Toshichi Onsen

Surviving the snow on Mt. Hachimantai

Toshichi Onsen has the highest elevation of any hot spring in the northern part of the Tohoku region. It is located at a height of 1,400 meters, just 200 meters below the summit of Mt. Hachimantai. The hot spring itself was discovered in 1928 – long before the roads that lead to the inn began opening – so people had to carry in the construction materials for the first inn buildings, which opened in 1932.

"Roads started being built in the park in the 1960s. These enabled cars to get to the summit of Mt. Hachimantai, which had only been accessible on foot until then. People compared it to the arrival of Commodore Perry's Black Ships to force Japan to open up to the world," jokes fourth-generation proprietor Abe Takao. Toshichi's original *toji* building was demolished to make room for a new road, prompting the inn to complete the switch from the old self-catering, long-stay *toji* model to a *ryokan* inn that serves meals.

Both of the roads that go up Mt. Hachimantai – the Jukai Line and the Aspite Line – close from late October to April, and so does Toshichi Onsen. "We close up shop at the end of October every year and start boarding up all the windows to keep the snow out," Takao says. "Smaller structures, such as dressing rooms and fences, get disassembled so they won't be crushed by the snow, and we dismantle all the pipes that feed hot water into the baths as well. We only have three or four days before the roads are closed, so we have to work like crazy."

But the real struggle begins in mid-April before Toshichi Onsen reopens at the end of the month. First, Takao has to get permission from the two relevant prefectures to use the roads, which at this stage have been cleared of snow only about halfway up the mountain. Takao and his staff drive as far as they can by car, then make their way through the snow to the *ryokan*, pulling everything they need behind them on a sled, like polar explorers.

"Once we get here, we have to dig our way into the buildings and check for wind and snow damage. The sheer weight of the snow is enough to actually push the buildings out of place! Sometimes there's five meters of it, right up to the eaves – and once in a while even eight or more. But the deeper the snow, the less the damage, because the snow actually protects the roof from the wind," Takao explains.