

Sanbe Onsen: The Waters of Learning

Ochre-colored thermal waters gush from a source on the south side of Mt. Sanbe at the rate of roughly 3,000 liters per minute, making Sanbe Onsen the highest-volume hot spring in the Chūgoku region. The water measures around 36°C at the source, although it cools slightly by the time it flows into the baths in Shigaku, a town on the mountain's south side.

The earliest record of a hot spring on Mt. Sanbe dates to around a thousand years ago, but the name “Sanbe Onsen” was only established in 1957. Before that, these thermal waters were called “Shigaku Onsen,” using the town's ancient name. Originally written with the characters 四岳 (“four peaks”), the name “Shigaku” referred to Mt. Sanbe's four summits. However, during the late 1700s, local dignitary Imada Chikyō went to Kyoto to train as a doctor. On his return, seeking to inspire town residents with his own love of learning, he changed the characters of the town's name to the homophonous 志学 (“resolved to learn”). Today, when the older name “Shigaku Onsen” is used, it is written with this later spelling and loosely translates to “waters of learning.”

Sanbe Onsen is a chloride spring with a deep, ruddy color that comes from oxidized iron. Its waters are quite cloudy—the result of insoluble mineral particulates called *yunohana* (“hot spring flowers”) suspended in the water like natural bath salts. In fact, *yunohana* particulates are often extracted and sold commercially. Among other minerals, Sanbe's waters contain sodium, potassium, magnesium, and calcium, and are reputed to be good for beautifying the skin. Small amounts of naturally occurring gas are also present, giving the water a faintly effervescent feel.

There are several places to bathe in the waters of Sanbe Onsen:

Sanbesō

This historic inn opens its baths for use by day visitors. Gender-segregated outdoor bathing areas include the standard communal stone baths, but also 14 smaller baths for just one or two people. Among these are *tōkiburo* (ceramic tubs), *hinokiburo* (hinoki cypress tubs), *kamaburo* (iron cooking cauldrons), and *taruburo* (wooden vats for sake fermentation). There is even a large boat-shaped bath positioned near statues of the Seven Gods of Fortune (*Shichifukujin*), a collection of deities drawn from Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Shinto. (Believed to grant petitioners good luck, the seven are often depicted aboard a sailboat.) Another unusual attraction of the Sanbesō baths is their varying temperatures. Most Japanese bathing facilities heat or cool the incoming spring water to temperatures in the low 40s, but Sanbesō leaves some baths at the tepid source temperature, so bathers can soak as long as they wish without becoming overheated.

Tsuru no Yu

With a name that means “waters of the crane,” this small co-op facility evokes the bird's

associations with longevity and healing. It is a *sentō*, the type of small neighborhood bathhouses that were common before homes had private baths. The fee is minimal, but bathers need to bring their own towels and bath products. There are separate changing rooms for men and women, and each leads to its own bath. As there are no showerheads, guests bathe the traditional way, filling a small bowl with water to cleanse and pour over their bodies before climbing in to soak. Outside are two free footbaths. One is filled with heated Sanbe Onsen water, the other with cold water from a separate effervescent spring. Alternating between the two heightens the tingling sensation imparted by the dissolved gas.

Kame no Yu

This small co-op is named for the turtle, a symbol of longevity and wisdom. The quaint facade has separate entrances for men and women. It, too, is a *sentō*-style bath, where neighborhood residents come to soak. The building next door has been converted into a rest area for after-bath relaxation, with lounge chairs, a free library, and views of a small garden planted with hydrangeas. Both here and at Tsuru no Yu, seasonal aromatics like *yuzu* (a lemon-like citrus fruit) and iris leaves are sometimes added to the baths.