

Landscape of Winter Wonders: Mt. Hakusan

Global region

East Asia

Domestic region

Ishikawa and Gifu Prefectures, Japan.

Internationally Designated Areas

Hakusan UNESCO Biosphere Reserve

1980

The Historic Villages of Shirakawago and Gokayama World Cultural Heritage Site

1995

Hakusan-Tedorigawa UNESCO Global Geopark

2023

Mount Hakusan, an active volcano rising 2,702 m, dominates the western edge of Japan's central mountains. Its dramatic geology, alpine habitats, and breathtaking winter snows earned the area designation as the Mount Hakusan Biosphere Reserve in 1980.

Expanded in 2019, the reserve's core centers on the volcano itself, with alpine and subalpine zones, while vast beech forests cloak the buffer zone and scattered mountain villages nestle in the transition areas. Revered as one of Japan's sacred mountains, Hakusan and the Shirayama Hime Jinja Shrine draw pilgrims seeking spiritual connection amid snow-clad peaks.

Cultural heritage as deep as the snow

In winter, north-westerly winds from Siberia sweep across the mountains, transforming the landscape into a shimmering wonderland. The diverse alpine forests within Hakusan National Park harbour more than twenty plant species carrying "Haksan" in their scientific names. The area also shelters the Japanese serow, an endemic mountain goat, and the Japanese black bear, both thriving on the forest's rich beech nut supply.

Hidden among rugged mountains are the Historic Villages of Shirakawago and Gokayama, a World Cultural Heritage Site since 1995, now integrated into the reserve's expanded transition zone. Their iconic gassho-zukuri houses, with steep thatched roofs, tell a story of centuries-old traditions of mulberry cultivation and silkworm rearing. The villages remain alive with cultural practices that connect residents to both their ancestors and the surrounding alpine environment.

Landscapes of memory and tradition

The Hakusan-Tedorigawa UNESCO Global Geopark, established in 2023 within the transition area, adds another layer to this living landscape. Its exposed sedimentary strata, sculpted by water erosion, reveal some 300 million years of Earth history, with fossils preserving snapshots of ancient life. The geopark also engages the local community, offering monthly activities with schools and colleges to deepen understanding of the land's ecological and geological heritage.

Community-led initiatives ensure the region's heritage endures while supporting sustainable development. In Shirakawago and Gokayama, local residents maintain the gassho-zukuri houses through

roof-thatching, or “yui,” and preserve traditional arts such as washi paper-making and dances celebrated in the Kokiriko and Mugiya Festivals. Every October, the dobuoku sake festival brings villagers and visitors together, reinforcing the connection between cultural heritage, winter landscapes, and the Biosphere Reserve’s model of living in harmony with nature.

Mount Hakusan is more than a mountain. It is snow-draped wilderness, a sanctuary for unique alpine species, and a cradle of Japanese cultural heritage. Its peaks, villages, and festivals offer a rare glimpse of traditions thriving in tandem with nature, a testament to sustainable stewardship in a timeless landscape.