
RUPERT HOARE

The Japanese Alps

(Plate 41)

The idea of climbing in Japan came from my friend Mark Lowe who lives in Hong Kong. I was also based in the Far East and we arranged a week's visit in July 1991. Apart from the volcanic cone of Mt Fuji (3776m), the highest peaks in Japan lie in the centre of Honshu province, only about 200km NW of Tokyo, where the most northerly of three mountain ranges, has been designated the Chubu-Sangaku (Japan Alps) National Park. The city of Matsumoto acts as a gateway to the Park, and we arrived there at about midnight having taken an express train from Tokyo's Shinjuku station.

After some difficulty we found a Japanese-style room in a nearby hotel. The door was about 5ft 7in high, a sensible height for me but not for Mark who is nearly six foot! The interior was small with the bedding lying directly on the tatami matted floor and with beautiful, wafer-thin papering on the cupboard doors. Rucksacks and climbing boots do not mix well with Japanese rooms!

Matsumoto is famous for its castle which has a five-tiered donjon built in the 16th century. From the castle there is a fine view of the distant mountains. The rest of the city, like most Japanese towns, is clean and modern but lacking in beauty or historical interest. Above all the streets there are forests of electric wires and advertising signs. Having inspected the castle and town, we took a private railway to Shimashima and then a crowded bus, which climbed steeply up deep valleys through wooded hills and passed through several tunnels to reach the roadhead at Kamicochi at 1500m. This is a popular local destination lying in the Azusa river valley, with mountains all around, and there are hotels, gift shops and a campsite. The 'Kappa Bridge' – a suspension bridge over the crystal-clear waters of the Azusa river – is always thronged with tourists. About 20 minutes' walk downstream there is a memorial to the Rev Walter Weston, an Alpine Club member, who climbed Yari Ga-Dake and other peaks in the Hotaka mountains between 1888 and 1894. The term 'Japanese Alps' was popularised by his celebrated book *Mountaineering and Exploration in the Japanese Alps*.

The following morning we awoke to the sound of steady rain on the tent. After a long and tiring journey, I was quite relieved to have an excuse for a lie-in. Unfortunately, at about 9am, Mark happened to look out and we saw at once that the water level was rising steadily around the tent. We fled to a café! It took most of the rest of the week to dry out the soggy pages of my passport and airline tickets. Even in the rain, the valley around Kamicochi, with its mossy pine, larch and silver birch woods, marshy areas and clear streams, had an exquisite beauty. It was easy to recognise the inspiration for much of Japanese art.



40. *Above Pumori, 7161m: the route climbed the spur (R) and the right-hand skyline. (Mal Duff) (p160)*

41. *Below The Japanese Alps: a view along the main ridge. (Mark Lowe) (p173)*



The next day dawned sunny with steam rising from the cold water of the river. We soon dried out the worst of our wet clothes and set off with sleeping-bags, bivvy-bags, stove, and food for four days to make a traverse of the main ridge of the Japanese Alps from Yari Ga-Dake (3180m) to Maehotaka-Dake (3090m). This route is one of the most popular mountain trips in Japan and is equipped with several huts. But as the huts can be crowded and are invariably expensive we chose to be independent. We followed the wide valley bottom with its stony riverbed for several hours and then climbed steeply through the forest beside an attractive torrent. Above, there were lovely grassy slopes with a mass of wildflowers. The mountains and valleys reminded me strongly of the Pyrenees.

After about eight hours of walking we reached a splendid bivouac spot with shelter, water and a fine view over the ridges to the distant cone of Mt Fuji. I was all for stopping, but Mark persuaded me to continue, since the shapely rock peak of Yari Ga-Dake was only about another hour away. It was lucky that he did, for the peak was lost in mist all the next day. We climbed on over scree for about half-an-hour to reach the ridge where we left our packs at a large hut. A further half-hour of scrambling took us to the summit. It was a beautiful viewpoint with lovely mist effects, including a Brocken spectre, in the evening light. We were forced to bivouac near the hut, in order to buy water. Unfortunately our bivvy site on a ridge at over 3000m was quite exposed, and the wind increased steadily until the violent flapping of the bivvy-bags forced us to seek more shelter in the middle of the night.

For the next three days we traversed along the ridge over several 3000m summits. Some of the time we were in thick mist and could easily have been on a ridge in Scotland, but at other times the cloud would suddenly blow away to reveal the deep wooded valleys below. Parts of the ridge had enjoyable scrambling but the more technical sections were all equipped with chains or ladders. We both felt slightly irritated by the abundance of paint marks and ladders, but on the last day, in wild wind and driving rain, we could understand their necessity on such a popular route.

The huts were not unlike Swiss huts, except for the dining-room. Here, one evening, we sat cross-legged on a matted floor eating with chopsticks from a table only a few inches high. The bulk of the meal consisted of sticky white rice and seaweed. The cost of a night, plus evening meal and breakfast, was 7000 yen (about £35!).

The traverse of the main ridge completed our primary objective. Now our plan was to do some rock climbing, but next day we again had heavy rain. Camping below the dripping trees brought back indelible memories of my first alpine season when we camped in the woods at Argentière. Apparently June and July are the rainy season in the Japanese Alps and prospective visitors would do better to choose August or September. Although there is some rock climbing on high crags near the ridge, the best climbing is at Byobu Rock, a large granite crag about 15km up the valley from Kamicochi. Mark had obtained some photocopied topo route descriptions by writing to a local climber he had met on a previous visit to Japan.

Next morning we set out in cloudy weather. The approach to Byobu Rock took $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours and included a knee-deep wade across an icy river. (Prospective climbers would do better to camp nearer the crag.) We scrambled up a long boulder gully leading to a large snow patch; three pitches of V Diff climbing and some scrambling led to a terrace where the routes start. All the climbs on Byobu Rock are artificial, mostly graded IV (A1) or V (A2). Pegs and bolts litter the rock, even where natural protection is available. The crag is several hundred feet high and looked black, wet and daunting, with the mist drifting in and out. Lacking *étriers* and any experience of artificial climbing (apart from a single pitch on a route called *Benny* at Swanage), I was far from keen to continue.

Mark looked disappointed, but it made no difference since, ten minutes later, the heavens opened and there was torrential rain for the next three hours. We abseiled down with water pouring through our sleeves and made our sodden way back to the campsite at Kamicochi. Next morning we had to leave for Tokyo. It was brilliantly sunny at last, with the valley at its most beautiful. I would like to return.