

Day 5: Morning walk: Akakura Onsen → Obanazawa (2.9km via Natagiri Pass)

Afternoon walk: Hijiori Onsen (3.5km Jizogura loop)

Total walking distance approximately 6.5km/4 miles

"Ohayo Gozaimasu!" Good Morning!

Course walking options

RECOMMENDED COURSE:

A morning soak in the bath (particularly for those keen to contemplate a river ala Basho's haiku: "swiftly flowing with early summer rain") and another filling and varied breakfast, complete with the Nara Chazen "side"-meal that Basho likely ate in this area. Leave your luggage at the inn on checking out. Your innkeepers will then drive you to the start of the trailhead at 8:30am for your morning walk up and over the Natagiri Pass. Basho reflects on this being a particularly difficult and unkempt route, and in some respects, it may be viewed as the climax of his Narrow Road to the North. Today, though with a steep start, it is a very pleasant and well-cared for path through beautiful beech forest.

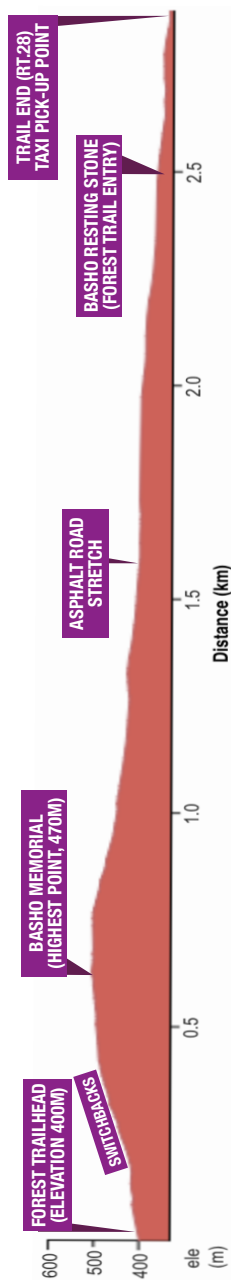
Reach the top of the pass and then a slightly longer down to the end of the trail at Highway Rt.28. A reserved taxi, that has first gone to pick up your luggage at the inn, will be waiting here at 10:30am to take you on your way. Head down to nearby Obanazawa town for an optional visit to the Basho & Seifu Historical Document Museum, then continue by taxi to accommodation at Hijiori Onsen, roughly one hour away along a scenic mountain route.

Arriving in Hijiori Onsen, drop off your bags and head to lunch in town. You may then choose to do another scenic walk up to the Jizo-gura temple-shrine. This ancient *shugenja* mountain ascetic path affords stupendous views of the surrounding landscape. Follow a trail loop back to the edge of town and return to your inn to relax in the healing onsen waters, before yet another delicious meal.

RAIN FORECAST/ NEED A BREAK:

If weather is not cooperating or you are not feeling up to the walk this morning, you may decide to wait at the inn for the reserved taxi to pick you up, with your luggage, at approximately 10:00am. In this case, you may opt to spend some more time in the Basho & Seifu Historical Document Museum before travelling on to accommodation in Hijiori Onsen. As check-in at the inn is not officially until 2:30pm, if not feeling well, please call our offices so that we may negotiate your early arrival.

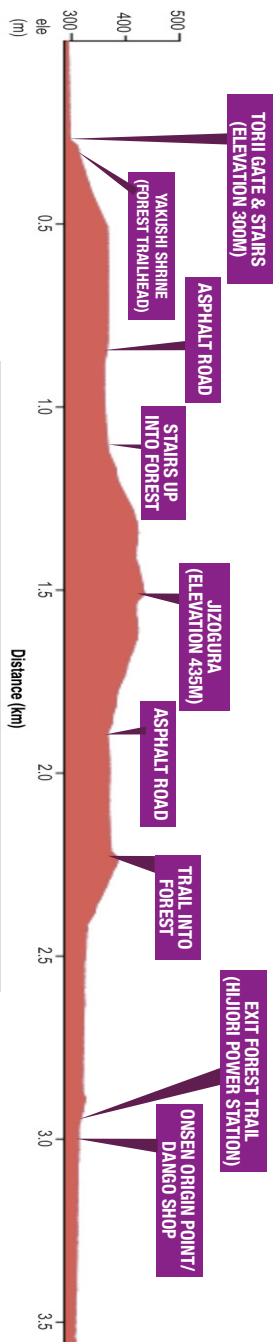
Day 5: Morning walk Distance and elevation: Akakura Onsen → Obanazawa (via Natagiri Pass)



TODAY'S MORNING WALK: The Natagiri Pass

Trail distance: 2.9km / 1.8 miles, Elevation: +105 / -160m
Max Grade: 24.7%, Avg. Grade: -0.6%

Day 5: Afternoon walk Distance and elevation: Hijiori Onsen (Jizogura loop)



TODAY'S AFTERNOON WALK: Jizogura loop

Trail distance: 3.6km / 2.2 miles, Elevation: +132 / -120m
Max Grade: 21.9%, Avg. Grade: -0.5%

Day 5 Recommended Course Schedule Itinerary Summary

BEFORE LEAVING YUNOHARA INN, PLEASE BE SURE TO LEAVE YOUR LUGGAGE AT THE FRONT DESK, PAY FOR ANY DRINKS, AND RETURN YOUR ROOM KEY!

7:30am Breakfast

8:30 Check-out / Depart ***Innkeepers will give you a ride to the trailhead.**

8:45 Arrive at the **Natagiri Pass trailhead** 山刀伐峠登山口

8:50 Start your morning walk up forest trail

9:25 Reach parking lot/toilets before the top of the pass (break if needed)

9:35 Reach the top of the Natagiri Pass (Jizo shrine and Basho memorial stone)

9:40 Head down on forest trail

10:00 Reach a longer stretch (800m) of asphalt road

10:10 Reach the Basho resting stone

10:20 Reach the end of the trail

10:30 *Reserved taxi pick-up

★YOUR RESERVED TAXI WILL PASS THROUGH NEARBY OBANAZAWA TOWN BEFORE HEADING TO HIJIORI ONSEN AND HAS BEEN DIRECTED TO STOP AT THE SMALL BASHO & SEIFU HISTORICAL DOCUMENT MUSEUM EN ROUTE. WE RECOMMEND SPENDING 20-30 MINUTES TO VISIT HERE (ENTRY IS JPY200 FOR ADULTS, CLOSED WEDNESDAYS). ALTERNATIVELY, YOU MAY DIRECT THE DRIVER TO SKIP THE MUSEUM AND HEAD DIRECTLY TO HIJIORI ONSEN , WHICH IS 50KM AND APPROXIMATELY 1HR AND 15 MINUTES FROM THE TRAIL-END PICK UP POINT. TO DO SO, YOU MAY POINT OR ATTEMPT TO COMMUNICATE THE BELOW IN JAPANESE:

尾花沢の芭蕉・清風歴史資料館に行かず、直接肘折温泉までお願いします。

OBANAZAWA NO BASHO-SEIFU REKISHI SHIRYOKAN NI IKAZU, CHOKUSETSU HIJIORI ONSEN MADE ONEGAISHIMASU (“PLEASE SKIP THE BASHO & SEIFU HISTORICAL DOCUMENT MUSEUM IN OBANAZAWA AND HEAD DIRECTLY TO HIJIORI ONSEN”)

12:00-12:30 Arrive Hijiori Onsen *Leave luggage at your inn and head out to lunch.

12:30-13:30 LUNCH in town (see options in notes)

13:30-15:00 AFTERNOON WALK (optional): 3.5km (2.1 mile) scenic forest trail loop from Hijiori Onsen town center to **Jizogura** shrine/lookout + down to the onsen origin point.

15:00 Arrival back at the inn for check-in, bath and dinner at a time of your choosing.



The Natagiri Pass 山刀伐峠 (Basho)

According to our host, there is a large mountain between here and Dewa County, and as the roads are not clearly marked, it would be best if we retained the services of a guide for the journey. If you say so, we agreed, and hired a young man who was exceedingly strong, and strode out ahead with a short sword in his belt and an oak walking stick. We timidly followed convinced that today was the day we would surely meet with peril.

Just as our host had said, the mountains were high, the woods dense, not a single bird could be heard, and foliage and branches grew so densely that it was as if we were travelling at night. With Dufu's [712- 770] poem "When having entered a Futo (a wind-related place), dust falls from the edges of clouds" in mind, we struggled along with uneasy hearts as if a huge wind was blowing dirt and sand up into the sky and hurling it down upon us from the clouds. We pushed through bamboo grass, crossed streams, stumbled over rocks, and drenched in cold sweat, finally arrived at the manor house of Mogami. Our guide happily told us as we parted company, "Something bad always happens on this road. He was lucky today getting us here safely". Even though we heard these words after the fact, they still made our hearts pound.



Basho's words in context:



This is, effectively, the climax of Basho's journey on the narrow road to the Northern territories. Though he does encounter other travel-related issues (including a persistent stomach bug, which may forecast the same illness that will eventually lead to his death in 1694) and visits many more spectacular sites along the way, this final, unkempt pass (which translates to "hatchet-cut" due to its steep incline) is the epitome of the wild frontier that Basho hoped to encounter and persevere through in the *Oku* territories. This is not to say he eagerly anticipated danger, but he was ready as a traveller for the consequences of travel and, in fact, fully

anticipated not making it through the extent of his journey to such far-flung places. This would be in line with themes of travel and ephemeral existence so persistent in his poetry. That being said, Basho may have also exaggerated the threatening atmosphere of these woods for literary effect, as you will see, it is now quite a beautiful forest. Sora's journal mentions none of the forest dangers, stating only "We give our luggage to a guide who shows us over the mountain pass."

RECOMMENDED COURSE WALKING DIRECTIONS:

The Natagiri Pass · After checking out and being dropped off by your innkeepers at the trailhead, take a few minutes to ready yourself for the initial up through beech tree-lined forest. It is short, but steep.

· From the parking lot/drop-off point, take the FOREST TRAIL PATH entrance to the right of the Natagiri Pass signs. (*DO NOT take the longer asphalt road to the left of the signs, unless there is significant damage to the trail or sudden bad weather.)

· Initially straight on narrow forest trail, the path will soon turn up trail steps. Take these up to meet the asphalt road above.



140m

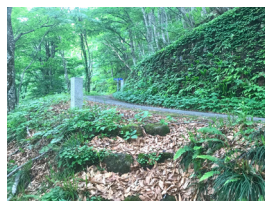
★ IF STEEP, DO TAKE A BREATHER OCCASIONALLY TO ADMIRE THE SURROUNDING BEECH TREE FOREST. THE BLUE SIGN IN JAPANESE ABOVE 大曲がり登り MEANS “THE GREAT TURNING ASCENT”. THESE LATER CHANGE SLIGHTLY TO 十二曲がりの登り OR “THE TWELVE TURN ASCENT”.



· Follow the arrow of the blue sign right, briefly, along asphalt road to the next STONE MARKER 山刀伐峠.

30m

· At the marker, follow the forest trail **UP LEFT** here. (★ Sometimes easy to miss if the trail has not been well-manicured!).



Follow trail switchbacks and reach the asphalt road again.

· Going left (/straight) on the asphalt, signs ahead point **UP RIGHT** to continue on the trail.



150m



· Continue up to meet the the road for a third time. There is a parking lot and public toilets available to your right, **but your trail continues LEFT** on the asphalt (★ somewhat counter-intuitive as the road descends here briefly).

120m

· Familiar blue signs will soon appear pointing **UP** the forest trail **RIGHT**.



60m



HAVE A TOILET BREAK, IF NEEDED, AT THE HUT IN THE PARKING LOT (BEFORE THE FINAL UP TO THE TOP OF THE PASS). THIS IS THE LAST TOILET AVAILABLE UNTIL THE BASHO & SEIFU HISTORICAL DOCUMENT MUSEUM. AFTER USING THE FACILITIES, HEAD BACK ON THE ASPHALT TO THE TRAIL ENTRY.



·Remaining straight on this final stretch of forest trail, soon reach the top of the pass.
 ★A shelter and large tree with a Jizo shrine next to it will be directly in front of you. The trail continues straight down between the two, but do not miss the short detour left up to a large Basho memorial stone.



250m



Top of the Natagiri Pass 山刀伐峠の頂上 (elev. 470m)

The large tree here is a natural *sugi* cryptomeria “cedar” and it likely predates the Jizo shrine here. It is locally known as the *ko-mochi* 子持ち “child-carrying” cedar, because of the way the boughs stretch up to supposedly cradle the spirits of lost children. Jizo, again, is a protective Buddhist bodhisattva for lost children (specifically those who have passed away before their time), as well as for travellers. This shrine is specific to children and, if open, you may see the bibs, small toys and other bits of remembrance laid inside, asking for his continued protective influence. Jizo are often found closer to the village at a more central point

for easier worship/prayer access. The location of this shrine at the top of a difficult pass lends itself to a more taboo subject: feudal era population control. In centuries past, especially during times of famine, remote mountain villages were keenly aware of how many mouths could be fed and how resources must be distributed to pay the Shogunate’s rice/timber tax. Though farmers’ riots were also prevalent in the Tohoku area to retaliate against the draconian measures of the feudal government, tales of *ubasute-yama* (literally “throw-away-grandma mountain”...the enforced leaving of the older, non-working generation to fend for themselves in the woods) are prevalent in folk tales. Often these tales end on a happier note (with grandma having been hidden in the attic, and aiding the village in overcoming some obstacle that only aged wisdom can solve...), but the reality of the times is likely less frivolous. And even less talked about is the prospect of infanticide/enforced population control, but records exist to show it was likely once the case in many rural areas of Japan. Though there is no direct evidence to say this shrine is such a monument, if it is, it no longer holds such context for locals. Rather, the opposite: praying here is said to provide easy conception and safe births.



Just up to the left of the tree (detouring briefly from the trail) is a **Basho memorial stone**. This is etched with the famous words he wrote about the pass (see previous pages).



·If checking the Basho memorial stone more closely, return to the trail and continue STRAIGHT DOWN on the path between the shelter and Jizo shrine.





THIS AREA IS ALSO KNOWN FOR POTENTIAL BEAR SIGHTINGS, PLEASE MAKE SOME NOISE (CLAPPING, SINGING, ETC.) AS YOU WALK.



•Head down the trail and reach a stone marker at the asphalt road.

Following the road briefly LEFT, another blue sign soon points DOWN the forest trail RIGHT.



100m

15m

•Reach the next stone marker and continue RIGHT down forest trail.



NOW IN MORE DENSELY-WOODED CEDAR FOREST, IF THE TRAIL IS OVERGROWN OR SNOW (SOMETIMES STILL PREVALENT IN MAY) OBSCURES THE PATH, YOU MAY CHOOSE TO RETURN TO THE ASPHALT ROAD AND TAKE THIS DOWN.



80m

130m

Cross a log bridge over the *Yamabushi-sawa* ("mountain ascetic stream").



The path opens up here briefly at the former site of the Yoichi Teahouse. Another open area ahead (just before the next stone marker) was the Miyoshi Teahouse and Nabe-wari ("Pot-breaking")



Pond. During feudal times when the path was more traversed, teahouses were convenient break points for travellers, often located just before or after a difficult mountain pass.

380m

•Reach another **stone marker and blue sign**.

TURN RIGHT and down the narrower forest path here. **★EASY-TO-MISS TURN** as the path is often overgrown and the trees become more dense, but you are going the right way!



260m

•Follow this narrower path through cedar forest until it opens up at the road above.

•Turn RIGHT (at the blue sign/stone marker) and follow the asphalt road down.



★ YOU WILL BE ON ASPHALT FOR THE NEXT 800M.

•Follow this asphalt road until you reach another marker and multiple signs.



800m

Turn LEFT off the road and onto the grassy path (past the stones) here.



Basho's resting stone 寝まる石

The signs here mark a spot that locals call the “Basho resting stone”, where he supposedly sat after finishing the Natagiri Pass. (You may choose which rock you think it is.) The word *nemaru* “sit/rest/nap” here is Yamagata dialect, and is a reference to the poem Basho writes (possibly composing here) on his entry to Obanazawa town, which you have just crossed into from Akakura Onsen. Basho presents it as a greeting haiku to his host and patron, the safflower merchant Suzuki Seifu:

涼しさを我宿にしてねまる也

Suzushisa wo

Waga yado ni shite

Nemaru nari

“The coolness treats one, as if arrived at lodging, sitting down to rest”

The white sign in Japanese here says “Natagiri Pass: Passing on the oral tradition of the historical path.” You may also take a rest, like Basho, before finishing the final 100m of forest trail ahead.

•Pass the Basho stones and enter the forest beyond, taking the path down. (*If tired of forest path, you may also just continue on the asphalt road down).



Exit the forest at the asphalt road a final time. This is the end of the trail. Turn left to follow the asphalt around, over a bridge and down to the parking area at the larger Rt. 28 road (The large wooden pillar here designates 尾花沢 Obanazawa town).

100m

★Your reserved taxi will be waiting here at 10:30am or before.



200m



★EASY-TO-MISS TURN DOWN INTO DENSER FOREST

LOG BRIDGE/
FORMER TEAHOUSE SITE



MEET THE ROAD



BASHO RESTING STONE(S)



Reserved taxi
Pick up point



Reserved taxi and onward travel options

You have finished the longer walk of the day and now have some down time. Your taxi will be waiting at the parking lot at the end of the trail at 10:30am (or before). The trip, depending on the below options, will likely take between 1.5-2hrs.

The taxi will pass through nearby Obanazawa city before heading to Hijiori Onsen and has been directed to stop at the Basho & Seifu History Museum en route. A small venue, it is nonetheless an interesting collection of mementos from Basho's visit to Obanazawa where he stayed for ten nights under the auspices of Suzuki Seifu, a wealthy safflower merchant. Entry to the museum is JPY200 (closed Wednesdays), and we recommend a 20-30 minute visit. There is also a toilet available here.

★SKIPPING THE MUSEUM: If you would rather skip the museum and head directly to Hijiori Onsen (which is 50km and approximately 1hr and 15 minutes away), you may direct the driver to do so. Point to or attempt to communicate the below in Japanese:

尾花沢の芭蕉・清風歴史資料館に行かず、直接肘折温泉までお願いします。
Obanazawa no Basho-Seifu Rekishi Shiryokan ni ikazu, chokusetu hijiori onsen made onegaishimasu

("Please skip the Basho & Seifu Historical Document Museum in Obanazawa and head directly to Hijiori Onsen")

★LUNCH option: We recommend lunch in Hijiori Onsen town and provide some restaurant details in your notes. However, you may also ask the taxi driver to stop at a local convenience store along the way (*conbini* コンビニ "cone-bee-knee" in Japanese). Communicate or point to the following:

途中でコンビニに寄っていただけますか？

Tochu de conbini ni yotte itadakemasu ka?

("Can you please stop at a convenience store along the way?")



PLEASE BE PROMPT IF MAKING ANY UNSCHEDULED STOPS. CONVENIENCE STORES ALSO USUALLY HAVE A PUBLIC TOILET (TOIRE トイレ "TOY-LAY") AVAILABLE.



Obanazawa & Basho 尾花沢と芭蕉

Passing through small hamlets along the way, the taxi will travel 16km (approximately 20 minutes) to reach the Basho & Seifu Historical Document Museum in central Obanazawa city. With a current population of roughly 16,000 people, Obanazawa would have been a much smaller rural town when Basho made his visit. In feudal times, it was renowned for safflower production (used for its oil, medicinal and dyeing properties), and while this is still produced on a smaller scale, Obanazawa watermelons are the mainstay brand of today's agriculture. You will likely see the prep or harvest of these in plastic domes lining fields along the way.

Basho's visit:

Basho stayed here for ten nights. This is his second longest stay after Kurobane. He stays for three nights with Suzuki Hachiemon (1651-1721), a large wholesaler of Benibana (safflower), who was known as the Safflower Baron (Daijin). His literary name was Zangetsuken Seifu. Seifu arranged for Basho and Sora to stay at Yosenji Temple for the next seven nights. Sora's diary notes they were able to have a bath at the temple. The temple was built in 1688, just one year before Basho's visit, so the rich smell of freshly hewn cedar in the timbers of the building must have been enticing. It was here that Basho met with the literary minds of the town, while looking out across the fields towards the rugged, still snow-capped Mount Gassan (1984m), which he will climb in a week's time, and the beautiful symmetry of Mount Chokaisan (2230m), known as the small Mt Fuji of Dewa region.

In Basho words:

At Obanazawa, we called on a man called Seifu. He was a man of great wealth and yet he has no meanness of heart. [Basho is paraphrasing a passage in the Tsurezuregusa which states that "A virtuous man is seldom wealthy"]. As a frequent traveller to Edo City he understood the hardships faced on the road. He insisted we stay for a number of days to ease our weariness and showered us with all kinds of hospitality.

涼しさを我宿にしてねまる成

Suzushisa wo / waga yado ni shite / nemaru nari

"The coolness treats one, as if arrived at lodging, sitting down to rest"

這出よかひやが下のひきの声

Hai-ideyo / kaiya ga shita no / hiki no koe

"Crawl out, from under the silkworm shed, hikigaeru [the Japanese toad (Bufo japonicus)]

まゆはきを俤にして紅粉のはな

Mayuhaki wo / omokage ni shite / beni no hana

"An eyebrow brush, comes to mind when I see blooming safflowers"



Bashi & Seifu Historical Document Museum

芭蕉・清風歴史資料館

Entry: Adults JPY200, Students JPY100 (elementary school age and below are free)

Hours: 9:00am~16:30pm *Closed Wednesdays

The museum is testament to the relationship between Basho and Seifu Suzuki, a wealthy and cultured safflower salesman who arranged for the poet to stay in Obanazawa for ten nights (three nights with Seifu and seven nights at nearby Yosenji Temple). Seifu had met Basho four years prior in Edo (current Tokyo), and travelled frequently between there and the Kyoto capital for business purposes. Impressed with the quality of Basho's poetic performances, Seifu also arranged a number of haiku gatherings in Obanazawa between July 3-13th, 1689.

Though not much is written in English in the museum, please ask for the English brochure and staff may be available to provide some guidance. The first floor features dioramas of the more famous scenes depicted in the Oku-no-Hosomichi (including the Shitomae-seki Barrier stop and Natagiri Pass...see if you can pick them out). Taking one's shoes off, you may peruse letters written in Basho's own hand to mourn the passing of Rogan, a disciple living on nearby Mt. Haguro. In the back of the museum (which is divided into two distinct architectural styles of the late-Edo and Meiji periods), enter the original *kura* rice storage, the equivalent of a family bank on the premises. Built with thick doors of earth and rice straw, the *kura* would be shut to protect rice and family heirlooms in the case of fire. Now, it houses a timeline of Seifu's life and achievements, as well as letters related to the safflower business and his enjoyment of cultural engagements, poetic gatherings in particular (Seifu also published three of his own books of poetry). The second floor of the *kura* houses Edo period tools and clothing particular to this area of Yamagata Prefecture that receives an average of 3-5 meters of snow per year. Skis, sleds, rice straw boots and winter jackets, as well as implements for agriculture and silk production, give us insight into the lifestyles of the common people in this more remote landscape.

Arrival at Hijiori Onsen

On arrival at Hijiori Onsen, please drop off your luggage at the inn. You may then go find lunch and peruse the town before setting off on your (optional) afternoon climb to the Jizogura temple-shrine.

*The optional walk is a circuitous loop, starting from the center of the hamlet and re-entering it from the *gensen* (thermal hot spring origin point). It is a short but steep ascent, primarily through beech and cedar forest, then along a narrow ridge (with a protective guardrail) to reach the temple-shrine. Enjoy some stupendous views of the surrounding mountain valley and pay respects at the Jizo-gura site before descending through forest to re-enter Hijiori Onsen from its outskirts.



Basho on the Mogami River

Though Basho did not stay in Hijiori Onsen, we think it is a fitting detour: a historically-rich onsen village with unique character, tucked away into the Yamagata mountains. The short Jizogura walk here is an added highlight, with just enough ascent to earn its place as one of the more exciting *shugenja* (mountain ascetic monk) homage points

in the area. A stay in Hijiori is in line with Walk Japan's goals of providing "hidden gem" experiences, while also trying to revitalize the Japanese countryside. That being said, you will pass a number of spots that Basho visited by vehicle. The most important, in terms of haiku popularity, is likely the river that runs along most of your trip to Hijiori: the *Mogami-gawa*. The Mogami River is 224 km long and is one of the "top three" most rapid rivers in Japan. It is also unique in that it the longest river to run exclusively in one prefecture (Yamagata). This is interesting to note, because the river was likely the geographical impetus for deciding the border of the feudal-era Mogami domain (and by extension the "sphere of influence" of the powerful Mogami clan). Usually, domain borders were defined by a more solid and defensible barrier, such as a mountain range, but the length, breadth and speed of the river must have made it imposing enough to gain the respect of opposing clans.

Basho and Sora make it as far as Shinjo (your train station tomorrow) and then, on July 19th, ride a boat from the nearby port of Motoaikai down the river. Without the current damming systems in place, it was then known as the "raging" Mogami and would have been an exciting ride for them, especially after the rains. Basho writes:

Mogami River 最上川

We hoped to sail down the Mogami River, and waited for the weather to clear at a place called Oishida. I was told that the seeds of the old haikai poetry had been scattered here, and that people still cherished the memory of those unforgotten flowers from the past. The rustic notes of simple reeds and horns could still bring music to their hearts. They had tried, they said, to grope their way towards the right path. But without a guide, they had found it difficult to choose between the old styles and the new. I could scarcely leave without composing with them a sequence of poems. The poetry-making of my journey had reached even here.

The Mogami River has its source deep in the northern mountains, and its upper reaches run through Yamagata. The Goten (Go-stones) and Hayabusa (Falcon) rapids are just two of the terrifying dangers on its course. It skirts Mount Itajiki on the north and finally enters the sea at Sakata. Our boat cascaded down through thick foliage, with mountains overhanging us on either side. It was probably the same kind of boat that the old poem described as "rice boats", though those were laden with grain. Through breaks in the green leaves, we could see the Shiraito (White Threads) Falls. The Sennindo (Mountain Wizard) Hall stands there too, right at the water's edge. The river was swollen, and our journey was dangerous:

Gathering the rains

Of summer, how swift it is –

Mogami River

SELF-GUIDED

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