

Tsuru no Yu

Navigating an age of change

Sato Kazushi, whose son now runs Tsuru no Yu, was the inn's 15th manager before becoming chairperson. He was, however, only the second generation of his family to manage the place. Kazushi's father, Sato Goro, managed another local *ryokan* before he took over Tsuru no Yu. "The deal on the first place was that my father got to manage it provided he paid for maintenance and repairs. But in his tenth year there, there was an accident and the inn burned down. My father then spent two years rebuilding the place and getting it back on track," Kazushi says.

Goro did such a good job that the *ryokan*'s owner decided to take it back under his own control, leaving Goro at loose ends. Looking for a new opportunity nearby, Goro approached Hagawa Kenjiro, who owned Tsuru no Yu. He proposed joint ownership of the inn, even though he had no money to invest at the time. Hagawa eventually handed it over to him in its entirety.

That was back in 1981, when Tsuru no Yu was much less well known than it is now. As the closest hot spring to Lake Tazawa in the Nyuto Onsenkyo district, it had long prospered as the most accessible of the seven therapeutic hot springs in that area. In 1966, Kokumin Kyukamura, a reasonably priced holiday resort operated by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, was built in Nyuto Onsenkyo along with new roads. As travel became easier, the popularity of Tsuru no Yu and the other inns in Nyuto Onsenkyo took off.

At the same time, a shift was in progress away from the self-catering hot-spring cure model that had sustained Tsuru no Yu for centuries. As the 1980s bubble economy gathered momentum, demand dwindled for modest self-catering holidays for recuperative purposes, with more people visiting hot springs purely for the fun of it.

"Even when I started here, the people who came for long therapeutic stays were quite elderly," says Kazushi. "Lifestyles have changed. People now do much less physical work. They're not like the old farmers who really needed to rest and recharge."

In 1980, when the Sato family took over Tsuru no Yu, the place had no telephone, no running water, and no electricity. Kazushi and his father Goro masterminded its transition from an austere self-catering inn for local farmers to a *ryokan* for tourists, while taking great care to preserve its old-world history and charm. The old self-catering building is still in use, while the magnificent mixed bath remains a prime attraction.