

## **Shirahone Onsen**

Shirahone Onsen is an *onsen* hot-spring village tucked deep inside the steep, forested valleys of Chubusangaku National Park. It is a perfect spot for people who appreciate a peaceful, remote location and are looking to experience the unique culture and customs of a hot-spring resort where everything revolves around relaxation.

Local historians believe that Shirahone Onsen's hot springs have been in use since the Kamakura period (1185–1333), when samurai warriors would stop for a soak as a break from marching through the rugged mountain passes. The village itself has been around for four centuries, and over time the locals realized that the milky-white mineral waters appeared to have beneficial properties. By the latter half of the Edo period (1603–1867), farmers from Matsumoto were coming here to recuperate from long days of planting and harvesting.

In more recent times, as hiking has become more popular, enthusiasts have found the *onsen* waters to be a perfect remedy for sore muscles. The milky cloudiness of the water that made Shirahone Onsen famous is now known to be due to the presence of minerals like calcium and magnesium. Drinking the water is said to have even more health benefits, and visitors are encouraged to try it, which is why you will often find cups next to the spigots at the baths.

Today the village has 11 hot-spring inns, where guests can enjoy the relaxing ambience of traditional lodgings, including classic Japanese rooms with tatami-mat flooring and futon bedding. Day visitors are welcome to drop by for a soak at one of the outdoor baths and even at some of the inns' baths. But the best way to truly experience the charms of a Japanese hot-spring inn is to stay overnight. Not only are guests free to make almost unlimited use of the baths, day or night, but the other amenities and services—particularly the elaborate meals—make for an unforgettable stay. Menus will usually include local specialties, like salmon-trout sashimi and *sansai* mountain vegetables, and one often-featured dish is *onsen okayu*, a rice porridge made with the hot spring's mineral water.