to seek specialized help, the only option becomes to call for a police rescue.

Due to all the difficulties listed above, the reasons not to climb may outweigh the reasons to climb. Many residents in Yamanashi, for instance, insist that Mt. Fuji is a mountain to be seen, not to be climbed. But, aware of the conditions and prepared both physically and mentally to the best of our abilities, we, a group of a dozen foreigners hoping to make this summer unforgettable, decided to accept the challenge of climbing the most iconic mountain in Japan and departed for Mt. Fuji during the last weekend of the climbing season.

## Journey to the Top

There are four routes to the top of Mt. Fuji: the Yoshida Route, starting in Yamanashi Prefecture, and the Subashiri, Gotemba and Fujinomiya routes, starting in Shizuoka Prefecture. The Yoshida Route is the most popular one, offering two separate trails for the ascent and the descent as well as a number of huts for overnight stays. It is easily accessible by bus from Shinjuku, Lake Kawaguchi, or Fujisan stations, and most commonly climbers start climbing from the Fuji Subaru Line 5th Station. It was from there, 2,305 meters (7,562 feet) above sea level, that we departed. We began our climb at noon, envisioning what it would be like to watch the sunrise from the summit of Japan's tallest mountain.

With a group as large as ours, it took six hours to reach the hut we had made a reservation at, which was located at the 8.5 Station (3,450 meters or 11,319 feet above sea level). A smaller group might be able to reach this point in less time. Reservations are required for staying at any of the huts, in which you are given a warm meal and a place to sleep. Most people, however, stay only for a few hours as an early morning wakeup is necessary to make it to the summit before sunrise. Some of the huts also sell food and drinks for those who only want to make a quick rest stop.

Staying at any of the huts is far from a comfortable experience. With dozens of climbers sharing the same

room, there is minimum space, no privacy, and – given that the huts are not connected to a water supply network – no showers. But we were all grateful to have a spot under a roof where we could rest our bodies and warm our hands with hot tea and blankets.

From the 8.5 Station, it would require yet another hour and

as lack of sleep can result in fatigue or, even worse, injury. Some of our group's members were affected by altitude sickness, but fortunately everyone was able to make it to the hut to rest and resume the climb the next morning.

Even with all the difficulties, the stunning views made everything worth it. During the ascent, at the summit, and



a half of hiking. Despite the rain, cold, and darkness that we set foot into upon exiting the hut, we were all excited for our arrival to the summit from which we could view the sunrise.

There is a reason the climbing season only lasts from the beginning of July to the beginning of September. This is the only period when the top of Mt. Fuji is free of snow and ice. But that is not to say the weather is ideal. Even in summer, as we experienced for ourselves, weather changes rapidly; within seconds a cloudy day can become a hot day, a hot day can then turn into a rainy and chilly day.

An even greater concern for climbers is altitude sickness. Due to the high altitude, even people in perfect physical condition can suffer from severe headaches, difficulties in breathing, nausea, dehydration, and the like. Taking regular breaks and drinking sufficient water helps to prevent this, and it is recommended to rest at one of the huts on the way

upon descending, the true beauty of the climb involved more than just impressive natural landscapes. It was also the view of so many different climbers from so many different countries – all gathered in the same place, all heading for the same destination – that made the hike an unforgettable experience. Independent of each person's country, culture, age, or life experiences, everyone was facing the same challenges. But seeing that it was Mt. Fuji that had invited such a diverse crowd made me realize how awe-inspiring it is, not only for the people of Japan, with their long history and deep tradition of artwork and poetry dedicated to this mountain, but also for the entire world. As a World Heritage Site, this is a title that is more than well-deserved.

More information about the climbing season, trails, equipment, huts, and transportation can be found here:  
[www.fujisan-climb.jp/en/](http://www.fujisan-climb.jp/en/)