

Tae no Yu

The entrepreneurial latecomer

Several of the hot-spring inns in Towada-Hachimantai have histories that stretch back to the early seventeenth century. Tae no Yu is a comparatively young enterprise; it was established in 1952 by Goto Sadaji, the great-grandfather of Sato Koichiro, the present CEO. “My great-granddad worked as a porter, carrying people’s luggage back and forth to Kuroyu, another hot spring near here. Hiking was really taking off during the Showa era [1926–1989], so when Sadaji discovered a hot spring, he decided to go into business for himself,” Koichiro says.

At the start, things were not easy. Until the late 1960s, there was no proper road, no bus service and no electricity. Worst of all, the rather homely original building was crushed not once but twice by the weight of the snow in winter. Koichiro himself remembers how, in his childhood, the snow would find its way into the rooms through gaps around the wooden window frames, and damp towels would freeze solid overnight.

The business began to gain traction in the 1980s, once a Shinkansen bullet train line was extended to nearby Morioka. Today the bullet train takes just over two hours to get there from Tokyo, but in the old days the fastest train from Tokyo to the area took eight hours, and a sleeper took 12. As customer numbers increased, Tae no Yu started offering guests meals alongside the original self-catering option for hikers and hot-spring therapy enthusiasts. Even so, by the late 1980s, managing the inn was such a struggle for Koichiro’s great-grandfather (who was getting on in years) that he was tempted to sell it.

Koichiro’s mother and father, who were then living in Tokyo, could not bear the thought of all of Sadaji’s hard work going to waste. Although Nyuto Onsenkyo, the hot-spring district where Tae no Yu is located, was not yet a name with the cachet it has now, they could see that a hot spring located in a beautiful national park had enormous potential.

Koichiro’s father took early retirement, sold his house in Tokyo, and erected the present building using cash rather than debt. “My great-grandfather died in 1992, happy with what the family was doing. At

his funeral, I made a rather rash promise to leave Tokyo and move up here. I was 27 at the time,” Koichiro says. He kept his word, and Tae no Yu continues to flourish to this day.