

## **Kenban**

Today, the total number of professional geisha is declining in Japan as a whole, but Hakone has about 150 active performers, including many young women. The local geisha association is supported by the Hakone-Yumoto Kenban, which is both a training center for the geisha and the headquarters of the association. While geisha are directly employed and assigned by so-called lodging houses or *okiya*, the Kenban decides on prices and handles all payments between the *okiya* and the *ryokan* inns or hotels to which the geisha are called to perform. The Kenban also collects association fees from the *okiya* to pay for things like building maintenance, staff salaries, and teachers who train the geisha in song and dance. The Hakone-Yumoto Kenban goes to great lengths to ensure that local geisha do not need to incur debt when entering the profession, running a savings-based pension system for the performers and encouraging the *okiya* to lend their employees the necessary costumes instead of requiring them to purchase this often very expensive wardrobe.

Characteristically for *onsen geisha*, who work at hot spring resorts and therefore entertain customers clad in casual *yukata* robes instead of the formal clothing expected in high-end geisha quarters, the geisha of Hakone accept first-time customers. The standard rate—¥25,000 per hour—is also the same for everyone. Some may prefer to get a taste of geisha entertainment by attending one of the Kenban's monthly events, which feature an hour of singing and dancing and are free for anyone staying the night in Yumoto or Tonosawa.