

Sakura-yu

The public bathhouse Sakura-yu is in many respects the heart and soul of Yamaga, with its antique elegance and centuries-old history of resilience and reinvention. Patrons purchase an entrance ticket from a vending machine and then soak in the hot-spring baths, the waters of which are alkaline and leave the skin feeling silky smooth.

Elite origins in the Edo period

Hosokawa Tadatoshi (1586–1641), daimyo lord of Higo Province (present-day Kumamoto Prefecture), was so fond of Yamaga's hot springs that he had an *ochaya* teahouse built in 1640 at the site where Sakura-yu currently stands. *Ochaya* in the Edo period (1603–1867) were a type of leisure facility and lodging that catered exclusively to the ruling class. By the eighteenth century, several hot-spring inns were in operation in this part of Yamaga, including one that was accessible to the lower classes. A country-wide compendium of notable hot springs published in the late Edo period includes Yamaga, attesting to the long reputation of the waters that continue to feed Sakura-yu today.

A public bath reborn

The Hosokawa family *ochaya* was transformed following the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The Tokugawa shogunate had fallen, and sovereign power had been restored to the emperor. Widespread administrative reform followed, and the daimyo lords had to relinquish their domains. Local gentry Egami Tsunao (1827–1905) and Inoue Jinjuro (1833–1906) decided to devote considerable sums of money to convert the *ochaya* into a public bath for all of the town's residents to enjoy. In 1872, the modern incarnation of Sakura-yu was born, and further expansions and renovations were made in the ensuing decades.

Changing fortunes

Sakura-yu was tremendously popular from the late nineteenth century through into the mid-twentieth century when not every household had a bath. The bathhouse accommodated 4,500 visitors per day at its peak in the Showa period (1926–1989). In the 1970s, the neighborhood around Sakura-yu underwent significant redevelopment,

and the bathhouse was rebuilt in a contemporary style.

The rehabilitation of the Yachiyoza Theater in the 1990s inspired local residents to restore Sakura-yu to its traditional wooden structure. Designers consulted photographs and other materials to faithfully recreate the building, even making use of a scale-model lantern of the original Sakura-yu. The bathhouse was reopened in 2012.

Today, Sakura-yu is the largest wood-construction hot-spring facility in Kyushu. There is an on-site archive of materials related to the history of Yamaga and Sakura-yu. The Edo-period-style architecture and atmosphere of the bathhouse demonstrate the deep respect Yamaga residents have for their history and local culture.