

Kawayu Onsen

The town of Kawayu Onsen is a hub for exploring the Kawayu district of Akan-Mashu National Park, known for its volcanoes, lakes, and hot springs. Visitors can discover the area's natural scenery through such activities as canoeing, cycling, hiking, and horse trekking. The town's hot springs provide welcome relaxation after a long, active day.

The history of Kawayu Onsen

Sulfur mining began on nearby Mt. Io in 1877, and settlements were soon built to accommodate those who worked in the growing industry. The development of the town of Kawayu Onsen as a hot-spring destination began in earnest around 1898 with the opening of the first official inn by Asano Kiyoji, who came from Niigata. The town expanded as a leisure destination after the establishment of Akan National Park (now Akan-Mashu National Park) in 1934. Many inns and hotels in Kawayu were built or remodeled after 1945, in step with the rapid economic growth of postwar Japan, and the town's popularity as a tourist destination boomed in the 1970s.

Mt. Io: Source of Kawayu's hot springs

The water that fills the baths of Kawayu Onsen is pumped from thermal springs heated by Mt. Io, an active volcano located 2.5 kilometers south of the town. It has a relatively high acidity, with a pH of about 1.6–1.9, and is rich in sulfur and hydrogen sulfide. The water contains antibacterial properties reputed to improve certain skin conditions such as eczema. Scientific studies have also shown that the warming effect of hot-spring water lowers blood pressure. Visitors to nearby Mt. Io will encounter an otherworldly landscape of steam rising from neon-yellow vents in the ground, as well as a strong sulfur odor.

A town of hot springs

The Kawayu Onsen Footbath is located in the center of town, a few minutes' walk from the Kawayu Eco-museum Center. This popular attraction is fed directly by geothermal springs. Nearby facilities include a hand bath and a fountain where visitors can taste the hot-spring water. In winter, steam rises from the hot water against a backdrop of snow

and ice, creating a starkly beautiful landscape. Other attractions include the hot spring that flows through the center of town and several other footbaths, some of which are lit up at night.

Kawayu Jinja Shrine, located near Kawayu Onsen Footbath, has one of Japan's only hot-spring-fed *temizuya*, a water basin at the entrance of a Shinto shrine used to ritually purify one's hands and mouth.

The joys of hot-spring bathing

For over a century, travelers have frequented Kawayu Onsen to enjoy its scenic beauty and the purported healing properties of its hot springs. For some visitors, the highlight of a trip to a Japanese hot-spring town like Kawayu is the stay at a traditional *ryokan* inn. Spending a day taking dips in the inn's baths, eating multi-course meals, and strolling through the town in a light *yukata* robe is a rejuvenating experience.