

Onsen. Say this word to anyone in Japan and you will have their complete and full attention. The words are the same in Japanese and English with *on* (温) meaning warm or hot and *sen* (泉) meaning spring. *Onsen* are universally loved in Japan and one of the things that foreign tourists enjoy the most during their visits to the islands.



What is an *Onsen*?

In Japan, a source of water is deemed a true *onsen* if it meets the following three criteria:

- 1) The water bubbles up from the ground
- 2) It must consist of either hot water or mineral water with water vapour or other gasses (excluding natural gas)
- 3) It was a temperature over 25 degrees when it emerges from the ground

What kinds of *onsen* are there?

There are many different kinds of *onsen* in Japan. *Onsen* are classified based on their temperature and alkali level (basic, neutral, acidic) as well as divided further into nine categories based on the make-up of the waters: carbon dioxide springs, bicarbonate springs, chloride springs, sulphur springs, sulphate springs, acidic springs, radium springs, iron springs and simple (neutral) springs are all possible under this system. Different minerals are thought to have different healing properties. For example, sulphate springs are thought to lower blood pressure which also lowers the chance of strokes while bicarbonate springs are excellent for the skin because dirt and oils from the skin are more easily emulsified in the basic water. Since every *onsen* is unique, their healing benefits will often be displayed in the bathing area.

Why are *onsen* so popular?

From a western standpoint it is sometimes difficult to adjust to Japan's culture of public bathing. In western cultural heritage, public bathing was the domain of ancient Greece and Rome. In medieval Europe people shunned the practises of these civilisations, seeing them as immoral and sinful. Bathing came to be seen as something which was not only bad for your health, but even dangerous to your immortal soul! Regular bathing only became more prevalent later on in Europe's history but the western tradition of communal bathing has never really returned.

Japan is of course very different. Bathing and *onsen* have been a part of the everyday lives of Japanese people for thousands of years. In ancient Japan the act of purification was very important in both the indigenous Shinto religious practises as well as Buddhist ones imported from China. Many argue that in addition to simply feeling nice, that the ubiquitous popularity of *onsen* was originally an extension of this focus on purification and being clean in both body and spirit. Bathing in an *onsen* allows one to wash away sins along with the dirt of everyday living.

Even the gods are said to enjoy the pleasures of *onsen*. Tamatsukuri Onsen in Shimane prefecture is said to be visited once a year by Izanagi and Izamai, the gods who created the Japanese archipelago. This association with divinity was so strong that *onsen* were often thought to be gifts from the gods. Since *onsen* are naturally occurring, usually the history of a specific *onsen* starts with its discovery by humans. *Onsen* were usually stumbled upon or found by following animals to the springs. This act of serendipity was seen to be miraculous and therefore divine. Sometimes the animals followed were seen as messengers from the gods; it is still common to see statues of the animals at *onsen* which in legend lead humans to the waters.



Gradually however, bathing in *onsen* began to lose some of its religious significance and became more of an aspect of everyday life. In the Edo period it was common for people to bath together in large mix-gender baths. However as western influence increased in the Meiji period and after post war reforms, mixed gender baths are rare now.



In modern Japan, *onsen* are seen as an important way for people to build connections with one another in Japan. Often people will visit *onsen* together with family, friends, or even their co-workers. People place great importance on the concept of *hadaka no tsukiai* or skinship, believing that bathing together is a good way to break down barriers between people to form strong connections. As well, most *onsen* are located in the countryside. Going to an *onsen* is a great way to relax from the stress of modern life and recharge your energy. It's easy to understand why so many people have loved *onsen* for so long!

Jozankei Onsen

Located in the mountains near to Sapporo, Jozankei has adopted the Japanese water spirit, the Kappa, as its mascot. Statues of the creature can be seen all around town, and visitors will often try to visit as many as they can. Jozankei also boasts lovely nature, adventure tourism, and many yearly festivals, including an ice candle festival in the wintertime. Website: <http://jozankei.jp/en/>

Sounkyo Onsen

Located in the Daisetsuzan national park, this onsen town is well known for its beauty, particularly in the autumn for the fall colours. The nearby town of Kamikawa also hosts an impressive ice cave festival from Jan.~Mar. every year. Giant caves are constructed and then illuminated at night.

<http://www.sounkyo.net/english/>

Shiretoko

The UNSECO World Natural Heritage site of Shiretoko is one of Hokkaido's treasures. The natural beauty of Shiretoko is unparalleled; this remote part of the island features unique ecological areas as well as being home to numerous different animals. One of the most interesting features is the Kamuiwakka Hot Falls. Kamuiwakka means "water of the gods" in the Ainu language and it is a natural onsen waterfall; the temperature of the water is over 30 degrees! Website: <http://www.shiretoko.asia/index.html>

Toyako Onsen

Located in the UNSECO World Natural Heritage site of Lake Toya the onsen of Lake Toya are surrounded by some very unique geological features like active volcanoes and the caldera lake Toya itself. Toyako is a great place to learn more about vocalism, spend time in nature, as well as enjoy a long soak in an *onsen*. Website: <http://www.laketoya.com/> (Japanese)

Lake Akan

Lake Akan is one of the most unique areas of Hokkaido. Held in special regard by the indigenous Ainu people, the lake is the home of naturally forming moss balls known as marimo. The national park is also a place to experience Ainu culture while also enjoying camping, hiking, and other nature activities. The onsen of Lake Akan are said to be therapeutic for arthritis and nerve pain.

Website: <http://www.lake-akan.com/en/>

Noboribetsu

Often counted among the best onsen in Japan, Noboribetsu is home to Hokkaido's most popular onsen. Noboribetsu's most well known event is the annual Hell festival. Many large floats, including the town mascot hell demons, are paraded up and down the center of town. There are a variety of different onsen in Noboribetsu.

Website: http://www.noboribetsu-spa.jp/?page_id=1797&lang=en

It is impossible to name all the incredible onsen that can be found in Hokkaido. These are some of the most famous onsen areas in Hokkaido, but the list is by no means exhaustive! For more information about onsen in Hokkaido please visit the websites of the various locales.

Onsen in

Hokkaido