

Fuke no Yu

Undefeated by a landslide

Fuke no Yu lies deep in the heart of nature. Nestled in a little fold on the slopes of Mt. Hachimantai at an altitude of 1,100 meters, the inn gets its name from the fumaroles (*fuke*) all around it. Fuke no Yu was founded in 1621, just five years after the death of Tokugawa Ieyasu, Japan's first shogun. When Abe Kyoko, the present proprietress, handed the reins to her son in 2005, he became the 18th generation of the family to run the inn.

"The first *toji* building that went up on the site was a simple structure with a cedar-bark roof," Kyoko says. "People used to come by horse or by ox, bringing their own luggage and food with them. They would lie on straw mats spread over the ground inside the same low-slung, barrack-like buildings where they slept." This system of warming the body atop geothermally heated ground is called *ondoru*. There is more to *ondoru* than heat; the minerals from the steam are absorbed through the skin.

Fuke no Yu flourished over the centuries, and by the 1970s there was a main *ryokan* building and a cluster of 16 *toji* buildings that could accommodate upwards of 600 *ondoru* guests, earning it the nickname "Fuke no Yu Ginza" because of the sheer number of people bustling around. But early in the morning of May 12, 1973, 350 years of history were wiped out when a landslide destroyed all the buildings except the *ryokan*, which was on higher ground on the far side of a stream.

"Luckily for us, the disaster happened just after the Golden Week national holiday. We didn't have many customers and nobody was hurt," says Kyoko, who was 33 at the time. "For the next 10 years, though, no travel agent would send anyone to us. We continued to pay our 60 staff for two years, but we couldn't keep doing that forever. Eventually, we had to tell them to go and find work elsewhere."

Informed that it would cost over ¥4 billion to clear the land and restore Fuke no Yu Ginza to its original scale, Kyoko opted instead to focus on creating a "bathing theme park" with a range of different baths centered around the surviving *ryokan*. She still feels nostalgic for the old *tojiba* atmosphere. "It was a very human environment. People talked to one another. That old spirit of give and take and everyone getting along is almost gone now," she says. "Japan's onsen culture is unique in the world. We must

treasure it and make sure we don't lose it."