

## **Unzen *Jigoku*: Welcome to “Hell”**

No one who visits Unzen can ignore the smell of sulfur in the air, the sound of gases and water escaping from the earth, and the billowing columns of steam twisted into swirling clouds by the wind. These emissions are proof that volcanic activity is still occurring not far beneath the earth's surface. The areas where they occur are called *jigoku*, or “hell,” from references in Buddhism to a symbol of the suffering that evildoers will experience.

### **Heat from the depths of the earth**

The “hells” offer a striking contrast to the lushly forested hills that ring the town; they are barren, pale but not colorless expanses of rock, from large boulders to sandy soil, where water and gases seem to surface from every fissure in the earth. Walkways pass close to the various “hells” and the points of interest: in some areas, gases escape from the earth in quiet gasps while in others they burst forth with loud, violent expulsions. The hydrogen sulfide gas, despite its strong sulfuric odor, is harmless at the levels found in the areas open to the public, but the steam can reach temperatures up to 120 degrees Celsius.

### **A part of local life**

For the local people of Unzen, the “hells” are also the source of much of their livelihood, for the thermal energy and mineral properties of the water provide the town with the hot-spring baths that have attracted tourists for generations. But they are also places of beauty and an intimate part of their neighborhood. It is not unusual for someone to be heard saying to their family, “*jigoku ni ittekimasu*,” or “I’ll be right back. I’m just going to hell.”