

Aokigahara - The Sea of Trees

At the base of Mount Fuji and covering an area of around 35km², there lies a forest with an almost mythical association with death and human torment. Hardly surprising then, that this place is considered the most haunted location in Japan. This place is Aokigahara.



Mount Fuji

Source: <http://wikitravel.org/upload/en/d/d5/FujiSunriseKawaguchiko2025WP.jpg>

Aokigahara is a dense, ancient and foreboding forest with an unwanted reputation of, and association with, death and misery. It is believed to be the second most used suicide location in the world, sandwiched between the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco and Beachy Head, England. As with all dark and ancient woods or forests wherever they are, there is an historical and cultural belief that ghosts, demons, spirits and witches inhabit the woods. It is also suggested that Aokigahara was a location of the 19th Century practice of *ubasute*. Ubasute was the reported 19th Century Japanese practice of taking the elderly or infirm to a remote or desolate location and leaving them to perish by exposure or starvation, especially in times of famine or drought. It would appear then, the reputation of the forest is not unfounded.

The reported numbers of deaths in the forest are unnerving. Since the 1950's, in excess of 500 deaths have been reported, averaging 30 per year. Most of this number are suicides. The numbers have increased in recent times. In 1998, 73 bodies were recovered, in 2002 78 bodies, and in 2003 100 bodies. Of course these are the bodies that have been discovered. It is thought many may have lain unfound, possibly for decades.

The floor of the forest is volcanic rock. It reportedly plays havoc with normal magnetic compasses. Consequently, there is a suggestion that lost hikers, campers or backpackers may contribute to the number of bodies found. However, whatever the possible other causes of deaths in the forest, suicide accounts for the highest percentage by far. Indeed, authorities were so concerned by the numbers; signs were erected throughout the forest urging those contemplating taking their own life to think of their loved ones and seek help. Since the 1970's, volunteers have also conducted annual body hunts. Bodies are returned from the forest in the hope of being given a proper burial. Bodies are usually found hanging from the trees far from the tourist trails and many personal belongings are found.

The collection, storage and disposal of the bodies places a considerable burden on the local villages that border the forest. They are financially responsible for burial and storage. There are many unclaimed bodies in these villages. In Kamikuishiki, Ashiwada and Narusawa there are thought to be 119, 52 and 60 unclaimed bodies respectively. Indeed, local authorities have allegedly stopped publishing the number of bodies found recently in an attempt to distance the area from any publicity associated with the suicides and also to discourage future suicides.

While there is a long history associating the forest with deaths, it is thought a number of books published in the latter half of the 20th Century contributed to the increase in suicides in the forest. *Kuroi Jakai* and *The Padoga of Waves* both featured characters taking their own life in the forest, and *The Complete Manual of Suicide* described the forest as "the perfect place to die". It is suggested this cultural influence went some way to romanticize the forest as a location for suicide. This coupled with greater economic stresses in recent times is seen by some authorities as contributing to the increased number of people taking their own life in the forest



One of the signs imploring the desperate to seek help rather than take their own life.

Source: http://articles.cnn.com/2009-03-19/world/suicide.forrest.japan_1_suicide-taro-aokigahara-forest?s=PM:WORLD

Aokigahara Jukai or *Sea of Green Foliage* (roughly translated into English as Sea of Trees) would appear to have some foundation as the most haunted location in Japan. As both an ancient, dense and foreboding forest and the location of decades of human torment and suicide, tales of ghosts and spirits would naturally arise there. The reported absence of wind

and wildlife, making the forest eerily quiet only adds to the mystique of the area. Whether the forest's *yurei* (Japanese for ghosts) are real or imagined is an age old question, but the reputation of the forest's association with death seems to be merited.

Sources;

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