

# Warm Up at an Onsen Inn

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The macaque monkeys who regularly take to Japan's natural hot springs with icicles hanging from their fur may do so simply to enjoy a reprieve from the cold winter temperatures. But there's another intriguing reason these animals have made hot spring bathing part of their routine.

Researchers at the Jigokudani Monkey Park in Joshinetsu Kogen National Park in Nagano prefecture have found that these simians take a steamy dip to benefit from the relaxing properties of the warm mineral-rich water. This theory is backed up by scientists from Kyoto University, who discovered that the monkeys who bathed regularly had lower stress levels than those who opted out.

I was eager to experience some of the same benefits when I embarked on a walking tour of Kyushu's Oita prefecture, traveling from Usa to Yufuin, an onsen resort, with Walk Japan. We journeyed through forests of deep mossy green, charming hamlets and lakeside parks in one of the most beautiful but least visited parts of Japan. We stopped to admire Buddhist temples and relics both rustic and opulent.

Each night in a selection of different traditional ryokans, or inns, we soaked in onsen baths before preparing for the next day's hike. This traditional and relaxing Japanese ritual is a wonderful experience, especially after a long day of walking.





For weeks before I arrived in Japan, I researched the proper procedure for visiting an onsen and fretted about being naked in front of other people. I had read that tattoos are taboo, and I was concerned they might turn me away for the ill-thought-out decision I made at 18 — a butterfly permanently etched on my skin. I was relieved that nobody seemed to even notice my tattoo, but other inked travelers wishing to visit onsens should be prepared that they might need to cover up their body art or may even be turned away from some more traditional establishments.

The onsen tradition in Japanese culture is so ancient that it was cited in the Nihon Shoki which was written in 720. Perhaps that long history is why it feels so natural to disrobe and bathe with others when in Japan, something that would feel uncomfortable back at home. All self-consciousness falls away along with your clothes, and what you find is a sense of relaxation and renewal — along with a healthy dose of body positivity. Everyone bathes in Japan, it isn't about comparing yourself to others, but an act of essential self-care.

### **Here's How to Enjoy an Onsen in Japan**

Japan's rich volcanic geology means that it has more naturally occurring hot springs than anywhere else on Earth. So, when you visit Japan, you simply must visit an onsen!

There are different types of onsen all over Japan boasting varying mineral contents including iron, alkaline, hydrogen, and even sulfur onsens, which have a milky appearance and are a little stinky.

A walking tour might sound low impact and it's certainly an eco-conscious way to see a country that fits into the growing trend for sustainable travel. But after logging five to six hours of walking every day, especially up and down steep temple steps or climbing Mount Yayama, my muscles were weary and in need of relaxation. Visiting the onsen quickly became an enjoyable ritual, a reward after all the miles logged during the day.

## **Get Naked**

The experience begins with disrobing. You cannot wear a bathing suit in an onsen. You'll be provided with a very small towel which can offer you a little modesty as you move from different areas. Leave any large towels you brought with you in the locker room. The hot spring waters, which must be at least 77°F to qualify as an onsen, naturally contain up to 19 different minerals that may offer health benefits including leaving your skin soft and smooth. Men and women are separated either in different onsens completely or by the use of partitions. Remember to drink plenty of water before and after you bathe and refrain from drinking alcohol.

## **Wash Well**

Bathers must wash thoroughly before entering the onsen so to not sully the clean waters. You'll usually be provided with a stool, basin, soap, and a cloth. There will be baths or showers to make sure you are squeaky clean before entering the onsen.



## **Keep the Water Clean**

The cloth used to wash yourself must never touch the water in the hot spring. Many people choose to fold it neatly and place it on top of their heads while they soak. Long hair must also be neatly tied up to prevent any hairs from getting in the water. Be sure to enter the tub slowly to get accustomed to the heat gradually.

## **Relax Quietly**

The geothermal heated springs are so relaxing that many visitors use this time to meditate, which is why it's polite to keep chatting to a minimum or at least do so quietly. Onsens are a chance to take a break from the busyness of everyday life, so don't rush the experience, relax and take it slow. There will usually be a relaxation area where you can rest after your bath. Dry yourself as much as you can with your small towel to prevent puddles on your way back to the locker room, where you can dry yourself properly and get cozy in a yukata. Remember, these casual kimonos must be closed left to right with the belt fastened at the front. Men traditionally tie them at the hip, whereas women tie them at the waist.



## **Extend Your Visit**

Staying at an onsen inn is possibly the best way to experience onsen culture. Not only will you benefit from the hot spring, but you can enjoy the traditional ryokan experience and a delicious meal provided by your host.

Japanese hospitality is second to none and when you stay at an onsen inn you are treated as a revered guest. My hosts ensured I had everything I needed for my authentic onsen experience and were attentive to my needs.

On your trip to Japan, practice some self-care just like the Jigokudani monkeys do and release all your stresses and strains with a soak at a traditional Japanese onsen.