

## Ginzan Onsen

The soft glow of gas lamps illuminates narrow riverside streets, as guests clad in *yukata* (light cotton kimono) venture from traditional inns for a nighttime stroll to enjoy scenery centuries in the making. Ginzan Onsen is a hot spring resort in the mountains of Yamagata Prefecture, well known for its rustic townscape. The traditional multistory inns—featuring white plaster walls, colorful *kote-e* plaster reliefs, and exposed wood—call to mind the style of the Taisho era (1912–1926). But the town dates from around 1600, when it flourished as Nobesawa Ginzan (literally, “silver mine”).

In its heyday in the mid-1600s, Nobesawa Ginzan had a population of approximately 15,000. The mine was one of the three largest silver mines in Japan, and silver from the town was shipped directly to the government in Edo (present-day Tokyo). During mining operations hot springs were discovered, and miners and residents would soak in the hot, mineral-rich waters to relieve their aches and pains. However, Ginzan’s silver rush was short-lived, and the mines were closed by 1689. The mining industry left, but traditional inns were built and Ginzan developed as a hot spring resort.

In 1913 the Ginzan River flooded, destroying most of the community’s original inns. Reconstruction began in 1926, transforming the town from a disparate collection of single-story buildings to multistory inns built in the uniform architectural style seen today. The local government passed an ordinance in 1986 to preserve the town’s architectural and historic character. Power lines are buried in the ground, the exteriors of the inns are meticulously maintained, and the town’s narrow lanes are closed to general traffic.

Ginzan is one of Japan’s most popular hot spring resorts. In addition to the traditional baths in the inns, there are public baths for day visitors. Guests of local inns can often be seen strolling the streets in *yukata*, browsing the shops in town, or soaking their feet in the public foot bath beside the river. The Ginzan River, which runs through the center of town, is fed by Shirogane Falls, a waterfall further up the valley with a dramatic 22-meter drop. Shirogane Park, near the falls, offers a circular walking course, along which visitors can explore the natural beauty of the mountains, as well as one of the town’s former silver mining tunnels.