

## 【Shibu Onsen】

For more than 1,350 years, Shibu Onsen has attracted people to its mineral-rich hot spring baths. The area is a superb example of a historic hot spring district, whose timeless atmosphere is characterized by narrow cobblestone streets lined with traditional Japanese inns (*ryokan*). Within these areas, it is common to see guests strolling in light cotton kimono and wooden sandals while shopping for souvenirs or sampling local specialties.

Shibu Onsen is distinguished by nine public baths that are scattered throughout the district, freely available to guests at any of the neighborhood *ryokan*. The small bathhouses are fed by several different sources and offer a range of different waters, from the murky, iron-rich brown baths at Shibu-Ōyu to the clear waters at Nanakuri no Yu that are flecked with bits of reddish mineral deposits called “water flowers” (*yubana*). Guests at any of the local inns can freely attempt the “nine-water pilgrimage” (*kyūtō meguri*), a tour of all nine bathhouses. The pilgrimage is completed by visiting each bath and collecting a stamp on a special souvenir towel. Once all nine stamps have been collected, bathhouse pilgrims ascend the 78 steps to Shibu-Takayakushi Temple and collect the final stamp before offering a prayer. Completing this hot spring pilgrimage is said to ward off evil, ensure safe childbirth, and bestow longevity.

In the evening, many *ryokan* light up their façades. Illuminated by floodlights, the swooping wooden eaves of 260-year-old Kanaguya evoke an ethereal atmosphere that is thought to be one of the inspirations for the other-worldly bathhouse in the Studio Ghibli movie *Spirited Away* (2001).