

【Chichibu Onsen Town】

Since the Edo period (1603–1867), visitors have come to bathe in to the “Seven Waters of Chichibu” (Chichibu no Nanatō), said to fully rejuvenate weary travelers on the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage. The oldest of these springs was discovered over 1,200 years ago, during the process of mining copper to make Japan’s first official currency. That original spring, dubbed the “Waters of the Medicine Buddha” (Yakushi no Yu), is said to have restorative effects, and for centuries local residents have used it to treat small cuts, arthritis, and nerve pain. Other springs in the area contain minerals that are beneficial to the skin, ease stiff shoulders and joints, or help to warm the body.

In addition to the springs’ therapeutic effects, the sheer act of getting out of one’s familiar environment and engaging the five senses with a hot bath in a new place is said to be a key benefit of a trip to the springs. This is referred to as the “power of a change of scenery” (*tenchi kōka*). Chichibu’s hot spring district, which contains many day spas, is perfect for taking advantage of the *tenchi kōka*.

Many of the Seven Waters of Chichibu have rich and interesting histories. Araki Kosen Ryokan, a public bath and inn, has been operated by the same family for nine generations. It is said that the spring that feeds its baths was discovered by a local grandmother who was sent there by the deity of Tsunemochi Jinja Shrine. Another spring, Hato no Yu (“Waters of the Doves”), was discovered in the Sengoku period (1467–1568) when a wounded warrior was led there by a mysterious pair of doves. After resting and bathing in the waters for several days, the warrior discovered that his wound had healed.

Of the original Seven Waters of Chichibu, three are no longer in operation. Ōyubi no Yu (“Waters of the Thumb”) was destroyed by the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923. Yanaba no Yu (“Waters of the Fishgarth”) was submerged with the creation of the Shimokubo Dam in 1966. Shika no Yu (“Waters of the Deer”) shut down in the late 1990s, and the once-bustling Japanese inn that contained the spring now lies empty. In their place, three other local springs have been made honorary members of the Seven Waters of Chichibu.

Chichibu’s springs are different from hot springs in many other regions of Japan in that they do not naturally bubble up from the ground. Before 1948, naturally occurring springs were largely divided into three categories by their temperature and mineral content. Springs that were sufficiently hot and contained a baseline level of mineral content or gases were called *onsen*, but colder springs that also contained mineral content were called “mineral springs” (*kōsen*) or “cold springs” (*reisen*)

depending on their temperature. Chichibu's springs were all *kōsen*, but since the creation of the Hot Spring Law in 1948, the criteria were changed, and Chichibu's springs could be legally referred to as *onsen*. The water is lukewarm when drawn from the ground, but it is heated to around 45°C (84°F) before being pumped to the baths.