

Sukayu Onsen

The ultimate in mixed bathing

Nowhere is the massive scale of Sukayu Onsen more evident than in its signature “Bath for a Thousand Bathers” (Senninburo). Two large mixed baths and several hot-spring waterfalls for massaging the neck and shoulders are housed in an enormous, pillar-free wooden structure with a four-meter-high ceiling and a floor area of over 264 square meters. The traditional design uses local water-resistant cypress.

“The water is supposed to be good for the skin, for scratches, and for bad circulation, but it won’t make you smart, improve your personality, or solve your relationship problems,” Sukayu Onsen staffer Takada Shintaro jokes.

As well as being the biggest and grandest mixed indoor bathing space in Towada-Hachimantai, the Bath for a Thousand Bathers is also the most daunting for people with any hint of shyness. Times have changed. Rather than farm families who return every year, today’s clientele is a mix of tourists, few of whom are used to mixed bathing. As you emerge from the changing room, you descend a staircase in full view. And in contrast to outdoor baths, there are no handy rocks or trees to hide behind, nor any natural scenery to distract the other bathers’ attention. When the men stand beneath the hot waterfalls, nothing is left to the imagination.

Sukayu has taken steps to make the baths less intimidating. A wooden fence that extends from the women’s changing room door down into the bath itself enables women to enter the water without being seen by other bathers. Women are free to wear a *yuamigi* covering in the mixed bath, and *yuamigi* garments are sold in the reception area. There are also designated times, morning and evening, set aside for women bathers only.

Sukayu is also participating in the Ministry of the Environment’s Mixed Bathing Project. The test run of a few “*yuamigi* days,” when both men and women have to wear a covering garment, successfully attracted more women and couples to this magnificent bath and – surveys show – helped recreate the genial and carefree atmosphere of earlier times.

“We are always exploring ways to make the mixed bathing experience more authentic and enjoyable. We may start gradually introducing *yuamigi* days on a more regular basis until they become a one-day-a-month fixture. That’s our goal for the future,” Shintaro says.