

Soaking Up Japan



MAYUMI YAMAZAKI *Onsen* Essayist is entranced by hot springs — not just in Japan, but all over the world. As well as visiting spas in 20 countries throughout Asia, Africa, South America, Oceania and Europe, she has written many books about her experiences, including *Dakara Konyoku wa Yamerarenai* (That's Why I Can't Stop Mixed Bathing).

Ever since research for a magazine article first led me to experience the allure of mixed bathing in an outdoor hot spring, I have journeyed around Japan and the rest of the globe in search of spots where men and women bathe together. When people are soaking in hot water they start conversations with complete strangers, and the special atmosphere soothes weary minds and bodies. This is one of life's true joys, which only communal bathing offers.

Nowadays I try to communicate the charms of Japanese *onsen* (hot springs) to an international audience. Through my work I have noticed that

many non-Japanese seem fascinated by the combination of snow and *onsen*. When they see a photo of bathers at an old-style Japanese inn luxuriating outdoors amid thickly-falling snowflakes, lots of people say they'd love to visit such a place. They are drawn by such archetypal scenes of Japanese life, which have disappeared from Tokyo or Kyoto but can still be seen in rural hot spring resorts.

Traveling around the world's hot springs, I have been impressed by the huge variety of bathing styles, each reflecting the customs and religious practices of the country concerned. In Iceland, for





ABOVE: Yamazaki (front) enjoys a mixed bath at Jigoku Onsen in Kumamoto Prefecture.

example, hot spring water is such a part of everyday life that it even comes out of household bath taps. Some Hindus in Indonesia wash themselves in hot springs.

I believe that Japanese *onsen* mirror their times. During the period of high economic growth from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, hot spring resorts were primarily a male domain. Groups of friends from the place workmates would head to *onsen* for rest and recreation, forming closer bonds as they soaked together in the hot pools. These days,

women-only groups have become a common sight, and one which can be seen as a reflection of the changing status of women in Japanese society. Such sociological insights are another fascinating aspect of Japanese *onsen* and how they reflect Japan today.

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The Japan Tourism Agency's "Yokoso! Japan" campaign aims to attract 10 million foreign visitors to Japan annually by 2010. As part of the campaign, people striving to increase visitor numbers are appointed as Yokoso! Japan ambassadors.