

Feeling the Blessings of Volcanoes in Onsen

For foreign tourists, the hot spring resort of Hakone is probably easy to get to thanks to its convenient access from metropolitan Tokyo. Whenever I visit, I always see throngs of foreigners in Hakone, and they all seem to be having a good time.

Actually, right now I am writing this manuscript here in the Tonosawa Ichinoyu Honkan hotel in Hakone. Last night I was surrounded by foreign guests staying here, and they were all using the word *onsen* in their conversations.



Tonosawa Ichinoyu Honkan hotel

Tonosawa Onsen, which gushes forth near Hakone-Yumoto Station, the hub of the Hakone district, is one of the most popular spas in the Hakone hot spring resort. The hot spring water here is simple alkaline, which is mild on the skin. Runners in the annual New Year's Tokyo–Hakone collegiate ekiden road relay used to nurse their aching limbs here. The Tonosawa area is famous for its mineral water, and the tofu made with that water is delicious too. Ichinoyu tofu is a real gourmet delight.



The popular Ichinoyu tofu

The secret of the Ichinoyu Honkan's popularity among foreign tourists lies in its *sukiya* style of architecture, which is based on an aesthetic of naturalness and simplicity. The wooden four-storied lodging exudes an atmosphere of traditional, "good old" Japan. Indeed, several lodgings along National Highway Route 1 are cultural properties, including the Fukuzumiro and Kansuiro inns as well as Ichinoyu Honkan.



A *sukiya*-style corridor in Ichinoyu Honkan



The Ohiradai Ekimae bus stop on National Highway Route 1

In addition, in Ohiradai Onsen, which is located just a little way up National Highway Route 1 from Tonosawa, there is a newly opened spa facility called Spa at Yamaguchi House. The family residence of the founder of Hakone Fujiya Hotel, built in 1930, has been renovated and turned into a day spa. The structure is Western style, which was quite unusual for residences at that time. Apparently an application has been submitted to list it as an important cultural property.

The spa facility offers Ayurveda treatment, a system of traditional Hindu medicine that is popular as the world's oldest therapy for restoring youth. It uses Kairali herbal oil procured from India. This oil, it seems, has a miraculous effect. Things like my weight, body fat percentage, body age, and body water percentage were measured before the treatment and again after. And lo and behold, after the treatment my body age was about three years younger!



Spa at Yamaguchi House

(Left) Ayurveda medical check



(Right) Herb tea

From July a plan will begin combining treatment at the Spa at Yamaguchi House and a stay at the Ichinoyu Honkan hotel, a registered cultural property.

Recently earthquakes and volcanic activity have been in the news a lot. One expert appearing on a television program said, "There is no need for people to be unduly worried. I recommend them just to keep an eye on the latest information about the ever-changing situation via TV, radio, the Internet, and other media." It's certainly a difficult decision to make, even for experts. There is lots of information floating around, and judging what is right and what is wrong is no easy matter. However, as the expert said, there is no need to be unduly worried. Remember that

the hot spring and residential districts of Hakone are some way away from the volcanic activity in Owakudani.



The hot springs that we enjoy so much are the blessings of the Earth and volcanoes. We should have an interest in volcanic conditions at all times and gather information about possible damage so that if an eruption does occur, the damage can be minimized. We must have a proper understanding of the situation.



~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.

