**Toshichi Onsen**

**One inn’s solutions to the challenges of mixed bathing**

The highlight of Toshichi Onsen is a cluster of large mixed outdoor baths that blend naturally with the volcanic landscape of the steaming, stony flanks of Mt. Hachimantai. Although the water itself is milky and opaque once you are in it, some guests may find the walk to it from the changing rooms a bit daunting, since the road overlooks the baths.

There are practical reasons for the baths being exposed in this way. First, any sort of enclosed building can trap dangerous gases. Second, structures are kept to a minimum so they can be dismantled during the snowy months. And third, the fewer fences there are, the more the bathers can enjoy the spectacular views.

Toshichi Onsen’s proprietor, Abe Takao, is all in favor of people covering up if it makes them feel more comfortable in the bath. “People often wrap themselves in bath towels, but they’re not the most convenient thing, so I found a towel company and started making *yuamigi* bath garments from toweling. At the beginning, I used a standard family sewing machine, but it kept breaking down since the material is on the thick side. I ended up getting myself an industrial sewing machine, and that made things a lot easier,” he says.

Takao now sells around 1,000 of his handmade *yuamigi* every year. Prompted by demand from his male customers and the Ministry of the Environment’s Mixed Bathing Project, he added a toweling kilt for men to his lineup in 2022.

Making *yuamigi* is far from the only thing Takao does over the winter months when the inn is closed. Based in his office in the nearby town of Kazuno, he develops the next year’s menu, arranges the sourcing of ingredients, and handles sales. “We take group reservations from the travel agencies starting in December and open up for individual reservations in January,” Takao says. “The public holidays always sell out first. April is busy with people coming to see the ‘snow corridor,’ when the road snakes its way between great walls of snow. Then, in June, they come for the ‘Dragon Eye,’ a circle of blue water surrounded by a ring of white snow that appears in the middle of a bright blue pond as the ice and snow melt; it’s said to resemble a giant eye.”