

# MOUNTAIN EXCURSIONS

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Coming in from Tokyo on the local train, Uenohara is the first stop once you cross the Yamanashi border. Being denizens of the Prefectural capital, the GV staff took the opposite route, jumping on an early morning train which would take us from the Yamanashi basin towards the mountain outskirts. Rainy season had just started, but the weather forecast predicted fair skies for the better part of the day.

The train rambled along from Kofu, filled with the usual morning traffic of uniformed students and businessmen. By the time we reached Uenohara Station, the train had emptied out and the scenery had changed drastically. The rolling expanse of the basin, quilted with grape trellises and peach orchards, was a world that existed on the other side of the Sasago Tunnel. But we were now in

steep, mountainous terrain thick with green foliage, rocky crags, and clouds clinging to the treetops.

Uenohara was a quiet town built against the mountainside. We strolled along the Katsura River before hiking up to the Uenohara Shopping Street for a taste of the local specialty, *saka-manjū*. A simple but filling snack, *saka-manjū* is a steamed bun made of sweet rice wine and flour, offered with a selection of fillings such as sweet red bean paste and miso.

The next stop after Uenohara was Shiotsu and its eye-catching, glass-encased escalator stretching along the length of a mountain. This was more of an Alice-in-Wonderland-whim for us, but instead of going down the rabbit hole we were transported up the

mountain in a diagonal elevator since alas – the escalator had been shut down. What we discovered was the Commore Shiotsu Tricoparc, a subdivision developed in 1991 as a testament to eco-friendly, sustainable housing and its increasing importance in the modern world. The landscape architecture was designed to subtly incorporate the natural environment of the local area, in addition to displaying foreign cultural artifacts (please note the totem poles), labyrinthine garden pathways, and spacious parks.

After a bento lunch with a side of fresh peaches in Clock Park, we descended the mountain and jumped on the next train to Saruhashi. By this point, a light rain had started to fall. Using a pair of cheap umbrellas we bought at a convenience store, we trekked along the road towards

Saruhashi (literally translated as “Monkey Bridge”). We then walked a little past the bridge and found ourselves in a riverside park awash with flowers, their colors muted by the rain. This was the site of the Saruhashi Ajisai Festival which, similar to the cherry blossom viewing festivals of early spring, celebrates the spectacular blooming of the hydrangeas and the arrival of a new and warmer season.

The last stop on this trip was Otsuki, where we looked over the day’s notes in a small café near the station. Our umbrellas and shoes wet with rain, we munched on blueberry cream pie, drank coffee, and listened to the low tones of a Showa-era ballad playing over the stereo.