

Hoshi Onsen Chojukan



In his book called *Fudo* (Climate), which I read when I was a student, the famous Japanese philosopher, Watsuji Tetsuro, states that the world's climate can be divided into meadow, desert and monsoon types. These three categories typify the climate of Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia respectively. Although Japan falls into the last category, the country is plagued with hot humid summers, flooding from torrential rain and extremely heavy snow in winter.

A line of volcanoes running from north to south through the Japanese archipelago makes it one of the most prominent earthquake-prone countries in the world. To add insult to injury, as there are no raw materials below ground to speak of, Japan actually imports about 80% of its energy. However, it seems that God took compassion on this seismic giant by providing it with the largest number of hot springs in the world. It naturally depends on the definition of a hot spring but according to the results of one survey carried out in 1980, Japan had a total of 2,053 springs, China 1,900, America 1,003, Iceland 516, Italy 149 and France 124. Considering that the land area of both China and America is about 25 times greater than that of Japan, it is clear that Japan is truly blessed with hot springs.

One gets the impression that spas in Western Europe are generally centers for rehabilitation or medical treatment but in Japan more emphasis is put on bringing relief to the mind by slowly relaxing in the

soothing waters of a hot spring, while enjoying the natural beauty of the surrounding scenery. Indeed, an outdoor pool situated in the heart of the mountains beside a running stream is surely the quintessence of Japanese spas. However, since the end of the war, Japan has experienced various booms as well as a bubble economy, when people's sense of values went haywire. As a result many hot spring areas have been greatly spoiled by groups of economic animals, who have turned them into mere extensions of their banqueting halls, and they no longer fulfill the hopes of those people who desire the old kind of quality spa.

About 20 years ago an association to protect the traditional form of hot spring called "Nihon Hito wo Mamoru Kai" was established in an effort to answer these people's needs. Since then, membership has grown to 128 Japanese Style inns and *Hoshi Onsen Chojukan* is one of these. This famous spring is said to have been discovered about 1,200 years ago by the reputed Kobodaishi and it was a favorite place for many artists and writers to sojourn in the 1920s. Being accessible from Tokyo by car in around four hours, it is still very popular today.

The charm of Chojukan undoubtedly lies in the fact that it stands alone along the side of a mountain stream deep in the heart of the mountains far away from habitation. Although strong traces of old Japanese architecture are apparent in the exterior of the building such as the main entrance which gives the impression of having been built in the Edo period, some elements of western style have been adopted throughout the interior. However, in the room off the entrance, there is a traditional Japanese hearth and it is here that the owner personally takes some of the famous local water in a bamboo ladle to make a delicious

cup of hot tea to serve to guests. But when all things are considered, it is the baths themselves that are really superb. Fed by hot water bubbling up from the river bed at a temperature of 45 degrees Celsius, the four pools are divided by logs. Using these sleepers as a pillow, it is possible to take a long leisurely bath stretched out in the warm water soaking up the relaxing atmosphere of the hot spring.

The food is seasonal with mushrooms such as *maitake* gathered from the mountain side and fish such as char and sweet fish caught in the river. As might be expected in the mountains, wild boar hot-pot is also served and if you are very lucky you might have a chance to sample a dish of bear meat cooked in homemade *miso* broth.

I can thoroughly recommend a visit to Hoshi Onsen Chojukan, giving it full marks for its surroundings, its food and health-restoring qualities. The price per person for one night including breakfast and dinner is between ¥15,000 and ¥25,000. Wine is not available at the inn but with prior notice, you may take your own.

Hoshi Onsen Chojukan

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The managing editor pays a tribute to Mr. Hori for his contributions to the Journal, who concludes "Table Talk" with this article.

