

Kuroyu

The virtues of simplicity

Kuroyu is one of the simplest and most authentic therapeutic hot-spring inns (*tojiba*) in Towada-Hachimantai National Park. Located at the bottom of a steep, narrow path deep in Nyuto Onsenkyo, it closes in winter when the snow renders it inaccessible. There are four main buildings: two self-catering blocks and two *ryokan* where meals are served.

“When I was a student in the 1960s, most of the guests who came here cooked for themselves,” Kuroyu chairperson Ikeda Yasuhisa recalls. “Our older customers still tend to come at very specific times of year to pick bamboo shoots, mushrooms, or mountain vegetables. They like to share the food they cook and spend time socializing. But nowadays self-caterers account for less than 10 percent of our sales.”

The *toji* self-catering blocks were constructed in the Taisho era (1912–1926) using chestnut and cedar. Originally the clientele consisted of farmers who came to recuperate in the off-season, but the place has also seen more illustrious visitors. The annex at a slight remove from the rest of the buildings was constructed in 1963 to accommodate Prince Takamatsu (1905–1987), one of the younger brothers of Emperor Hirohito (1901–1989). A keen sportsman, the prince used to visit the mountains of Hakkoda and Hachimantai to ski in the spring months.

When it comes to the architecture, there are practical reasons to stick with the old ways. Hydrogen sulfide gas corrodes the rebar in ferroconcrete, making rustic wooden buildings a more economical, longer-lasting option, as well as a better aesthetic fit for the unspoiled landscape of the park.

“The Nyuto Onsenkyo ethos is not about being showy,” Yasuhisa says. “As a *ryokan*, we have a duty to protect this area. We live here in nature, and nature sustains us with delicious water and food. The hot spring is part of that ecosystem too. People come here for healing. It’s a world away from those big modern hot-spring hotels that cater to large groups on company trips.”

[NOTE: This glossary can be placed in a box anywhere in the text, but perhaps is best placed at the end as an appendix.]

A Towada-Hachimantai Hot-Spring Glossary

<i>Jisui</i>	Self-catering <i>toji</i>
<i>Konyoku</i>	Mixed bathing
<i>Konyoku-buro</i>	A mixed bath
<i>Ondoru</i>	A “bath” consisting of mats laid on geothermally heated ground
<i>Toji</i>	Hot-spring therapy or cure
<i>Tojiba</i>	A place for hot-spring therapy
<i>Yuamigi</i>	A covering garment worn in a mixed bath
