

# SPAS IN JAPAN

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In Japan, there are over 10,000 thermal mineral springs, more than in any other country in the world, and over 2,000 hot springs, or *onsen*, resorts. Some of these are located in isolated mountain villages. Others are large pleasure resorts served by Western-style or Japanese-style hotels, the traditional *ryokans* (inns).

*Ryokans* are uncluttered, spartan to western eyes. Your *tatami* (straw mat) room comes with low tables, translucent *shoji* screens, which usually slide open to an appealing vista, as airy an environment as a birdcage to some, and forlorn as a dungeon to others who prefer a canopied four-poster to a *futon* (cotton or down quilt) placed on the floor for sleeping. Luxury-level *ryokans* may feature lacquer furnishings inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a *kokatsu* (a table with a heat lamp and quilted padding like a tea cosy to keep the heat from escaping), heated toilet seats, and other niceties. In all, you are provided with a *yukata* (sleeping kimono) of cotton for summertime wear or lined with wood for winter use, slippers for walking inside, and *geta*, or rectangular, elevated wooden clogs 2 to 4 inches high, with a strap for your toes, for outdoor walking. (Editor's Note: However, none fit my large-size 12—western foot.)

At some spa locations, massage and acupuncture treatments are available. Relief from ailments is promised through soaking, warming, and relaxing in your own private high-sided, vat-like bathtub, or by taking *o-furo*, a steaming soak in a wooden or stone pool brimming with mineral water in a public bathhouse. One of Japan's deeply rooted traditions is mixed male and female nude bathing, in the steam bath, but many *ryokans* have separate facilities.

Beppu is a seaport on the southern main island of Kyushu, in the prefecture of Oita. (Editor's Note: It was one of the recent sites for the World Geothermal Congress 2000 held in May/June 2000. Also, see Vol. 17, No. 2 (1996) of the *Geo-Heat Center Quarterly Bulletin* for more on Beppu Hot Springs.) Its scenic valleys and hills proffer a variety of natural spring baths, from steaming hot mineral water spouting from more than 4,000 openings—some spurting up smack in the center of town—to the muddy, bubbling oozing of a fumarole's "hell pond," some vermilion, some deep blue, said to stimulate a clear complexion and to heal arthritis, bronchitis, and circulatory problems with a week's daily 30-minute treatments. This therapy is experienced outdoors, so that while you let the hot mud slurp around you—the less you move, the more heat you can stand, and the longer you can endure lolling about in it—your can look upward at lush and undulating green hills in the distance and admire the charm close up of a wooden bridge garlanded with seasonal flowers. The bridge leads to the bathhouse where you use buckets of water and soap to cleanse yourself of your mud coating before

you slide into the communal bath. (For all communal baths, you always soap yourself and rinse off several times before you are considered clean enough to get in.) (Editor's Note: Beppu is also the location of numerous "hells" or *jigokus* which are hot spring tourist parks.)(Figure 1)



Figure 1. *Jigoku in Beppu.*

Less messy, but just as therapeutic, said to promote active circulation and to help sufferers of gastrointestinal ailments, neuralgia, and rheumatism, are the natural hot sand baths at one of Beppu's oldest establishments, which first opened for serious sand bathers in 1879. The sand, rich in sulphur, is layered above a hot spring and heated to a temperature of 140°F, both by the hot water rising through the sand and by the steam the water releases to vaporize in the air. An attendant buries you up to your neck in heated sand for a short stint while your body is treated by the underground spring below as well as by a hot mineral spring after-bath.

The giant Suginoi Hotel has 508 Japanese-style rooms, 89 Western-style rooms, all with private baths. (Editor's Note: The Suginoi Hotel also has two large bathing areas available for guests—one for men and the other for women (Figure 2). So as to let the guest enjoy both facilities, the gender use is reversed on a daily basis. There is also an Aquabeat facility across from the hotel that includes water slides, jacuzzi, dream bath (*umeno onsen*), flower bath (*hana-no onsen*), outdoor hot spring baths, a wave pool, theater, bowling alley and restaurant. A 3,000-kW geothermal power plant, put into operation in 1980, supplies electricity to the hotel. The waste water from the plant is cooled by cascading down through a park behind the hotel.)(Figure 3)

Noboribetsu Onsen, on the island of Hokkaido, is a spa resort located in a narrow valley among wooded mountains. A sanctuary for brown bears on the top of nearby



**Figure 2.** *Hot spring bath in the Suginoi Hotel, Beppu.*



**Figure 3.** *3,000-kW geothermal plant at the Suginoi Hotel.*

Mt. Kuma and a close-by village of Ainu folk is of interest to most visitors. It is noted for its Valley of Hell, a huge indentation in the earth from which various types of sulphuric, salt, and mineral waters and muds spout, gurgle, and steam for the health and relaxation of its patrons.

Spa areas of particular appeal to Westerners include Nikko, in the Tochigi Prefecture northeast of Tokyo; Kusatsu, in the Gumma Prefecture northwest of Tokyo; Hakone, just to the south of Tokyo in the Kanagawa Prefecture; Katsuura and Shirahama in the Wakayama Prefecture convenient to Nara and Osaka; Arima in Hyogo Prefecture convenient to Kyoto; Dogo, in the Ehime Prefecture, convenient to Nara and Osaka; and Unzen in Nagasaki Prefecture on the tip of the island of Kyushu opposite to Oita. Nikko is located by Lake Yunoko in Nikko National Park. You get a great view of Mt. Fuji in the Hakone area. At Katsuura, the Nachi waterfall is a 25-minute bus ride away, and you can cruise around the Kino-Matsushima islets. Kusatsu is located near a notable ski resort on the flanks of Mt. Shirane. Zao Onsen in Yamagata Prefecture in the northern highlands is also located near a ski

resort, with choice deluxe accommodations as well as venerable *ryokans* comprising thatch-roofed buildings connected to each other, allowing them to share hot sulphur springs that pour out of the mountainside into steaming pools in each inn, often reachable from open verandas. In some, time-worn green and black stone baths for communal bathing are kept constantly brimming by cool, warm, and hot water spouts you can stand under like showers. A large room with an entry foyer--lanai set with a wicker table, chairs, and a toilet--the location of privies in country *ryokan* architecture may involve walks through labyrinthine corridors, so this placement is considered a luxury.

Your best bet for a first Japanese spa experience might be Atami, a scenic resort perched on the slopes of an extinct volcano overlooking Sagami bay, about 55 minutes south of Tokyo by Kodama Express to JR Atami Station. Popular since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Japan's shoguns made their ceremonial way down the Tokkaido Road to Atami's waters--rich in calcium, magnesium, and other minerals said to be good for relieving bronchitis, constipation, eczema, and indigestion, and aiding relaxation and relief of anxiety--Atami, often referred to as Japan's Rivera--minus beach--is a favorite spot for lovers, honeymooners, and company-sponsored parties and outings.

The amenities of a true *ryokan* do not include a restaurant or a dining room. If you are attuned to American spa resort hotels, with planned activities, playgrounds, gymnasiums, and tutors, you may be bewildered by the Japanese penchant for solitude and seclusion, but in Japan, solitude is considered to be a status symbol, and nowhere better to be enjoyed in Atami than at Horai. Trained in shiatsu and other forms of massage, licensed masseurs and masseuses are available by appointment to come to your room to relax and tone your body. Each of the 17 suites at the Horai is equipped with a square cypress-wood bathtub for you to steam in up to your chine, perhaps for half an hour before dinner. But to miss the communal co-ed bathhouse is to bypass the grand passion of the Japanese--immersion in water so hot as to be barely tolerable, keeping still so that the hot water does not hurt, a sacramental ritual of regeneration. You'll also miss the exercise of negotiating the steep covered walkway down to the ancient-style bathhouse, with slots and joints instead of nails and screws holding its cypress roof beams together above the granite tub brimming with water kept at a temperature of 108°F. Your wooden *geta* make the trek down and up the stone steps an excellent exercise for your leg and foot muscles. Yoshi Furutani, the proprietor's wife, and Yukimasa Kinjo, the assistant manager, explain that guests do not come to Horai for the stair-climbing exercise, or for the healthy diet, but for the therapeutic qualities of the water, the view, the peace, and the solitude.

For more information about Japanese spas: Japanese National Tourist Organization, 630 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10019; telephone (212) 757-5640, or through their website: [www.jnto.go.jp](http://www.jnto.go.jp) and then search for "hot springs and spas."