

The History of Dake Onsen

Dake Onsen traces its origins to a group of hot-spring inns high up on Mt. Tetsu named Yui Onsen. Hot springs with similar names appear in historical records as early as the ninth century. By the seventeenth century, Yui Onsen was a thriving entertainment district catering to travelers and locals alike.

Moving Down the Mountain

In 1824, however, Yui Onsen was buried in a deadly landslide and the site was abandoned. Two years later, the daimyo of Nihonmatsu domain ordered a new *onsen* town built in an area called Jumonji Dake at the foot of Mt. Tetsu. As there were no natural hot springs at Jumonji Dake, a system of wooden conduits and pipes was built to carry the waters of the original springs from 6 kilometers above. Today, Dake Onsen's water is piped in exactly the same way.

In 1868, Jumonji Dake burned down during the Boshin War, when an alliance led by powerful domains in western Japan overthrew the Tokugawa shogunate. In 1870, it was replaced by a new *onsen* town in nearby Fukabori, but in 1903 a fire that spread from one of the inns burned Fukabori Onsen to the ground. Finally, in 1906, the town was rebuilt at its present location under the name Dake Onsen. Its waters still come from the same springs on Mt. Tetsu, 8 kilometers away.

The Republic of NikoNiko

The next dramatic move for Dake Onsen was rhetorical: in 1982, the town declared itself an independent country, “The Republic of NikoNiko.”

(*Nikoniko* is a Japanese word for cheerful smiles.) This came as part of a wave of tongue-in-cheek micronation declarations in Japan inspired by Inoue Hisashi’s 1981 satirical novel *The People of Kirikiri*, about a breakaway village in Iwate Prefecture.

For Dake Onsen, the declaration was driven by concern about the new Tohoku Shinkansen line. With no Shinkansen bullet train station planned for Nihonmatsu and many express trains to be replaced by Shinkansen services, Dake Onsen's visitor numbers seemed likely to drop. The declaration of independence was meant to keep Dake Onsen in the public eye—and it worked. The Republic of NikoNiko made national news, so the town leaders kept the joke going.

The tourist association's headquarters were renamed the "National Assembly Hall" and the head of the association was appointed President. The town issued passports and even a currency, the Cosmo (after Dake Onsen's town flower, the cosmos), which respectively functioned as stamped discount cards and shopping vouchers. It was not until 2006 that the reigning President finally announced that NikoNiko was re-merging with Japan, ending more than two decades of "independence."

Throughout Dake Onsen's circuitous history, the determination of the people of Nihonmatsu to preserve the hot springs is a constant. In the face of every challenge, from natural hazards to economic pressure, they have found a way to keep the *onsen* alive for future generations.