

The Volcanic Blessings of Mt. Aso: Part 2

Hot Springs and Spring Water

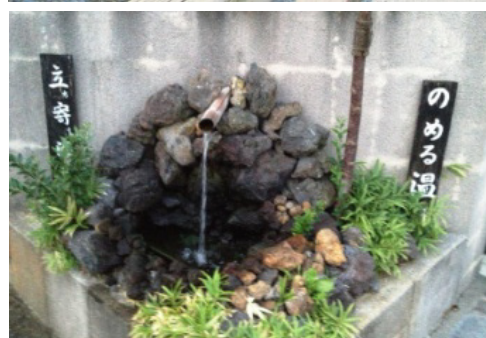
One of the byproducts of volcanoes that immediately springs to mind (excuse the pun!) is spas and spring water. The Aso caldera is no exception, being blessed with lots of hot springs and loads of spring water. These rich assets support the lives of the local people, provide places of relaxation, and contribute to the local economy as an important tourist resource.

Uchinomaki Onsen Village

Drinkable Spring Water

Uchinomaki Onsen is an old spa frequented by many literary figures in the past. Its characteristics are the plentiful and diverse types of spring water. Almost every hotel and *ryokan* has its own hot spring, with water fed directly to baths from the source. Water qualities differ from hot spring to hot spring, and even neighboring facilities have completely different types of water. Several facilities offer “drinkable spring water” at their entrances, so you can easily taste the difference. The drinkable water at the hotel where I was staying contained a lot of calcium, sodium, and hydrogen carbonate; it tasted rather like diluted salt water. In contrast, the water at a nearby *ryokan* had a bit of an iron flavor. The medicinal effects differ as well, so visitors can choose hot springs according to their physical condition.

Two completely different types of spring water



Strolling Around the Spa



cheap and tasty *izakaya* bars are.

Loaded with information from the proprietresses, I then headed for Miyuki, a confectionery shop selling exquisite sweets. Though the mouthwatering menu was lavish, I immediately

When I set off on my stroll around Uchinomaki Onsen, the first place to catch my eye was the Okami (Proprietress) Café. While enjoying a delicious cup of coffee for ¥300, I received a lot of useful information and advice from the *ryokan* proprietresses there, who seemed to know just about everything there is to know about Uchinomaki, like where to go to buy something, where Akaushi beef is served for lunch, and where the



spotted what I wanted and ordered a whole pear tart. There is a counter in one corner of the shop, so orders can be eaten on the spot. The complimentary self-service coffee is a welcome bonus, too. My sweet consisted of a full pear atop a crispy tart with superb custard in the core. I marveled at the freshness of the pear, which appeared to have just been peeled.



Sweets are a treat, but sake was on my shopping list as well, so next I went to have a look at the local sake available at Okamoto Liquor Store, which, judging from its marvelous appearance, looked likely to have some good sake in stock. The genuinely sincere-looking owner recommended Isshokenmei, the store's original *shochu* (clear liquor) made from Aso rice. *Isshokenmei* means enthusiastically in Japanese, so plenty of passion must have gone into making it.

Needless to say, I purchased a bottle.

I also dropped in at Oshimaya, a variety store selling everything from accessories to pottery, T-shirts, and clothing and especially popular among women. The bubbly owner of the shop, Yukari Furuta, recommended a 100% cotton shawl with pockets. If my wife had been with me, no doubt I would have been coaxed into buying it!



Street Art



Telling me that they want to fill the village with art, Ms. Furuta pointed me in the direction of the spa's concrete-block wall art, a project begun in 2012 with the aim of galvanizing the Uchinomaki Onsen shopping district by filling the village with art. Under the guidance of Takumi Matsunaga of Kumamoto University, students have used ordinary concrete-block

walls as canvases to paint street art, giving a vibrant feeling to the main street.

Food Culture

In the evening, following a recommendation by the proprietresses at Okami Café, I spent a pleasant time at the Shichifukujin *izakaya*, listening to the dialect of the local people around me. I drank the Reizan brand of local sake and tucked into hors d'oeuvres recommended by the bar---fried Higo eggplant with mayonnaise, grilled variety horsemeat, and raw *koune* (the fatty part under the horse's mane). The Higo eggplant, although large, was juicy rather than tasteless; the grilled variety horsemeat was nice and chewy; and the *koune* just melted in my mouth. This is Aso's food culture, I thought; I certainly wouldn't be able to experience any of these tastes back in Tokyo.



Higo eggplant



Grilled variety horsemeat and fresh vegetables



The raw *kouno* delicacy

After enjoying this excellent food, I went back to my hotel to wash away the day's sweat in its treasured hot-spring bath, where the water is drawn directly from the headspring. The spring water---so much of it, it seemed almost wasteful---soothed my aching limbs. As I soaked in the bath, it dawned on me that this really is the supreme joy and blessing bestowed on travelers to this area.

**The indoor Shigaraki-ware bath
(Aso Hotel)**



Aso Shrine and Its Shopping Street of Springs

A Historical Shrine



I asked Shunichi Yoshida, a volunteer tourist guide, to show me around Aso Shrine and its vicinity in the Ichinomiya-machi Miyaji district of Aso City. Mr. Yoshida informed me that Aso Shrine is dedicated to Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto, the grandson of Emperor Jimmu, the first emperor of Japan, and has a history of about 2,300 years. The position of chief priest of Aso Shrine has been inherited by the descendants of Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto; the present chief priest is the 92nd. Architecturally, the shrine has a two-story tower gate built in Buddhist temple style, which is counted as one of Japan's three leading gates of its kind and is designated as an important cultural property of the state.

Mr. Yoshida explains the shrine's tower gate.

The Onda Festival takes place on July 28 every year as a prayer for a bountiful harvest and to extol the virtues of Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto, who is said to have been the pioneer of Aso's opening. This festival, which is a summertime fixture in Aso and is designated as an important intangible folk culture property of the state, features four portable shrines and a march through the paddy fields by women dressed in white costumes, called *unari*.



The impressive *unari* march

Gushing Spring Water Everywhere



In the Ichinomiya-machi district, where Aso Shrine is located, the underground water of the Aso caldera for topographical reasons becomes subject to intense pressure and gushes above the surface here and there. Sometimes the spring water shoots up to a height of about two meters. It is used by the local people for daily living purposes and to irrigate farmland.

Underground water jets up naturally.

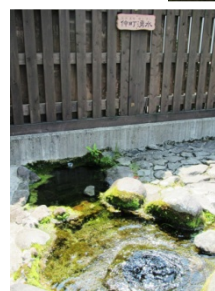
Shopping Street Prospers with Water

The approach to Aso Shrine is a lateral one, which is rather unusual in Japan. (The approach extends left and right from the tower gate.) Heading north from the gate along the approach, you come to the Aso Ichinomiya Monzen-machi shopping street, which has gained popularity by endeavoring to galvanize the district by making use of the abundant spring water.

Local residents joined forces and created a uniform landscape over the entire district using spring water, the tradition and culture of the area, under a philosophy of building a community that exists in harmony with nature, is a pleasant place to live for children, and is full of vitality. They built drinking fountains, called *mizuki*, in front of many stores, thus creating a watery environment and at the same time inviting passersby to taste the delicious local water. This concept went down well and has attracted many tourists to the district.



Numerous drinking fountains



The drinking fountains are not the only delight of Aso Ichinomiya Monzen-machi shopping street, either. Another attraction is gourmet strolling in search of cuisine that is only available here, such as dishes and sweets using local ingredients and spring water and coffee made with spring water. For lunch I had boiled rice mixed with leaf mustard (*takana*), which was so delicious I later went to a



pickle store and bought some pickled Aso leaf mustard. Tourists going round the drinking fountains also enjoy the opportunity to sample horsemeat croquettes. Fried after you make your order, these piping hot and tasty croquettes, called Barokke, have a unique fragrance and are an excellent companion on your stroll.

A Barokke horsemeat croquette

Volcanic Blessings (The Five Peaks of Aso)

On the way back to the airport after my trip, I glanced south from the highway and saw the five peaks of Mt. Aso rising behind green paddy fields. Local people liken this outline to the shape of a reclining Buddha. I stopped the car and, while taking a photo, remembered what the guide, Mr. Yoshida, had said. “Aso’s vast paddy fields are called *senmaida* [a thousand paddy fields],” he said, “and the scenery is completely different depending on the season. In spring, before rice planting, the watery places look like a lake. In summer, like now, everything is green. And in the fall, before harvest, it’s golden.” Imagining the reclining Buddha floating on a lake or surrounded by golden heads of rice, I thought to myself, “I must come here again at a different time of year!”



The five peaks of Mt. Aso are said to look like a reclining Buddha.