**Kazawa Onsen**

Kazawa Onsen is a naturally carbonated hot spring containing magnesium and sodium bicarbonate. Most onsen in Gunma Prefecture are simple hot springs that contain only trace minerals or are sulfate or chloride hot springs. Water flows from the source at 47.5 degrees Celsius and cools on its way to the surface, so there is no need to heat or cool the water before using it to fill the baths. The carbonated water is believed to aid circulation, stimulate the peripheral nervous system, and benefit the skin.

The Kazawa springs have long been known as a source of healing. One myth of the onsen's discovery dates to 650 and tells of villagers climbing up the mountains to investigate rising white smoke. There, Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of healing and medicine, manifested before them and hot water gushed forth from the ground. Another legend attributes the name "Kazawa" (meaning "deer stream") to a story of a wounded deer healed by the onsen's waters.

Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199), founder of the Kamakura

shogunate (1185–1333), ordered the construction of a hut at the hot spring while he was hunting in the area in 1193, but the first documented bathhouse was not established until 1562. Kazawa Onsen enjoyed great popularity throughout the Edo period (1603–1868), when it became a bustling town of inns and day-use facilities. By 1918, it had five public baths and welcomed around 5,000 visitors annually.

Disaster struck that same year. A great fire destroyed the town, with only Kōyōkan Inn left standing. Kōyōkan survives to this day, but the rest of the onsen facilities were rebuilt in a larger, flatter area. The first three inns of the new Kazawa Onsen opened the following year, in 1919.

### The 100-Kannon Trail

Although the springs are located in Gunma Prefecture, they were historically popular with the residents of Tōmi, a city across the border in Nagano Prefecture. The 12-kilometer road from Tōmi to the old Kazawa Onsen is lined with 100 Kannon statues, evenly spaced 1 *chō* (approximately 109 meters) apart.

Kannon, also known as Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit, is the bodhisattva of compassion, responsible for delivering sentient beings from suffering. The statues depict six incarnations of Kannon, each responsible for saving beings in one of Buddhism's six realms of existence. Most of the statues were created over a ten-year period between 1864 and 1873. They are attributed to a single stonemason, Nakayama Kiun, but his daughter is said to have helped complete many of the statues after he fell ill in 1869.

While Kannon statues commonly line the routes to temples, it is unusual for them to mark the path to a hot spring. They were placed here to allow visitors on the road to the onsen to pray for safety on their journey. Of particular note are the first, fiftieth, eightieth, and one-hundredth statues. These statues are larger than the others and depict Nyoirin Kannon, Horse-Headed Kannon, Shō Kannon, and Thousand-Armed Kannon, respectively.