

Mount Fuji is the tallest mountain in Japan, standing at 3,776 meters (12,380 feet). It is an active volcano, sitting on a "triple junction" of tectonic activity: the Amurian plate (associated with the Eurasian tectonic plate), the Okhotsk plate (associated with the North American plate) and the Filipino plate all converge in the region beneath Mount Fuji. It is only 100 kilometers (62 miles) from Tokyo, Japan's capital and largest city. In fact, the last time Mount Fuji erupted, in 1707, volcanic ash fell on Tokyo.

Mount Fuji is the single most popular tourist site in Japan, for both Japanese and foreign tourists. More than 200,000 people climb to the summit every year, mostly during the warmer summer months. "Huts" on the route up the mountain cater to climbers, providing refreshments, basic medical supplies, and room to rest. Many people start climbing Mount Fuji at night, as better to experience sunrise from the summit—Japan, after all, is nicknamed "the Land of the Rising Sun." The sunrise from Mount Fuji has a special name, Goraiko.



Approximately 300,000 people climbed Mount Fuji in 2009. The most-popular period for people to hike up Mount Fuji is from July to August, while huts and other facilities are operating. Buses to the fifth station start running on 1 July. Climbing from October to May is very strongly discouraged, after a number of high-profile deaths and severe cold weather. Most Japanese climb the mountain at night in order to be in a position at or near the summit when the sun rises. The morning light is called 御来光 goraikō, "arrival of light".

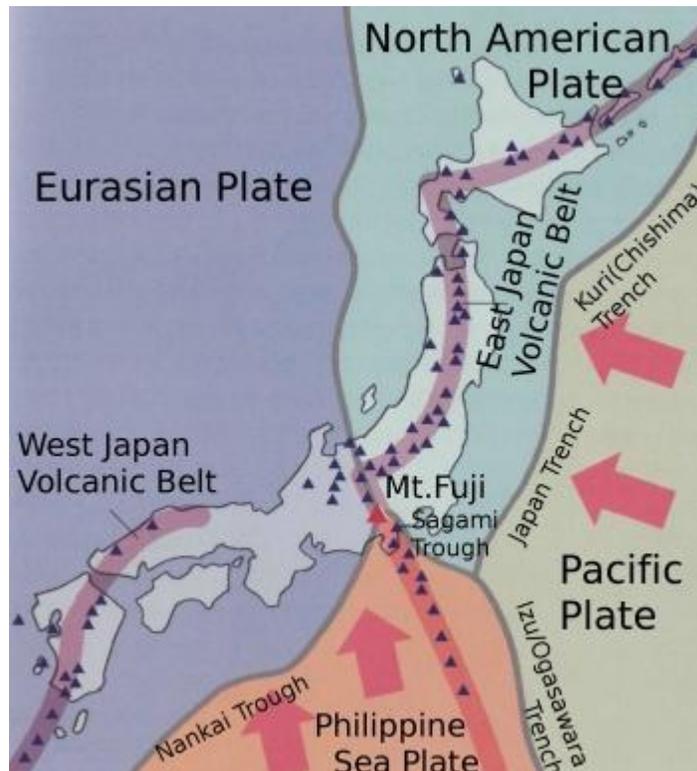
(CNN) -- The inclusion of Mount Fuji in the UNESCO World Heritage list recently has spurred a huge reaction among international travelers and agencies.

Climbers started to ascend the 3,776-meter peak as early as 3 a.m. to watch the sunrise from the summit. They lit torches and walked in long winding queues along the path that leads up the mountain. So numerous were the climbers in their colorful outfits it looked a little like a busy morning in a Tokyo subway station.

Risk of erosion: Environmentalists warn the extra tourists pose potential environmental problems, such as erosion or littering. Mt. Fuji attracts around 300,000 trekkers each year.

The ascent routes in places are heavily eroded and in other places have been protected by harsh, intrusive barriers," the ICOMOS report says. It also notes rubbish is a problem.

"During peak times for visitors in July and August, there is enormous pressure on the roads from private cars driving to the access routes. Fumes from cars and buses are a recognized concern."



For the past three decades, the permafrost on Mount Fuji has been thawing quicker than researchers' expectations, the Japanese daily Asahi Shimbun reported.

Permafrost is soil at or below the temperature of zero for two or more years. In 1976, permafrost layer existed from the 3,100-meter level up to the Mount Fuji summit, at 3,776 meters, which is the highest in Japan.

However, by 1998, the layer had receded to the 3,200-meter level and higher, and now the permafrost is in scattered patches only around the peak, according to a joint research by Shizuoka University and Japan's National Institute of Polar Research (NIPR).

"(The loss) is no doubt from the impact of global warming, but its pace is much faster than expected," NIPR Director-General Yoshiyuki Fujii said to the newspaper.

In 2007, researchers found the permafrost layer existing only sporadically from the 3,600-meter mark and above. More recently, permafrost was confirmed at six points before 2009. It's now reduced to three points, all on the northern side, the newspaper said.

According to the Japan Meteorological Agency, the average temperature at the summit in August rose from 4.2 degrees in 1976 to 6.6 degrees in 2009.