



Japan National Tourist Organization

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THE HOT SPRINGS OF KYUSHU

In a land celebrated for its hot springs, Japan's southern island of Kyushu has some of the country's best onsen (spas).

Hot springs exist where there are volcanoes, and Kyushu has two of the most spectacular volcanoes in Japan. **Mount Aso**, rising smack in the middle of the island, is grand. Its caldera, the largest in the world, dominates the topography of central Kyushu Island.

At the southern end of Kyushu, towering over Kagoshima Bay, is **Mount Sakurajima**, which, like Aso, is a live volcano. Both periodically bellow showers of ash down over their surrounding cities and towns.

While volcanoes have become tourist attractions in and of themselves, it is the thermal results of their activities that have created the greatest benefit to Kyushu's residents and visitors. They have spawned innumerable bubbling, warm, soothing hot springs, many of which have arisen in out-of-the-way places that are exquisite hideaways of natural beauty. Kyushu's mild climate makes it a popular destination all year round.



Day 1 – Arrival



Since there is currently no direct service to Kyushu Island from North America, it is best to fly into Osaka's Kansai International Airport, which is closer to Kyushu than to Tokyo. Travelers arriving in Tokyo are nearly 750 miles from Kyushu, too far for a comfortable train ride. Most flights from Tokyo to Fukuoka do not leave from Narita International Airport, but from Haneda Airport, 44 miles away. Buses connecting the two airports take 1 hour and 15 minutes and cost ¥3,000. As of this writing, there is one flight from Narita to Fukuoka (Kyushu's largest city), a Japan Airlines flight leaving at 19:40 and arriving at 21:35. Some months it operates daily; others a few days a week.

From Kansai International Airport there are several flights a day to Fukuoka. Or, one may take the bullet train from Osaka and be there in 3 1/2 hours.

There is a fundamental difference between what is called a spa in Japan and what is called a spa in the West. In Japan, hot spring, *onsen*, and spa are used interchangeably to refer to a place where one goes “to take the waters,” and perhaps splurge on a massage. Beauty treatments, body wraps, facials, pedicures, exercise classes, and spa meals are not part of a typical spa experience in Japan; in most places they are not even available.

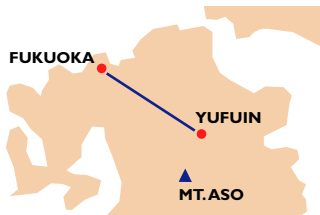


Open Air Bath

Washing with soap is done outside the tub; the hot water is for relaxation only. Don't stay in longer than you feel comfortable, and avoid hot baths immediately after eating. Too much alcohol is not advisable prior to entering a hot bath, but remember to stay well hydrated by drinking water.

Inns and hotels that serve meals as part of an overnight package charge per person and not per room. But these packages are an incredible value. Japanese cooking, with its emphasis on low-fat, high-fiber, and natural flavors, rivals any spa cuisine in the world.

Day 2 – FUKUOKA to YUFUIN



Take the train from Fukuoka's Hakata Station to *Yufuin*. The ride is 2 hours and 10 minutes, if you take one of the few through trains that doesn't require changing at *Kurume*.

Yufuin Onsen is an ideal place to recover from jet lag. This small, quiet spa, located on a mountain plateau with bracing fresh air, has excellent accommodations, beautiful hot spring baths, homegrown organic food, and several attractive art museums and galleries, as well as some resident craftspeople.

When Japan's *onsen* boom took off in the 1970's, a delegation from Yufuin went to Europe to study successful spas and chart the spa town's future. The ideas they returned with have made Yufuin a model *onsen* for Japan's burgeoning hospitality industry.

To ensure that Yufuin would be more than just another pretty mountain spa, the local leaders decided to enrich the town's cultural life, control the growth of large-scale buildings, and stress the concept of “healthy food with healthy baths.”

In addition to the museums and galleries listed on tourist brochures, Yufuin has a *Folk Craft Village* where you can watch artisans at work, and an annual *film festival* (in August) that draws big names from around Japan.

The topography of Yufuin is relatively flat, and the best way to get around is to rent a bicycle at the train station. Pedal over to **Lake Kinrinko** for an early morning bath in the quiet mist that wafts over the lake and the nearby mountains. The town's public bath is in a tiny, thatched-roof pavilion overlooking the lake. There's no room for separate facilities; it's mixed bathing. Put the bath fee in the honor box outside, and soak 'til your heart's content. Local women sometimes bring their laundry, to wash in the communal hot water trough outside and chat with their neighbors.

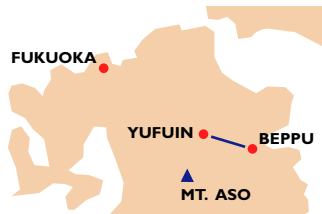
In addition to the **Shitanyu public bath**, most of the inns feature attractive private indoor baths and outdoor **rotenburo**. Some of the town's leading inns have restaurants or coffee shops open to the public. If an overnight stay at a luxury property is not within your budget, you can still enjoy their atmosphere for a couple of hours.

A leisurely way to see Yufuin's sights, including some outlying temples, is by horse-drawn cart.

If you plan to be in Yufuin on a weekend or holiday, advance reservations are highly recommended.

Spend night Two and night Three in Yufuin.

Day 4 & 5 – Train from YUFUIN to BEPPU



The train from Yufuin to Beppu takes only one hour. But these two cities are about as far apart in mood as two spas can be. **Beppu** is one of the most famous hot spring resorts in Japan, visited by millions of people a year. It provides everything that many travelers want when they visit an onsen: lots of hot springs, lots of people, lots of action.

If crowds and noise aren't your style, there are plenty of places to stay in Beppu where tranquility prevails. Choose whatever type of lodging you prefer, but don't miss Beppu. There's no place like it on the face of the earth.

Beppu sits on a hillside overlooking the sea. But what appears to be a sloping hill is actually the interior wall of a volcano. The other half of the volcano blew out into the ocean eons ago. If you approach Beppu by ship, as many people do, the city appears to be on fire. Numerous clouds of smoke rise above the rooftops. This is not smoke, however, but steam. The thermal waters beneath Beppu boil up in nearly 3,000 different places. The city actually encompasses eight different spas, each with a different type of thermal water.

Bathing and sightseeing are the two main activities in Beppu. The best-known baths in Beppu are at the **Suginoi Hotel**, a gigantic complex high on a hill overlooking



Beppu City

the city. It's not necessary to stay here in order to bathe here; day bathers can buy an entrance ticket. The Suginoi has two gigantic public baths, each known as a *sennin-buro*, or "thousand-person bath." This is bathing as entertainment; each bathing area is lavishly decorated and contains numerous pools featuring water of various temperatures and mineral content. One giant public bath is for women, the other for men, and the designation switches every day; so if you come to the Suginoi two days in a row, you can try both baths.

If the thought of bathing with 1,000 other people leaves you feeling a bit hesitant, remember, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Bathing with crowds of people in Japan is as commonplace to your fellow bathers as riding a train during rush hour. They don't give it a second thought, and neither should you.

Beppu also offers *sand baths*, which some consider to be the ideal way to heat the body all the way to the bone marrow. This involves lying in hot sand draped in a *yukata* (cotton robe) and having more sand shoveled on you until only your face is exposed. The sand bath at *Takegawara Onsen* is in a beautiful old wooden building that somehow, in this city of glitz and gimmicks, managed to survive from an earlier era.



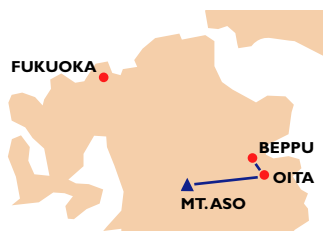
Hells (jigoku)

Among Beppu's many other types of baths are natural steam baths (*mushi-yu*) and mud baths (*doro-yu*). Ask your innkeeper where to find them. One large complex with several different types of healthy baths, both mineral and mud, is *Hoyoland*. Another is *Hyotan Onsen* in the Kannawa district, an area that contains lots of inns, including some that have retained their traditional old-style wooden buildings and spacious gardens.



For sightseeing, Beppu's do-not-miss attraction is the so-called "hells" or *jigoku*. Bubbling up out of the earth are a variety of geothermal wonders: each hell, or pool, a different color and consistency. One is blood red, another sea green, another cobalt blue, and so on. The unusual colors look more like a left-over sci-fi movie set than the hand of mother nature. Some are muddy, with blobs of hot mud bubbling up, then sinking with a plop. Some shoot up periodically as geysers; one is stocked with alligators. Tour buses make a *jigoku meguri*, circuit of 8 of the hells, in 2 hours and 20 minutes for ¥2,500. Commentary is in Japanese only, but these natural wonders can be comprehended without the verbal description.

Other pastimes in Beppu include an amusement park in the mountains above the city, with a terrific roller coaster and a panoramic view. The ship permanently moored in the harbor below is a retired British cruise ship that welcomes tourists on board. Sip a drink while viewing the city from its deck.



After two days and nights sampling Beppu's merry madness, it's time to move on. Your next destination is the lovely national park surrounding Mount Aso.

Day 6 – Train from **BEPPU** to **OITA** then on to **MT. ASO**

Take train south from **Beppu** to **Oita**, then on to Aso Station, 1 hour and 40 minutes by express train. This may be the only time in your life you ride a train through the caldera of a volcano. A caldera is the crater basin of a volcano, and Mt. Aso's caldera is the largest in the world. At its widest point, it stretches 15 miles across. Most of it is grasslands, broken up by a few towns and roads, as well as the train line. The grasslands separate the volcano's outer rim from the inner cone, which rises up to a peak in the center of the caldera. The outer rim also rises up, in a ring of steep mountains encircling the caldera. The scenery here is the most spectacular in Kyushu.

Aso and the adjoining town of **Uchinomaki** contain over a dozen places to stay, from large hotels to small inns. All feature hot spring baths, fed by the geothermal springs. One of the hotels has its baths on the top floor, with a window view of Mt. Aso's center peak.

Sightseeing buses leave from Aso Station bound for the west side of the crater. It takes about 30 minutes and costs ¥610. A ropeway carries people up to the crater rim in four minutes. There you are, staring down into a smoking, live volcano. In the unlikely event that Mt. Aso begins emitting ash instead of smoke, concrete bunkers encircling the rim provide shelter for tourists. But, the volcano is constantly monitored, and if it appears to be getting restless, sightseers are prohibited from ascending the mountain.



Mt. Aso

To learn more about the monitoring of Mt. Aso's thermal activities, visit the **Mt. Aso Volcanic Museum**, located partway down the outer rim of the volcano's central peak. One of the exhibits is a big TV monitor showing the continuous live action of the volcano as recorded by a video camera that has actually been lowered down into the crater. The sightseeing bus stops here.

Day 7 – **MT. ASO** or **KUMAMOTO CITY**

Day Seven offers a choice.

Option 1: Adventurous travelers accustomed to public transportation in rural Japan can explore the remote and rustic **southern flank of Mt. Aso**, a romantic, albeit minimalist retreat, with only two country spas. The reason to go here is certainly not luxury; you are isolated in the woods. Go here for the solitude and the fresh and delicious country cuisine, and most of all go here for some of the most incredible open-air baths in Japan. To get here requires two trains and a bus, of which there are only about three (buses) a day. For some, however, the transportation effort will be worth it. A traveler who goes to the trouble of getting to either of these spas will experience a side of Japan rarely encountered by foreigners.



Kumamoto Castle

Option 2: The alternative is to take a direct JR express train from Aso to **Kumamoto City** (1 hour) and visit one of Japan's finest castles as well as a noted landscape garden.

Southern Aso Course

Before heading off the beaten track, be sure accommodations are available. As mentioned above, each of these two spas is an isolated establishment sitting alone in the woods – there's no town and no other place to stay. **Tarutama Onsen** consists solely of the **Yamaguchi Ryokan** (tel. 09676-7-0006) and **Jigoku Onsen** consists only of the Seifuso (tel. 09676-7-0005).

These are places where people come for the baths; the rooms are secondary. Both inns have a wonderful variety of indoor and outdoor baths, including at least one that offers mixed bathing. At hot springs such as these, there is always a mixed bathing option, so that couples and families don't have to split up for the bath. In Japan, bathing has traditionally been an occasion for socializing as well as for getting clean.

Kumamoto City Course

Kumamoto Castle was an incredible feat of engineering when it was built 400 years ago. Its massive stone walls stretch for some 5.6 miles, and still inspire awe. Inside the restored donjon are several floors of exhibits showing what life was like for Kumamoto lords. Climb to the top for a panoramic city view.

Three museums encircle the castle. The Traditional Craft Museum (Dento Kogeikan), may be the most interesting; it features artwork by local craftsmen. The other two are the **Prefectural Art Museum**, whose collections include a display of full-size replicas of ancient Kyushu tombs, and the **Kumamoto Municipal Museum**, built by the nationally-known architect Kisho Kurokawa.

Ride a streetcar to Kumamoto's famous garden, **Suizenji Koen**. This meticulously laid out stroll garden depicts in miniature the 53 stages of the Old Tokaido Highway that connected Edo (Tokyo) with Kyoto. There's a teahouse where you can order a bowl of matcha, frothy green tea. Suizenji used to be the daimyo's private retreat.



Suizenji Koen

Day 8 – KUMAMOTO or KAGOSHIMA

Take an express train from **Kumamoto** south to **Kagoshima** (1 1/2 hours). If coming from the remote hot springs on Mt. Aso's south side, allow another 1 1/2 to 2 hours to reach Kumamoto Station before transferring to train for Kagoshima.

Kagoshima is a sunny port city at the southern end of Kyushu, often called the

“Naples of the Orient.” **Sakurajima**, a large and very live volcano, looms over Kagoshima from just across a narrow bay. Residents sometimes have to carry umbrellas when it spews gray ash.

Commuter ferries ply back and forth every 10 or 15 minutes, and the ride across the harbor takes only 15 minutes. **Sakurajima** offers unusual scenery, together with a unique bathing experience. A huge eruption in 1914 covered most of the island with lava, and this barren lunar landscape has become a tourist attraction. **Furusato Onsen**, a 15-minute bus ride from the ferry terminal, caters to day-bathers as well as overnight guests. The inns are on a hillside overlooking the ocean, and there is an open-air hot spring bath at the water’s edge. This is a blissful place for a relaxing soak after a long day of traveling. (Note: Bathing suits are worn here, unlike at many **rotenburo**, because this bath is adjacent to the ocean and to a swimming pool.)

Day 9 – KAGOSHIMA



Kagoshima’s geographic location, coupled with the fact that a powerful clan, the Shimazus, ruled this area for nearly 700 years, have given the city a rich history. To see some of the remarkable events that took place here, visit the **Reimeikan**, the large and attractive **Kagoshima Prefectural Museum of Culture**. Instead of being a southern backwater, Kagoshima was more international than many other parts of Japan, because of the proximity to the Asian mainland.

The Portuguese arrived in 1543, and introduced guns. Francis Xavier arrived in 1549, bringing Christianity. St. Xavier Church was built in Kagoshima 1949 to commemorate 400 years of Catholicism in Japan.

Another interesting place to visit is the **Shoko Shuseikan**, a factory built by Lord Shimazu in 1851 to manufacture Western-style arms, ships, and other technologically advanced items at a time while many in Edo and elsewhere were resisting opening the country to the West.

Next door to the factory is an elegant villa and garden, **Sengan-en**, that once belonged to the Shimazu clan and is now open to the public. When they ruled here, the area was known as **Satsuma**. Satsuma-ware ceramics are still produced in Kagoshima, and it’s possible to visit a workshop.

Day 10 & 11 – IBUSUKI ONSEN

The final spa on this tour is an onsen that epitomizes present-day Japan. **Ibusuki Onsen** combines old and new, East and West, in a completely unselfconscious manner.



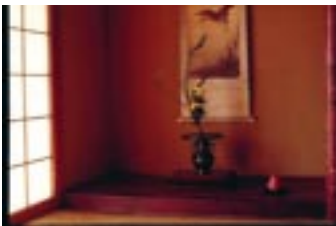
Hibiscus

This subtropical spa, graced with palm trees and long beaches, is a good place to rest and reflect on what you've seen. The baths are great, and there are sightseeing attractions for those who still want to explore.

Ibusuki is an hour south of **Kagoshima City** by express train, at the bottom end of Kagoshima Bay; Kagoshima City is at the top. The curving Satsuma Peninsula encloses the west side of the bay.

Accommodations at this well-known *onsen* run the gamut from youth hostels to large resort hotels. **The Ibusuki Iwasaki Hotel** was designed as Japan's premier honeymoon resort. Before jet planes made it possible for newlyweds to fly to Hawaii, those who wanted a honeymoon with a tropical mood came here.

To enhance the tropical mood, Mr. Iwasaki's original hotel, which stands adjacent to the Ibusuki Iwasaki, featured the first "jungle bath" in Japan. Jungle baths, which became wildly popular, are an oversized "thousand-people" bathing area filled with tropical plants, waterfalls, decorative bridges and other exotic touches. The original jungle bath, now refurbished, is still here and is a major attraction. Be sure to try it. Those not staying overnight at one of the property's hotels can buy a bath ticket.



Ryokan (inside)

Ibusuki is also known for its sand baths. You can get covered with hot sand adjacent to the jungle bath, or, if you're staying in the main part of town, right on Ibusuki Beach. Just look for the colorful umbrellas which shade the exposed faces of those lying buried in the sand.

Among other sights not to be missed if you go to the Ibusuki Iwasaki Hotel is the contemporary art museum, designed by Fumihiko Maki, located right on the extensive grounds.

Day 12 – Return Home

Train to Kagoshima, bus to airport, and fly from Kagoshima to Osaka or Tokyo for flight home.

MORE SPAS

This itinerary assumes that most people who come to Japan to sample the hot springs are coming to relax, and do not want to pack up and move on every day. If you desire to add additional overnight stops, other possibilities among Kyushu's dozens of hot springs include:

- **Takeo Onsen**, not far from the ceramic centers of **Imari** and **Arita**;
- **Futsukaichi Onsen**, near Kyushu's gateway city of **Fukuoka**;
- **Kirishima Highlands** and **Ebino Highlands**, in the mountainous area along the border of **Kagoshima** and **Miyazaki** prefectures, offer dozens of spas large and small;

- **Unzen Onsen**, in the mountains of **Nagasaki** Prefecture, was a famous summer watering spot in the 19th century for foreigners living throughout East Asia, and has hotels that feature western food and white tablecloths;
- **Oita** Prefecture has several rustic onsen, including **Yunohira Onsen** and **Kabeyu Onsen**;
- The mountainous area beyond the north side of **Mt. Aso** contains many small, countryside hot springs, such as **Kurokawa Onsen**, whose inns usually have outdoor as well as indoor baths.

For further information, see the suggested reading and ask JNTO for more spa suggestions along this route.

RESOURCES

Books

A Guide to Japanese Hot Springs by Anne Hotta with Yoko Ishiguro (Kodansha Intl., 1986). Outdated information in many instances, but good chapter on bath etiquette.

Japan's Hidden Hot Springs by Robert Neff (Charles C. Tuttle & Co., 1995)

Pleasures of the Japanese Bath by Peter Grilli and Dana Levy (Weatherhill, 1992). Out of print, try libraries or the Internet

Internet Sites

<http://www.wdirewolff.com/JapOnsen.htm>

Essay on Japanese onsen with photo gallery by W. Dire Wolff

<http://www.outdoorjapan.com/section-onsen.html>

Information on outdoor onsen on Hokkaido and Honshu; onsen vocabulary

<http://gemini.u-aizu.ac.jp/~anatol/projects/rachel/springs.html>

Essay on Japan's onsen by Rachel Farnay (with photos), discusses Beppu and Ibusuki

Useful Vocabulary

daiyokujo = main bath (most hotels have two main baths; one for women, one for men)

furo, ofuro = bath, bath tub

geta = wooden clogs provided for guests to use outside

kazoku-buro = family bath (can be reserved as a private bath by individuals as well)

konyoku = mixed bathing

rotenburo = outdoor, open-air bath

yukata = cotton kimono provided for guests to sleep in, and wear to the bath