

Totsukawa Onsen Cooperative

(Web)

Totsukawa has long been known among hot spring enthusiasts for its excellent bathing facilities and the high quality of its bath waters. The history of hot springs in this area goes back centuries; one tale tells of a fifteenth-century samurai who recovered from battle wounds while using the baths as a hideout. Another of the springs was discovered next to a river by a charcoal maker looking for suitable wood some 300 years ago. The hot springs of Totsukawa are best known, however, for a more recent event: a dramatic new commitment.

Making a Promise

In 2004, representatives from three Totsukawa hot spring communities made a startling announcement: a declaration to rely entirely on free-flowing water at all of their facilities. It was a pledge not to circulate, reuse, reheat, chlorinate, or dilute the original spring water, a change virtually unheard of in Japan. This was no easy task. Most hot spring sources are located some distance from the bathing facilities, so hotels and other hot spring operators are usually forced to manipulate the waters in some way to maintain a steady temperature and quality, and they often reuse water for economic reasons. Thanks to the abundance of hot spring water in Totsukawa, however, and some clever methods of mixing water from different springs to maintain water temperature from the source to the baths, these hot spring communities have been able to keep their promise.

Keeping the Pledge

Tosenji Onsen is the oldest of Totsukawa's three hot spring communities, and is believed to have

begun operating in the Muromachi period (1336–1573). According to one legend, it was discovered years earlier by En no Gyoja (634–706), a revered figure said to have founded the ascetic practice of Shugendo. Today, the spring waters are distributed to a number of inns and guesthouses along the river valley, and the public bathhouses Izumiyu and Takinoyu accept day visitors to their indoor and outdoor facilities. The water consists mostly of sulfur spring water, a staple of hot springs throughout Japan.

Totsukawa Onsen is a large lakeside onsen community, with the spring water piped from 3.4 kilometers away to ten hotels and other facilities. Its baths are prized for salty sodium bicarbonate and chloride waters that maintain a high temperature and are also drinkable. Located in the village center is the public bathhouse Iorinoyu, which accepts day visitors to soak in the baths and enjoy an expansive view of the lake just outside.

Kamiyu Onsen, the smallest of the hot springs, is a privately operated, large *rotenburo* open-air bath that sits directly on the Kamiyunokawa River. It is said to have been discovered by a villager early in the eighteenth century. The stunning location, in a secluded valley surrounded by steep forest slopes, makes it well worth the drive to reach it. The spring waters are high in sodium bicarbonate.