

# Towada-Hachimantai National Park

## A unique hot-spring culture

*Tranquil lakes surrounded by virgin forests.*

*Living, breathing volcanoes.*

*Healing hot-spring inns deep in the mountains.*

(Official

slogan of Towada-Hachimantai National Park)

Towada-Hachimantai National Park developed in two stages. The northern section, encompassing Lake Towada, Oirase Gorge, and the Hakkoda Mountains, was designated a national park in 1936. Twenty years later, the Hachimantai section to the south became part of the park. Both northern and southern sections feature volcanoes and hot springs, and the unique scenery and culture associated with them.

Even before the northern section was chosen as a park site in 1936, the Hakkoda Mountains area centered around Sukayu Onsen was known for its hot-spring inns. Because this area was covered in deep snow half the year, it was sparsely inhabited, but people went for lengthy hot-spring cures (*toji*) at the inns, which were known as *tojiba*. After the area was designated a national park, parking lots, campgrounds, and restrooms were developed in the vicinity of the inns to accommodate more visitors, and it gradually grew popular with mountain climbers and skiers.

The hot springs in the Hachimantai section were undeveloped when it became part of the national park in 1956. They were popular with nearby residents, especially farmers in the off-season, but had none of the resort atmosphere found in hot-spring towns elsewhere in the country. The hot springs also had unique features, ranging from self-catering (*jisui*) kitchen facilities for long stays to *ondoru*, a system that allowed users to soak up geothermal heat through straw mats spread out on the ground, often in a simple, barrack-like building. The park's landscape – harsh and devoid of human habitation, with the sole exception of the inns – was seen as the perfect setting for this distinctive hot-spring culture.

### **Precious cultural landscapes**

Towada-Hachimantai's therapeutic hot-spring inns, with their old wooden buildings and unique culture, set against a backdrop of mountains, volcanoes, fumaroles, and beech forests, are collectively described as a "cultural landscape" – the Ministry of the Environment's term for an environment created by people living in harmony with the natural world around them. The Hachimantai Regional Plan of 1986 stressed the importance of preserving and invigorating the landscapes associated with the therapeutic hot-spring culture.

### **Gateways to nature**

Despite the presence of these cultural landscapes, the proportion of land under private ownership in Towada-Hachimantai is, at just 5 percent, one of the lowest among Japan's 34 national parks.

The hot-spring inns tend to be in the remotest areas of the park: deep in the forest, high in the mountains, nestled in secluded valleys, or close to volcanoes. Many of them shut down during the winter because the heavy snowfall renders them inaccessible. This remoteness, however, also means that the inns are perfectly situated for getting out into nature. Some were founded by hikers for hikers, so they are conveniently situated right at the entrance to mountain trails. Paths linking one inn to another make it possible to trek the length and breadth of the park, staying at a different hot-spring inn every night.

Gentler walking options are also available. The Tamagawa Onsen Nature Research Path and the Goshogake Nature Research Path, for example, are both short trails, walkable in a half hour, that offer access to a whole host of geothermal phenomena – from volcanic gas and bubbling pools to Monroe's lip (*Cladonia vulcani*), a pistachio-colored lichen that thrives in high-sulfur environments. In short, a visit to the old therapeutic hot-spring inns of Towada-Hachimantai National Park is a great way to return to a simpler time and to reconnect with nature.