

HEALING WATERS

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SOAKING UP ONE OF JAPAN'S MOST BELOVED TRADITIONS IS THE ULTIMATE IN APRÈS-SKI ACTIVITIES

Picture the scene: you've spent a gruelling day on the slopes skiing or snowboarding, you're cold, exhausted and your muscles are on the verge of mutiny. What comes next? In the West a hot toddy and a warm bath are generally the best options available for a post-snow pick-me-up, however, for skiers in Japan, there's something much more therapeutic: the *onsen*

A blanket word for hot springs and the various bathing facilities that use them, the onsen is a year-round attraction for locals and visitors alike, but it's during winter when they really come into their own. Every ski resort has at least one and whether private or public, gender segregated or mixed, the principle remains the same: a long, indulgent soak in steamy, mineral-infused waters.

And this is a country that does hot springs like nowhere else. Thanks to its location on the volcanic Pacific Ring of Fire, Japan is a hotbed for geothermal activity, resulting in 25,000 naturally-occurring mineral hot springs, which pepper the length and breadth of the country and are channelled into 3,000 spa resorts - more than anywhere else on earth.

History

Onsens have undoubtedly been enjoyed for centuries but their origins - at least in terms of human use - are hazy. One popular theory attributes their discovery around 3,000 years ago to unwitting ancient hunters, who were led to these bubbling springs by wounded prey who would go there to soothe their pain. Indeed, adding credence to this theory to this day, many onsens have statues of various creatures in their grounds, paying tribute to the animals that aided their discovery.

Health benefits

"Balneotherapy" - the use of bathing as a form of medical treatment - is widely practiced in Japan and Japanese scientists have been documenting the health benefits of onsens since the early 1700s. It's believed that the sulphur and magnesium-rich springs promote skin health, reduce inflammation (an ideal tonic for ski-weary muscles) and boost the immune system. ✦

PLAYFUL PRIMATES

Snow monkeys are also regular partakers of the warm waters during the snowy winters





IN HOT WATER
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HEALING WATERS
 Milky-looking spring waters of Kusatsu are said to cure almost every ailment



Onsen etiquette

As with many Japanese traditions, observing onsen etiquette is important. Avoid rookie errors and make your first-time visit as smooth and faux-pas-free as possible by following a few simple rules:

TAKE IT OFF
 If you're prudish, then an onsen probably isn't the place for you. Swimming suits aren't allowed in most bathhouses, so be prepared to get naked, in public, in front of complete strangers. And if you're inked, check on the onsen's "tattoo policy" before you go, as many don't allow them.

SCRUB UP
 Before you even think about taking the plunge, a long soapy shower is a prerequisite - Japanese bathers are fastidious about cleanliness.

KNOW YOUR TOWELS
 Use your towel for modesty as you move around the baths. And while you're soaking, place your towel neatly on top of your head or at the edge of the pool. Make sure it doesn't come into contact with the water - like swimwear, towels are regarded as "dirty".

SILENCE IS GOLDEN
 It's not done to talk loudly in an onsen. While friends and family do talk quietly among themselves, volume is low and chatter kept to a minimum. Most bathers are here to relax in peace and quiet, so be mindful.

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