

# Relaxation for Adventurers: the History of Japanese *Onsen & Ryokan*



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Journeys: that is what human beings have always desired. Matsuo Basho, a famous Japanese poet of the Edo era (1603-1868), wrote in his book *Okuno Hosomichi*:

Years and days are equal to people on an eternal journey, and the years coming and going are also travelers. I myself, since some time or another, can't help being driven by an urge to drift when I watch the scudding clouds flowing on the wind.

In this modern world, travelling still accounts for a huge industry and market. Regardless of the time, people remain attracted to going on journeys. In Japan, though it is now pretty easy to go on a trip and come back, there was a time when traveling meant putting one's life on the line. As Basho stated, "Many men of old ended up meeting death during their journey." It was rare in those days for people to come back easily from a journey when there was no good means of transport.

In such cases, accommodation was a vital component of a journey, not just as an intermission but also to save one from fatigue. For travelers, the main relaxations were hot springs (*onsen*) and inns (*ryokan*). They are often combined and called *onsen ryokan*. In this paper, I would like to discuss the different types of Japanese hot springs and inns and their roots derived from the past.

## The Beneficial Effects of *Onsen*

*Onsen* have been considered one of the best organic ways of healing. The first descriptions of *onsen* appear in ancient Japanese history books, such as the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. The Japanese word *touji* literally means "healing with hot water" and Tadanori Matsuda argues that this is "a pure Japanese culture. It is a remedy that began in the Edo era, without any influence from China or European countries" (*Onsen ni hairu to byouki ni nararai* [Avoiding diseases by bathing at hot springs], PHP, Tokyo, 2010). cursorily categorized, there are eight types of water for *onsen*: simple, carbonated, hydrogencarbonate, chloride, sulfate, sulfur, acidic

and radioactive. Here is a table listing each kind of water and their effects.

Water	Features & Effects
Simple	Simple. Nothing special but good for recovery from fatigue.
Carbonated	Reduces blood pressure. Often called "a spring for the heart".
Hydrogencarbonate	Close to alkaline. Softens skin and makes it beautiful.
Chloride	Effectively heats up a person. Often called "a spring for heat".
Sulfate	Has a sedative effect. Often called "a spring for injuries".
Sulfur	Effectively works for skin disease.
Acidic	Strong sterilizer. This water is not good for people with sensitive skin.
Radioactive	Works for neuralgia and muscle pain.

Information on the types of water at *onsen* is available in Japan and individuals can choose the one most suitable for their physical problems. Making information on the quality of water available is important for attracting users, and many organizations including *onsen ryokan* refer to the quality of water in their advertisements.

A true *onsen* in Japan needs to be dug with permission from the prefectural governor and also should have a business license.

## The History of Japanese Inns

*Ryokan* are a type of Japanese inn that we can still see today. Japanese inns have a fairly long history: the first inns are said to have been started in the Nara era (710-794). But it was in the Edo era that the culture of inns flourished. Active competition was created between each inn to attract guests. There are two likely factors behind the development of inns: the duty of the *daimyo* (Japanese feudal lords), called *sankin-koutai*, and the completion of the first map of Japan by Tadataka Inou.

The government obliged *daimyo* to do *sankin-koutai* once a

year. *Sankin-koutai* refers to the duty of *samurai* to travel between Edo and their own territory and to serve in the army in the capital. Though it caused a serious burden on each *samurai*, the inns along the roads had the opportunity to be successful as a result. Also, Inou's survey of Japan, which he undertook on foot at the age of 55, stimulated the desire among many people to travel and also led to the development of many types of inn.

## Types of Traditional Inns

Of the many types of inns that emerged in the Edo era, I would like to take four as examples: *zenkon-yado*, *honjin*, *hatago*, and *kichin-yado*.

*Zenkon-yado* were a type of inn available to monks on journeys of pilgrimage. There were many pious people in those days, especially Buddhists, who offered their houses as accommodation for monks, as well as asking them to conduct religious practices like memorial services for the dead. This kind of accommodation seemed to be most common in city suburbs, but was not seen so much in central social areas (*Edo no yado* [Inns in the Edo Era], Jinzo Fukai, Heibonsha, Tokyo 2000).

Secondly, when *daimyo* were undertaking *sankin-koutai* they used the houses of influential town people and farmers along the highways. According to Fukai:

In 1610 and 1611, the government prescribed these houses as *honjin*, and they started working as inns not only for government officials and *daimyo* but also for court nobles. The followers of the guests cooked dinner and breakfast, so they had to pay only for the use of the house. If they made additional payment, they could get meal services, too. On the other hand, *honjin* paid tribute to the guests; from marine products to flowers, tribute had a broad range.

These *honjin* were a very exclusive type of inn: only people in the upper class could use them.

Less exclusive than the *honjin* were the *hatago*. Though there was wide range in the quality of services between each *hatago*, the basic style of service was that guests paid money and received two meals — dinner and breakfast — and a bath. According to Fukai, the cost was higher if the location of the inn was close to Kyoto in western Japan, where the emperor, who had no sovereignty, had his residence. Despite the big gaps in price, the average cost of a one-night stay was around 3,000 yen by today's rates. The *hatago* are thought to be the origin of modern Japanese *ryokan*. They competed with each other in the quality of their rooms, meals, and security, and this brought about the development of inn culture in the Edo period.

The average cost for one stay was much cheaper in *kichin-yado*. Like the *honjin*, this kind of inn had the style of self-



Source: Digital Collection of the National Diet Library  
“Mitake, Sixty-nine Stations of the Kisokaido”, a scene from Kichinyado, by Hiroshige Utagawa (1797-1858). This woodblock print shows guests cooking their own food on a fireplace at an inn where the cost of fuel for cooking would have been cheap.

service. They just offered rooms and only when guests made additional payment for meals and a bath did they provide these further services. Some *kichin-yado* had a good reputation for their *onsen*, in which case people would go on a trip and visit the inn just for the health benefit of using the *onsen*. Initially, only people who were officially supported by the government, including scholars, could enjoy *onsen* at inns. But as cheaper inns spread, more people became interested in traveling to *onsen* for their health, and this trend took off. *Osen* travelers went all over Japan and they wrote accounts of their trips full of detailed information on minor *onsen* in the remote regions of Japan. This in turn stimulated other people to go on trips to secluded *onsen* and the trend spread in a chain reaction.

## Conclusion

Relaxing at inns and hot springs has long been a Japanese tradition. Just as we are today, people in the past, especially from the Edo era, were aware of the effects of *onsen*, including the differences in the water. They tried to find the best *onsen* for themselves and went on journeys for that purpose, providing inn keepers with great opportunities for success and dramatically activating competition. Inns became not only places to stay, but also factors influencing the economic movement of society.

The principal is the same as today. Food, sanitariness, tranquility — the service is better, though the cost is higher. The culture of *onsen* and *ryokan* has developed over many years and we are still preserving it. Let's cherish their history and enjoy their healing effects.

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