

# Onsen: Japan's Treasure

Hot-spring essayist Mayumi Yamazaki introduces some famous spas visited by medieval warlords and literary figures in the past, as well as *onsen* (hot-spring resorts) where the colorful autumn foliage is a wonder to behold.

## The Japanese Love Hot Springs

The Japanese love hot springs. Chronicles written as many as 1,300 years ago refer to onsen in their depiction of local life. For example, *Izumo no kuni fudoki* (Records of the Cultural and Geographical Features of Izumo Province), written in 733, mentions **Tamatsukuri Onsen** (in present-day Shimane Prefecture), stating that “Young and old, men and women alike were relaxing peacefully in the hot spring. Soaking in spring water is good for the health and beauty. People revere this spring water as the water of the gods.” Another popular spa at that time was **Shirahama Onsen** (Wakayama Prefecture).



Nanki- Shirahama Onsen

Incidentally, today Tamatsukuri Onsen is extremely popular among young women because of its proximity to Izumo Grand Shrine, where the god of marriage dwells. The hot-spring water

is said to be effective in both beautifying the skin and helping to find a partner, so young women flock there in their quest for good looks and romance.



(Left) Tamatsukuri Onsen is well known as a beauty-care hot spring.  
(Right) Spring water from the source of Tamatsukuri Onsen can be taken home.

In the Sengoku (Warring States) period the warlord Takeda Shingen (1521–73) used to go to onsen to heal the wounds he suffered in battle. While his aches and pains were surely soothed, no doubt he enjoyed the mental relaxation as well. **Shimobe Onsen** (Yamanashi Prefecture) was one of the favorite retreats of generals and wounded soldiers.



Kusatsu Onsen Yubatake (hot water field)



In the Edo period (1603–1868) visiting spas for medical purposes became popular along with pilgrimages to Ise Shrine. One of the spas frequented by the people of Edo (present-day Tokyo) was **Kusatsu Onsen** (Gunma Prefecture), where the spring water contains a lot of sulfur. After a lengthy sojourn at Kusatsu Onsen, maybe a couple of weeks to a month, Edoites would finish off their trip by soaking in softer water to mollify the skin before returning to Edo. This was called *shiage no yu* (consummatory water).

Let me explain a little more about this *shiage no yu*. The spring water of Kusatsu Onsen is acidic and contains a lot of sulfur, so it reduces the sebum and keratin in the skin. Afterward bathers certainly feel fully refreshed. But while the water does have an effect in cleansing the skin, without adequate moisture it can lead to skin irritation too. That is why the people of Edo, who did not have access to skin moisturizers, used to stop off at another spa on their way back from Kusatsu and take a consummatory dip in spring water that was more moisturizing and gentler to the skin.

In the Meiji, Taisho, and early Showa periods many literary figures used to like going to spas. Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972), a winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, famously wrote *Yukiguni* (tr. *Snow Country*) at the **Takahan ryokan in Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen** (Niigata Prefecture). The room where Kawabata stayed at Takahan, Kasumi-no-Ma, is still preserved in its original state. Kawabata loved the spring water of Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen. In a letter to his wife dated June 16, 1934, he wrote, “Apparently the spring water is good for neuralgia. Probably because it warms me up, the aching that I feel after working through the night soon disappears. . . . The water is tepid, as I said, but the soap is foamy, so my skin seems to be much better than in Tokyo.”



Takahan ryokan at Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen



Kasumi-no-Ma room at Takahan

In this way, onsen have served as palliative retreats for the Japanese over the ages. Even today, when they think of onsen, many Japanese imagine the gentle, warm feeling they get when climbing into the bath. And that in itself is enough to make them glow.

## Marvelous Views from Outdoor Baths

What the Japanese like about onsen is not only the spring water itself but also the marvelous views that can be seen from them. The Japanese are proud of Mount Fuji, which is one of the most majestic peaks in the world, and like them, many foreigners also love nothing more than to gaze at Mount Fuji while soaking in a hot spring. Such picturesque spas as **Hottarakashi Onsen** (Yamanashi Prefecture) are often used as locations for television dramas. These days many people visit Hottarakashi Onsen to enjoy the splendid scenery, so the bathing facilities are well developed. In the past, though, there was nothing more than an outdoor bath with a simple changing room and the view of Mount Fuji. Hence the name Hottarakashi Onsen (*hottarakashi* means “neglected” in Japanese).

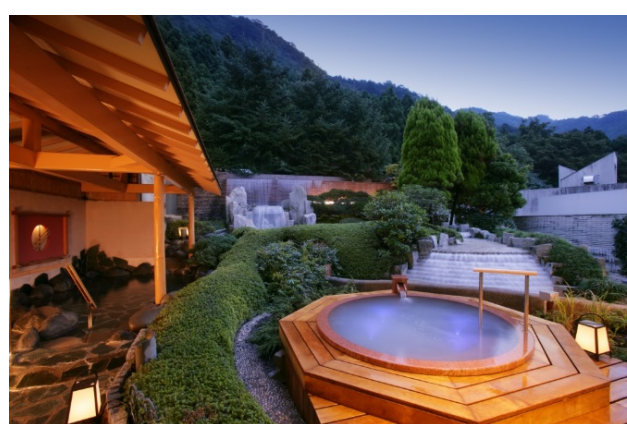


Hottarakashi Onsen



Autumn colors at Kinugawa Gorge

Japan has four seasons, and in the fall the foliage is really beautiful. One of the spas famous for its autumnal hues is **Kinugawa Onsen** (Tochigi Prefecture), which is located amid the colorful scenery of Kinugawa Gorge. In addition, the Kinugawa river is lined by modern hot-spring ryokan, many of which are large and ready to welcome foreign visitors. One of them is the Kinugawa Grand Hotel Yume no Toki.



(Left and right) Kinugawa Grand Hotel Yume no Toki

The Japanese really do love hot-spring resorts. As a means of getting to know Japan, why not go on an onsen trip yourself?



# ~Mayumi's Tips for Enjoying Onsen~

## What to Take

When I visit onsen, I always take two Japanese *tenugui* (hand towels) with me. I go to several baths in a day, so I use one towel when I get out of the water at one place and then use the other towel at the next place. *Tenugui* are most convenient. As well as being light and compact and therefore easy to carry around, they also dry very quickly. Indeed, *tenugui* have been fondly used by bathers ever since the Edo period. Look at colored woodblock prints of the time, and you will see both men and women coming out of hot-spring baths with *tenugui* around their necks.

## Before Getting in the Bath

A bathe at a hot spring is relaxing, but in the process you actually consume many more calories than you imagine. If you soak in water with a temperature of 42 degrees Celsius for just 5 minutes, it is said that you consume as many calories as you would during a brisk 10-minute walk. So if you enter a bath on an empty stomach, you might feel unwell afterward. At the same time, though, you don't want to have a full stomach either. So the golden rule is "not too empty, not too full." I recommend you to eat something beforehand that gives you a quick calorie boost, like chocolate. Ryokan often provide bean-jam buns and green tea in their rooms. Now you know why!

## Japanese-Style Bathing Manners

Foreigners should definitely know about Japanese-style hot-spring bathing manners. First of all, when you enter the bathing facility, there will be a changing room. Undress here and leave your clothes in a locker or basket. Women in particular should then tie up their hair in a bun if necessary. In Japan it is considered unclean to let hair get into the bathwater.

Next, take your towel or *tenugui* and go into the bath area. If there are shower booths, wash your body thoroughly there. If not, scoop some water from the bath using a pail and wash yourself. Then you can get into the hot-spring bath.

When you are adequately warmed, go back to the shower booth and this time wash your hair as well as your body. Then get into the hot-spring bath again before drying yourself with your towel and returning to the changing room.

