



# Trail Running in the

by : Justin Ehringhaus (former CIR from Maine, USA)

**M**ountains. They are intrinsic to life here in Yamanashi Prefecture. They are what one first sees upon looking out the window during the quiet waking hours of a Sunday morning. They are a piece of what makes up an infant's very first sight of the natural world. They are also the backdrop of many a couple's first kiss. As home to some of Japan's most famous peaks, the mountains of Yamanashi Prefecture have seen it all. In ancient times of feudal warfare, for example, these tall mountains with their dense forests served as a natural barricade capable of depleting an encroaching army of both its resources and morale, perfect for the cunning warlord hoping to stay out of sight. Since even more ancient times, mountains were central to ascetic religious groups. The ascent of Mt. Fuji in particular symbolized a spiritual rebirth to many people, and still welcomes thousands upon thousands of climbers every year.

But there is yet another reason why so many people are attracted to the mountains of Yamanashi Prefecture.

In recent years, the competitive sport of trail running has gained massive popularity worldwide—and with its plentiful variety of mountains on which exist an infinite number of trails, Yamanashi Prefecture is no exception. However, to find out just exactly *what is* trail running and *what it is* about this prefecture that makes it so unique, it was in true *Grapevine* fashion that I submitted my name to be entered into the 2018 Three Peaks Yatsugatake trail run.

With very few kilometers under my runner's belt and very few mountains inside my hiker's hat, this was not an unflinching decision for me to be making. Yet, life in Yamanashi Prefecture had brought out an aspect of my character that yearned for adventure, challenge, and athleticism. Thus, with the daunting prospect of racing against 500 participants on a 24 kilometer course with an elevation of over 1,500 meters in altitude, I had little choice but to prepare myself as best as possible during the two months prior to the race.



# Mountain Prefecture

It was alongside a trail running group in Kofu City that I learned the ropes. About thirty people would gather once per week at Midorigaoka Sports Park in the early hours of the morning to run up Yumura Mountain. There was much to learn at first. For example, special shoes and a lightweight backpack are required to make the run as efficient as possible; dried fruits and meats are recommended as mid-run snacks for minimizing weight and maximizing caloric intake; zig-zagging over uphill terrain as opposed to running straight takes more steps but is most energy efficient; running downhill takes practice, practice, and more practice, as it is easy to lean too far forward and risk a painful faceplant but also common to lean too far backward and risk expending too much energy. The list goes on... but while preparing for the big event, I also learned that trail running was intensely strenuous. Needless to say, running on and up trails takes a whole different kind of stamina than regular roads.

But trail running also introduced me to a new way of

perceiving distances. Atop Yumura Mountain while on a break to look over the city and enjoy the view, my trail running companions were discussing the various trails in and around Yamanashi Prefecture and asked me, "Have you been to Shosenkyo Gorge yet?" Embarrassed, I replied in the negative. Shosenkyo Gorge happened to be one of Japan's most beautiful gorges, located right outside of Kofu City where I was living. And I hadn't yet made the time to go and visit, despite often being teased by friends and coworkers about the fact. "Well, how about we go and stop by there now, then. It's just a little ways ahead." Shocked, I nodded, having had no idea that it was possible to *run* to *Shosenkyo* Gorge. As just like that, we began our descent of the mountain, but now with a beautiful final destination in mind.

Fast forward a couple of weeks, and the day of the race arrived. I had gained a general gist of what trail running involved after several practice sessions and countless YouTube sprees. Equipping myself before the race with

a smartphone and miniature microphone, it was now my task not only to run the race, but also to interview willing participants mid-run in order to find out more about what makes trail running unique in Yamanashi Prefecture. The toll of the taiko drum rang, thus marking the beginning of the next four hours of my life.

This was *hard*. Until this day, I had never wanted to quit something so badly. My entire body screamed at me to stop—my foot hurt, my knee hurt, I was hungry, I was thirsty. Eventually, I needed to stop. There was a rest station about three-quarters of the way through the race, and I savored the availability of food, water, and bathrooms. I was in a crouched position giving my knees some much needed rest when another runner approached me.

Mr. Sasaki, as his name turned out to be, was not from here but had come all the way from Nagasaki Prefecture. "I've been on plenty of trail runs, but I have to say that this is my favorite." He explained that his greatest impression of Yamanashi Prefecture is its spirit of *omotenashi*, a Japanese concept of the grace and hospitality that is offered towards guests. "The organizers of this run, the volunteers, the participants, everyone is so kind and warmhearted. Their *omotenashi* drives me to keep going, to finish the race. And, of course, Yamanashi also has great hot springs and craft beer to enjoy after the run, too!" We laughed, and I felt my eyes begin to open to the smiling

faces of the people around me.

The rest of the run was still difficult, but no longer impossible. I paid more attention to the scenery passing by, the beauty of the rolling green slopes and surrounding mountains. I also began to notice the way in which participants would kindly voice "nice run!" and "keep going!" whenever passing or being passed by one another. Volunteers stationed in small groups throughout the course let out encouraging cheers and sported colorful posters displaying the number of kilometers left to run. I thought about what Mr. Sasaki had told me. We were all doing our best, not just in solitude nor against one another, but alongside and in support of one another.

Although trail running is not a team sport, trail running in Yamanashi Prefecture is about more than just the ultimate winner. It is about the whole of the event. The spirit of *omotenashi*. The actions of a collective. In a similar way, each and every mountain in this prefecture contributes something unique. One in particular happens to shine as the biggest and brightest symbol of Japan. Yet, it is this entire whole, the ring of mountains bordering the prefecture that make it truly special. After three hours and forty-three minutes, I crossed the finish line. Many had finished earlier, and many would not finish until later. But it was as one that we raised our glasses, shouted, and praised each other's efforts. To Yamanashi!

