

# Unwinding in Yufuin

**Izumi Kuwano**, a ryokan owner in the small hot spring resort of Yufuin, offers a personal take on tourism in the town.

**Y**ufuin is located in Oita Prefecture, central Kyushu, the most southwesterly of Japan's four main islands. It is situated in a basin surrounded by mountains. Although primarily a hot spring town blessed with an abundance of natural hot water, gushing up out of the ground anywhere if you dig deep enough, it is also home to around 100 traditional Japanese inns, or *ryokan*. Hemmed in by the mountains, the limited availability of land in Yufuin means that all of the town's ryokans are on the small side, with the number of rooms averaging just 12.5. It may not be particularly efficient, but this is how things are done in Yufuin.

Kept out of the spotlight by the many hot springs in Beppu, which boasts the most hot springs and the largest volume of hot spring water in Japan, Yufuin was once a small hot spring resort known as Oku-Beppu (hidden Beppu). Frequented only by those in the know, it was so isolated that plans to build a dam were even drawn up. Yufuin initially became established as a small-scale residential resort, designed along the same lines as the spa resort town of Baden-Baden

in southwest Germany, forty to fifty years ago. Although Japanese people tend to favor instant gratification, making decisions based entirely on the here and now, Yufuin has worked to establish itself as a resort town over a long-term timeframe of 100 years and continues to do so right through to the present day.

But what's so special about Yufuin?

If you really think about it, one of the answers to this question lies in the fact that Yufuin is a hot spring resort connected to a rural village. It is the perfect example of what we would call local production for local consumption. The fact that visitors get to eat dishes made from seasonal produce such as rice, vegetables and fruit grown in Yufuin is undoubtedly one of the attractions that brings them to the town. What is more, visitors' lingering memories of the tastes and smells of Yufuin no doubt act as the driving force that makes them want to come back and visit again.

A prime example is the hugely popular local specialty *yuzu neri* tea cakes, which are made by taking the fleshy skins of yuzu citrus fruit, dubbed "hundred year yuzu" to reflect

the fact that they are picked from trees grown from ancient hundred year old yuzu trees, and boiling them until sweet. Using local food to make dishes to be served in ryokan and restaurants and create products in this way helps the farmers who grow the ingredients and breathes life back into the community as a whole. This cycle is exceedingly important.

As someone who runs a ryokan myself, I believe that ryokan have a role to play as a sort of showroom bringing together



**Izumi Kuwano,**  
president of Yufuin  
Tamanoyu Hotel

local industry and tourists. Tables and chairs made in Yufuin are laid out in local ryokan, flowers grown locally are displayed in the rooms, locally grown ingredients are used to make the food and Yufuin's own hot springs are used for heating. Each inn showcases what Yufuin has to offer to the full, as if to say to visitors "look, this is what Yufuin is like." If there are any attractions that ryokans can't offer directly, they give their guests the information they need to go out into the town to find them themselves. This encourages visitors to go out walking around the town rather than just staying in their rooms, which in turn brings the town as a whole to life. The vibrant streets then serve as another reason for people to come to Yufuin. You could say that this sort of enjoyment is only made possible thanks to the concentration of small ryokan in one area.

With just a handful of small ryokan with their own hot springs, nothing in the way of entertainment in town and little to do inside the inns themselves, a lot of people visiting resorts such as Yufuin used to find themselves at a loss as to how to pass the time. In recent years however, there has been a steady increase in the number of people who are much more adept at passing the time.



Yufuin Tamanoyu Hotel is one of many inns in the hot spring resort of Yufuin offering luxurious baths.

Visitors from Europe and the United States in particular bring their own approach to resorts with them, getting up early to go out walking or just relaxing in front of the fire. Influenced by their European and American counterparts, Japanese tourists have also learnt to take it easy whilst on vacation rather than rushing around from one sight to another as many have tended to do in the past.

People are starting to appreciate that hot spring resorts out in the country, like Yufuin, are at their best if you take it easy and just feel time passing you by as the seasons change. In spring for example, visitors are greeted with swathes of pink as the mountains are transformed by mountain cherry blossoms. In summer meanwhile visitors can see fireflies flying around. Fall brings the beauty of autumn leaves, with morning mists drifting in on particularly cold days during winter. Seen from up above, it looks like the whole of Yufuin has been submerged beneath a sea of mist. It is the sort of scene that you can only really enjoy if you are feeling relaxed. We try to do everything we can to help guests find the time to stop, take a break and unwind.

Hot springs really enable the body to relax. As the hot springs in Yufuin in particular aren't as hot as some you can let your body warm up thoroughly and soak away all your aches and pains. Once your body is relaxed, you can get food that warms you right to the bone. We have a range of inventive dishes available so that you can eat whatever you like.

With many foreign guests perfectly able to use chopsticks and well informed about Japanese food these days, many relish the challenge of trying dishes that they have never eaten before. In addition to discussing combinations of food and drink over an enjoyable meal, guests can also fully experience the warmth that you only get with a Japanese room, including

unique features such as tatami mats, shoji paper screen doors, sliding doors, alcoves and hanging scrolls.

Yufuin is located roughly an hour and a half from Fukuoka Airport. As there are connections to Fukuoka from areas throughout East Asia, with flights lasting around one to three hours, the number of visitors from such locations has also increased in recent years. The vast majority come to Yufuin having heard about it through word of mouth.

As Yufuin is only a small hot spring town, it does not engage in large scale PR campaigns. We try to welcome each and every one of the visitors who come to Yufuin based on word of mouth so that they will go on



Located in a natural forest, Yufuin Tamanoyu Hotel was once a sanatorium for Zen priests.

to tell others how good it was. I believe that it is important to keep the chain going like that. Talking to guests in person also provides those of us who live here with a constant reminder of just how special an area this is.

Instead of being a tourist destination that attracts hordes of visitors all at once, our aim is to establish Yufuin as a hot spring resort where people come to stay a little bit longer, staying for two nights rather than one, or three nights rather than two. This would be virtually impossible of course as a single ryokan acting alone. It can only work if the area as whole has plenty to offer. This means that we also need to identify new resources that will appeal to visitors. Yufuin's aim for the future

is for the town's residents to create a place where visitors can enjoy themselves and spend quality time together.

All of this means nothing however unless the underlying foundations remain solid. We need to think about the best way to protect the mountain scenery of Yukudake and the basin, not to mention the town's hot springs, the very source of tourism in Yufuin. We need to focus in particular on how to protect these things without shutting them off to the outside world. People should always be able to come and enjoy Yufuin.

The scenic rice fields that cover parts of the basin for instance are absolutely essential to Yufuin. It is nonetheless extremely difficult to both protect and harness this scenery as Japan's population, particularly its farming population, continues to decline. The solution that Yufuin has come up with is to create a different type of scenery from *warakozumi*, stacks of straw piled together after rice has been harvested in the fall, which were once a common sight in the area. By reviving this tradition on a more widespread basis, *warakozumi* will hopefully become a typical sight each fall, enabling visitors to get a real feel for the season whilst also helping local farmers.

I believe that it is essential for Yufuin to keep a close eye on changes that need to be made and changes that are being made as we continue to develop the town in such a way that suits its small size.

The land is the cornerstone of tourism. We therefore need to make sure that we take good care of everything that we get from the land as we continue to develop Yufuin, protecting and never losing sight of the tranquility, clean air and natural beauty that make the town what it is. If we can do that, the number of visitors will definitely increase, enabling us to continually refine our spirit of hospitality. □

Izumi Kuwano is president of Yufuin Tamanoyu Hotel.