



# A Day SOAKING in HELL

**Suzy Pope** finds heavenly respite in the hell pools of the Japanese spa town of Beppu.

**W**hite plumes of steam rising from the landscape announce my arrival into Beppu. Since the 19th century, this seaside city has been considered a major hot spring resort and people from all over Honshu would make the rail or road journey south to soak in the natural healing waters. People still flock to this hot spring town for restorative weekends away, and there's a jubilant holiday vibe to the groups on my bullet train from Osaka.



Walking from the main station to the seafront, I spot wisps of steam rising from every manhole cover; the naturally warmed water flows from nearly 3,000 hot springs across and around the city, feeding a seemingly endless selection of traditional onsens and spas. After several days in the mile-a-minute neon city of Osaka, I'm in Beppu to unwind.

I climb my way into the hillside suburb of Kannawa to explore some of the city's 'Eight Hells'. Far from a nightmare, each 'hell' is an otherworldly, serene pool, each in a different nature-defying colour. I take my time at each beautiful spot, admiring the milky-blue water of the Sea Hell that glows neon in the sunlight and enjoying the contrast of the rust-red Blood Pond Hell against the greenery of the walkway around it. Each 'hell' is over 100°C (therefore 'hot as hell'), so they are not the kind of hot springs you can bathe in. However, to experience the rejuvenating properties of the mineral-rich, naturally heated water, Beppu has myriad traditional onsens where cold spring water is mixed with the natural hot spring water, meaning bathing in balmy 30-40°C pools of replenishing goodness.

Up in Kannawa, there are plenty of onsens to choose from, including the Hyotan Onsen, which has been operating for over 100 years and offers private baths for those who prefer their onsen experience alone or as couples. I dip in and out of ten public pools, each one bath-warm and

surrounded by sand-coloured stone and trickling waterfalls. The water here is said to have a special moisturising quality and after an hour or so, I feel the cracks and lines on my hands soften and my muscles loosen. The rush and organised chaos of Japanese city life feels like a world away.

Kannawa is also the place to sample a healthy lunch of 'hell-steamed' cuisine. At Jigoku Mushi Kobo Kanazawa, beautiful kaiseki cuisine is freshly cooked in the steam of the natural hot springs. A wicker basket of sunshine-yellow corn, deep green vegetables and the freshest prawns and scallops from Beppu Bay are plunged into the depths of 'hell' to be steam-cooked in front of me. With no oil and no additives, each freshly steamed dish is a guilt-free ode to health. It's delicious as hell, too.

Back in the centre of Beppu, the oldest operating bathhouse in the city is Takegawara, which dates back to 1879. The building looks much older, with the dark wood and white walls of a Meiji-era shrine. A gentleman stops to talk to me as I admire the old building. He's a truck driver, transporting goods up and down Japan. "If Beppu is on my journey, I always stop here to rest," he says. "I've tried nearly every onsen here and Takegawara is my favourite."

It's just as old-world beautiful inside. The main hot spring pool is relatively small and extremely hot, and I can only handle a few minutes at a time. I prefer the outdoor mud bath – not the bubbling, slopping mud pools of my imagination, but a



mineral-rich silty water pool with mud underfoot. After a long soak, I emerge feeling soft as a newborn baby.

For a uniquely Beppu wellness experience, I head to the Beppu Beach Sand Bath. A patch of grey-black sand is separated from the shore where mummy-like bodies lie in a straight line before the sea. The sand, heated by natural hot spring steam, is heaped on top of me, surrounding me in warmth as the steel-grey sea stretches before me. My body warms gradually, and my limbs and muscles loosen – this treatment is said to improve blood circulation. Cocooned in the sand, there's a sauna effect and, through the perspiration, I can feel my body detoxifying.

In my spa hotel for the night, I pad down to the onsite onsen for a final soak before bed. That night, I slip into one of the deepest, undisturbed sleeps of my life.

Boarding the bullet train back to Osaka, I'm rested, sated and rejuvenated. A spa session at this seaside, hot spring city leaves me feeling like I've slipped out of my dry, tired city skin and emerged shiny and new. ■

