

Sukayu Onsen

Traditional simplicity on an epic scale

Sukayu Onsen is built on a much larger scale than the other hot-spring inns in Towada-Hachimantai National Park. The inn has 140 rooms capable of accommodating 250 guests; it even has a nurse on staff. Located on the flanks of the Hakkoda Mountains, it faces onto a popular and picturesque motoring road and provides access to numerous hiking courses around the mountains in summer, as well as plenty of backcountry skiing in winter.

The hot springs at this spot were first discovered in 1684, and by 1902 there were multiple separate competing baths whose operators would fight over customers. Eventually realizing that cooperation was better for business than competition, the operators merged to form a single company, Sukayu, in 1933. A bus service from the prefectural capital of Aomori to Sukayu Onsen started in 1934, and the surrounding Towada-Hakkoda area was designated a national park in 1936.

Sukayu got a further boost soon after World War II. In 1954, Sukayu, along with Gunma Shima Onsen and Nikko Yumoto Onsen, was designated one of Japan's first three National Hot Spring Health Resorts. "In the old days, going to a hot spring didn't have the best image. The government wanted to change that image, and we were chosen as a model," explains Takada Shintaro of Sukayu Onsen.

Although its market was still restricted to a relatively local clientele, Sukayu thrived. In the 1950s, the concourse in front of the inn was a bus station from which tickets could be purchased to anywhere in Japan. Many of the staff lived on site, and because the area was so remote, Sukayu was even used as a polling station in national elections.

But it was year-round access, made possible by dramatically improved rail links and an initiative by Aomori Prefecture to promote winter tourism, that propelled Sukayu Onsen to the popularity it enjoys today. The initiative promoted both hot springs and ski resorts. As part of its policy, the prefecture started clearing snow from Sukayu's access road, enabling cars and buses to reach it in winter. (The area around Sukayu is believed to get the heaviest snowfall of anywhere in Japan.)

Traditionally, people came to Sukayu for a hot-spring therapy course lasting about ten days, based on a three-day cycle of acclimatization and treatment that would be repeated twice. Although the declining population of full-time farmers, along with other lifestyle changes, has led to a drop in the number of such long-term visitors, there are still some left. Recently, a Japanese couple in their sixties stayed for 40 nights. “This place is like a little town unto itself,” says Shintaro. “You have the live-in staff and the hot-spring cure customers who stay a long time and come back year after year. They become friends.”