

Kunimi Onsen Mori Sanso

Living with a volcano

With three generations of the Mori family living on the premises, including Soichi's 92-year-old mother, Mori Sanso feels very much like the family-run business it is. The Moris have their own distinctive way of life: spending the months from spring through autumn on the mountain, and the winter down in the city of Morioka. It all sounds quite idyllic until you remember that Mt. Akita-Komagatake is a live volcano, which last erupted from September 1970 to January 1971.

"I was in middle school at the time," Soichi recalls. "There were no rules about evacuation or staying away from eruptions back then. In fact, when the eruption occurred, there was a national athletic meet taking place on the mountain, with teams of climbers racing along trails with weighted backpacks!" The photograph albums that are kept in the communal dining room include pictures of the teenage Soichi happily watching the eruption from no great distance.

A far less serious challenge that Mori Sanso faces on a daily basis is dealing with the hardness of the hot spring's highly unusual jade-colored water. Soichi has to clean all the pipes thoroughly once a week to prevent them from breaking under the buildup of mineral deposits and make sure his guests can enjoy bathing unimpeded. "We bash the pipes with a piece of wood to detach the scaling, then rinse them out with fresh water," Soichi says. Early-morning bathers might notice flakes of whitish crust on the water's surface, but when the water is agitated, they soon vanish.