

## **Ibusuki Sand Baths: Not Just Another Day at the Beach**

Ibusuki is home to the world's only natural sand baths, called *sunamushi onsen*. Each year, approximately 250,000 people come to Ibusuki to be buried in the warm, wet sand. Therapeutic sand bathing has been practiced for at least 160 years and is purported to have a range of benefits, including improved circulation and pain relief.

The sauna-like sand is a rare natural phenomenon created by the area's unique geological features. Farther inland, geothermal pressure forces the water beneath the mountains up toward the surface at over 90 degrees Celsius. Some of the water bubbles up, forming natural springs, but the rest seeps downhill through the sandy soil. When the hot water reaches the shoreline, it hits colder, denser seawater and rises up into the sand along the beach—where it can be used for sand bathing.

The process of sand bathing is simple. Sand bath attendants first dig long,

body-sized holes in the sand, each about 10 centimeters deep. Each hole is then occupied by a sand-bather wearing a robe, who lies face up. The bathers are then covered up to their necks with hot, wet sand and left to enjoy the heat and swaddling pressure. Sand-bathing has been shown to raise blood pressure and stimulate circulation, and the sound of the waves and the cool breeze off the ocean are deeply relaxing. Most bathers remain buried for around 10 minutes, but others linger and enjoy the sensation for a half hour or more.