

Tsuta Onsen: One Thousand Years of Hot-Spring History

The Ancient Spa

The first historical account of the hot spring (*onsen*) at Tsuta dates from 1147, almost a thousand years ago. It documents the existence of a hot-spring pool and a nearby hut for bathers that was probably built by local hunters or charcoal makers who found the heated waters soothing and restorative. The spring continued to attract bathers over the centuries, though no permanent structures were built due to the harsh winters.

The Classic Inn

As more advanced techniques of Japanese carpentry were introduced to the area during the Edo period (1603–1867), sturdier buildings were constructed near the spring. In 1897 Ogasawara Shiro, along with some other local residents, began managing one of these as a spa where travelers could stay overnight in very basic accommodations. Most of the visitors were pilgrims traveling on foot to Towada Shrine at Lake Towada, and they were happy to soak their tired bodies. Later, Ogasawara and his wife, Naka, took over sole management and opened an *onsen ryokan*, a traditional hot-spring inn. The wooden main building at Tsuta Onsen Inn, which was finished in 1918, still houses the inn's entrance hall and several of the rooms. Over the years, additions have been made to accommodate larger numbers of visitors who have been attracted by easier access and glowing travel accounts.

The Healing Deity

Some historians believe the Buddhist deity Yakushi Nyorai was worshipped at the hot spring from the time of its earliest use. One of the first figures in the Buddhist pantheon to be widely embraced in Japan, Yakushi Nyorai is the buddha of healing. As hot springs have long been treasured for their medicinal properties, the connection with the deity is not surprising. Today, a small Buddhist hall near the inn hosts a statue of Yakushi Nyorai.