

Nozawa Onsen flourished as a hot spring town during the Edo period (1603–1868), when drinking from and soaking in the alkaline mineral-rich water was said to heal various illnesses. The town is particularly proud of its Soto Yu, thirteen communal bath houses dotted around the neighborhood and run by local families of the “Yunakama” community. Easily recognizable due to their wooden structures, which resemble architectural designs from the Edo period, the baths are located within walking distance. Facilities combine a calm atmosphere with rustic, simple structures; there’s one room for each gender, containing a bathtub with space for about ten people and a changing area. All the baths are served by a hot spring whose water flows continuously from its local natural source (ranging between 40–90 degrees Celsius) called *gensen kakenagashi*; the water in the bathtubs is typically 45–49 degrees Celsius. For first-timers the hot water can be a challenge, but it’s a challenge worth accepting because your body will profit from the silk-like, mineral-rich liquid, which boasts anti-aging effects and smoothes your skin. If it’s too hot, don’t worry—you can add cold water to adjust the temperature, but do check with other guests that they are comfortable with the change. Some like it hot. Keep in mind that swimwear is not common in onsen facilities, and before you enter the bath you have to wash while seated as to not disturb other visitors (don’t forget to bring a towel and soap). There is no entrance fee to the thirteen Soto Yu, but contributions towards its upkeep are appreciated. Donation boxes are placed next to the entrance of each bath. You may also encounter single indoor pools next to some Soto Yu facilities. These are used by villagers for daily tasks such as laundry or vegetable washing.

To give your onsen-hopping even more of a local flavor, wander around this picturesque, nostalgic town dressed in a *yukata* (light cotton kimono), and explore the many narrow lanes with their tiny canals. Even if you may not feel comfortable entering a Soto Yu, it is worth visiting each of them. Gaze at their unique architecture, or collect stamps at the checkpoints in front of each bath. Hours: May–Nov 5am–11pm, Dec–Mar 6am–11pm