



A Day at the *Onsen*: Mitama-no-Yu

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Introduction

After a hard day's work, what do you do to relax? Many people from the West might go drinking with friends, unwind with some video games, or curl up in their blankets at home while reading a book. The Japanese enjoy these activities as well, but one custom ubiquitous in Japan—but rarely seen in Western countries—is visiting the *onsen*.

Onsen, which means hot spring in Japanese, is a place for public bathing with heated baths, often equipped with spa-like relaxation facilities as well. Just imagine relieving a day's stress in a nice, hot bath—except naked and with a bunch of other naked strangers! Yes, the Japanese tradition of visiting the *onsen* is a communal one and a very intimate experience at that.

I recently had the opportunity to visit Mitama-no-Yu, a natural *onsen* located in the municipality formerly known as Mitama-cho in Yamanashi Prefecture. There, I met Kensaku Watanabe, the manager at Mitama-no-Yu. Watanabe first started managing Mitama-no-Yu when the city hall of Mitama-cho decided that the *onsen* would be better run by a private company. So while the facilities are publicly owned, Mitama-no-Yu is managed privately. The same company also manages the Hotel Naito *onsen*. I was able to discuss with Mr. Watanabe about *onsen*, what makes Mitama-no-Yu special, and how things will change for onsens and Mitama-no-Yu going forward.

The Rise of the *Onsen* Tradition

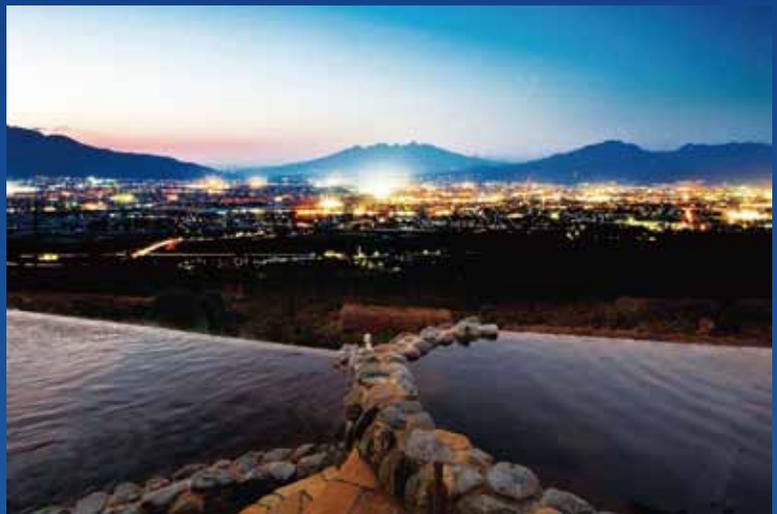
Japanese people first started going to *onsen* because there were no bathing facilities found in individual houses. Much like bathhouses in the West, *onsen* are communal bathing areas used by many people within a certain area, a beacon of hygiene that arose when people were unable to bathe regularly. *Onsen* also provided a communal space for socializing. The local gossip in the town happened while people bathed and relaxed at the end of the day. Famous warlords like Takeda Shingen from Kai Province (now Yamanashi Prefecture) used them to heal their wounds after fierce battles.

Onsen also have the added benefit of producing naturally-heated baths, relying on geothermal heating to provide a steamy bathing experience.. This is due to the *onsen's* deep connection to Japan's volcanic activity, as Japan sits on the Ring of Fire and experiences much volcanic and seismic activity. The hot water from *onsens* helps to relax your muscles and encourages muscle repair after a full day of extensive use.

Mr. Watanabe observes that today, however, customers are much less talkative with one another. Most people are rather quiet. These people come to relax their bodies and their minds in peace, bathing in a large tub where they can fully stretch out, something they cannot do in their tiny Japanese homes. While the way in which the Japanese use *onsens* may change, and while the frequency of *onsen* visits may decrease as better in-home bathing facilities become more common, Mr. Watanabe believes that Japanese people will always have the urge to visit *onsens*.

Mitama-no-Yu

Mitama-no-Yu is a gorgeous *onsen*. It provides a wonderful night view overlooking the Kofu basin, so bathers can enjoy the scenery as they relax their bodies. It is also a natural *onsen*, relying on geothermal heating rather than artificial means, something Watanabe is especially proud of.



In addition to the normal *onsen* facilities, which include multiple hot water baths, a seated shower area, and a sauna, Mitama-no-Yu also provides various other services, such as massages, an inkan (personal seal) corner, food, and a farmers market. This is because offering an *onsen* alone will not attract customers anymore; a beautiful view and the additional facilities make Mitama-no-Yu stand out and make it a great place to stop for a day trip from the surrounding prefectures. In fact, 40% of Mitama-no-Yu's customers herald from outside the prefecture, coming from surrounding prefectures like Kanagawa, Shizuoka, and Tokyo.



The farmer's market in particular offers a unique experience you cannot find anywhere else. This is where incredibly large carrots are sold early in the morning. In fact, it is famous for its large carrots, with the farmers market out front selling out before the *onsen* opens at 10am! Mitama-no-yu also holds a carrot festival every year. It is

rumored that over 1000 farmers would bring wheelbarrows of carrots to Kofu and other areas to sell, but now that number has dwindled to just 50 producers. The Ichikawa-Misato-cho area also has a carrot club. Carrots are really popular here!

Japan also has a custom of eating and drinking certain foods and beverages during an *onsen* trip. The most common drink is milk, probably to help the body keep hydrated after an intensely dehydrated *onsen* session. In addition to milk, Mitama-no-Yu's popular choices include *tonkatsu*, *hoto*, carrots, and *kankan musume* sweetcorn—a special type of corn found at Mitama-no-Yu. Many visitors from outside the prefecture buy *omiyage* (souvenir snacks) that can only be found here.

With all of this additional merchandise and services available besides the *onsen* itself, it becomes clear that the *onsen* has changed greatly over time. Starting as a place to take an infrequent bath, and evolving into a place for community socialization, it has now expanded and transformed into an all-out entertainment facility with a distinct Japanese air. I asked Mr. Watanabe about these recent trends and changes in *onsen*, like adding certain minerals or even fruits to baths in order to give them special properties. He likes natural baths like Mitama-no-Yu the best, untampered by artificially adding trendy ingredients. He has no particular plans to make an *onsen* with special ingredients like many other *onsen*, adding yuzu or other special fruits, spices into the baths. Simply put, natural is best: "I want everyone to enjoy a natural bath while gazing out at the wonderful panoramic view in front of them."



Who Goes to the *Onsen*?

Every year, approximately 260,000 visitors come to Mitama-no-yu. Who visits the *onsen* and when largely reflects Japan's highly regimented society: in March, many students come during their spring break. Many businessmen drop in to the *onsen* on their way home from work. In the mornings, usually elderly women come as they do not work. The main customers, however, are the elderly; with most younger Japanese busy during the day between school and work, Japan's large retired population in their 60s and older make up a large portion of *onsen* frequenters.

Yet young people's relative absence from *onsen* compared to their elders cannot be entirely explained away because of their busier schedules. Watanabe has noticed the number of young people coming to the *onsen* to simply take a quick bath, not soaking for too long, has increased. He attributes this to the slow Westernization of the younger generation. Though its true that young Japanese are more subject to these influences, *onsen* are a key part of Japanese culture, so even if *onsen* visits become less frequent, they will still make time for a visit every now and then. Even if the Japanese lifestyle changes, people still have these same inclinations and habits that have developed over the centuries. For example, tatami, a material used to make traditional Japanese floors, has seen decreased

popularity in recent decades, yet it will not disappear forever as it constitutes a key part of the Japanese identity.

Non-Japanese remain a rare sight at the *onsen*. Some Chinese tourists on bus tours stop by on occasion. Mitama-no-Yu lacks any rooms for overnight stays, so people come to this *higaeri-onsen* (day *onsen*) for just a few hours.

Sometimes it is an issue getting tourists to learn and obey written and unspoken rules of the *onsen*. Right now, the facility is geared toward Japanese people, so it maintains no signage in English to reach a wider audience other than its core audience of Japanese visitors. Also, if more foreigners start to frequent *onsen*, the Japanese clientele may feel alienated or disturbed by these *onsen* novices. Most Japanese visitors to the *onsen* come for a quiet atmosphere, silently obeying the norms of the *onsen* as they relax from a tiring day of work. These norms include washing your body before entering the bath, entering the bath completely naked (without any swim trunks either!), keeping your personal towel out of the water, and keeping your noise level to a minimum. If tourists start coming in large numbers, most of whom may not know such rules, it might disturb the tranquil equilibrium so carefully maintained. However, Watanabe admits that Japanese *onsen* facilities cannot simply ignore foreigners, especially as Japan's population decreases and the number of tourists increase.

What Message Does Watanabe Want to Send?

"Come to the farmers market, and enjoy the fresh fruits and veggies and a great location. Mitama-no-Yu has a great panoramic view of nature. I hope you to come visit the *onsen* and do things you can't do anywhere else! I also want more people to come to Yamanashi and learn about the Ichikawa Misato area Even if it is a stop on the way to Tokyo, I want them to think, 'I'm glad I came to Yamanashi.'"



How to get There

Mitama-no-Yu is just a 5 minute taxi ride away from Kai Ueno Station on the JR Minobu Line. You can also drive there from Kofu Station (35 minutes) or Shinjuku Station (1 hour and 45 minutes). It is also open year-round (from 10am-11pm), only closing for inspection days.



Brandon is in his second year as CIR in Yamanashi. He really misses the warmth of summer despite complaining about the Yamanashi heat and humidity just a few months ago. You can usually find him in his apartment playing some Pokemon game or studying some kanji while huddled in a blanket.