

Walking the straight and narrow

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It starts with a small, burning ember and eventually grows into an enormous flame. Scorching heat and black smoke rises up in the air, sending gray, flaky ash to settle upon the tops of onlookers' heads. The chanting begins, followed by a ceremonial dance. Eventually, the flames are quenched, leaving burning coals on the ground.

The annual Fire-Walking Festival draws more than three thousand visitors each year, held at Mt. Takao in Hachioji City, less than 40 minutes from Camp Zama by train or car.

During the ceremony, a procession of priests dressed in brilliantly-colored brocade robes walk barefoot across the burning, hot coals, which are left after a great pile of cedar boughs are set on fire.

Fire-walking is a common practice among Japanese mountain cults, such as the *Yamabushi*, which came to be renowned for their magical abilities and sought out as healers or mediums, known as *miko*. Most of these ascetics studied the teachings of the *Tendai* sect of Buddhism, or the *Shingon* sect, established in the 8th century by Kobo Daishi, who first introduced Buddhism to Japan.

Haguro is a sacred mountain in northern Japan, which is the *Yamabushi* birthplace, where they gather at the summit each year in August to conduct their ritual fall training, lasting eight days.

The trainees, who come from all walks of life, be it journeyman or salaryman, are not permitted to bathe, practice oral hygiene, or change clothes throughout the duration of the training. Some are retired, but many are just tired of the rat race of train commutes and the lifestyle of 16-hour work days. It's sort of a soul-searching journey.

As for the actual ceremony, the purpose is to pray for world peace, health and safety. After the priests walk across the hot coals, visitors young and old are also welcome to brave the heat and soot with their bare feet. Don't worry about getting scorched - you're basically

walking on a straight and narrow dirt path amidst the cooled-down coals.

However, Mt. Takao is known for much more than the great Fire-Walking Festival.

Tourists and hikers alike will find the sacred Mt. Takao to be a pedestrian's paradise. It's home to many temples, shrines, restaurants, street shops, hiking trails, waterfalls, a zoo and even the famous Trick Art Museum, which has an Egyptian theme. Also located here is an observation deck which boasts a great view of Tokyo and Hachioji City on a clear, sunny day.

There's more than one way to reach the top of Mt. Takao: cable car, chair lift or by foot. If you catch the cable car or chair lift, you still need to walk for at least another 20 minutes before reaching the top of the mountain. However, it's a pleasant walk with a fairly well-paved path. Just be sure to wear comfortable shoes and travel light.

The most favorable route to the mountain top is the chair lift, which carries you and a travel partner up to an elevation of 600 meters at the speed of nearly 10 miles an hour. Just like a ski lift, you hop on and hop off.

The view from the top is excellent and the ride back down is quite surreal, with a fear factor of about a six out of ten, if you're afraid of heights. But not to worry. A safety net is situated four feet from the lift throughout the entire ride. You even have the option of purchasing a photo to prove you were actually on the lift.

Other attractions at Mt. Takao include the incredible Biwadaki and Hebi-daki Falls, the Takao-san Natural Zoo and Botanical Garden, where free-running monkeys might greet you.

To get to Mt. Takao by train, take the Odakyu Line to Machida Station and transfer to the Yokohama Line. From there, exit at the Hachioji Station and catch the JR Chuo Line to Takao Station, then jump on the Keio Line and exit at the Takaosanguchi Station.

The Mt. Takao businesses are in operation daily from 8 a.m. - 5 p.m.. The next Mt. Takao Fire-Walking Festival is scheduled for March 11. For more information, visit www.jref.com/practical/takaosan.shtml.

