

Unzen *Jigoku*: Welcome to “Hell”

The first things you will notice in Unzen are the smell of sulfur in the air and the billowing columns of steam swirling in the air, proof that the mountain underneath is still alive with volcanic activity. They are called *jigoku*, or “hell,” a term that Buddhist teachings connect with man’s temporary destination after leading a life of evil. But for the local people of Unzen, who make their lives here, each area is a place of beauty and an intimate part of their neighborhood. They are also the source of much of their livelihood, for the thermal energy and mineral properties provide the town with the hot-spring baths that have attracted tourists for generations.

Though the hydrogen sulfide gas can wreak havoc on certain metals, it is harmless to humans and the mountain greenery at the levels found in the areas open to the public. In some places, gases and liquids escape from the earth in quiet gasps, while in others they burst forth in violent expulsions. There are walkways that pass by all of the major areas, and certain particular formations have been given names or have played a part in the town’s history. You’re required to stay on the walkways and observation points, since the steam from the hydrogen sulfide gas can reach temperatures of up to 120 degrees Celsius.

The walkways are open twenty-four hours a day, and for the fearless, a stroll through the “hells” after dark is highly recommended, when the moans and whistles and bubbling springs make for a very unusual, very eerie experience. (Don’t forget a flashlight.)