

The Hells of Beppu

Modern-day Beppu is home to seven jigoku, or “hells,” which are pools of bubbling hot spring water and gas that were originally formed by local volcanic activity. Beppu’s jigoku pools have been put to use as hot spring water sources for bathing since at least the Edo period (1603–1867), and as tourist attractions in modern times.

The word *jigoku* is derived from the Buddhist term *Ennetsu-jigoku* (burning hell). *Jigoku* was used in the past as a general term for any place that resembled Buddhist descriptions and depictions of hell. Beppu’s steaming pools were called “hells” for this reason.

In the early twentieth century, local entrepreneurs transformed the area containing Umi Jigoku (Ocean Hell) into a tourist attraction, adding a surrounding garden as well as fencing and other safety features. Others followed suit, and by 1937, Beppu had ten hell attractions. Although Beppu’s hells are for viewing, not bathing, each contributed to Kannawa Hot Springs’ growing popularity as a travel destination.

Each hell has distinct characteristics. For example, Umi Jigoku’s pool is a stunning ocean-blue color, and Chinoike Jigoku (Blood Pond Hell) is decidedly red. Oniishi Bozu Jigoku (Oniishi Monk Head Hell) features large surface bubbles thought to resemble the shaven heads of Buddhist monks partially submerged in its muddy pool.