
Hot Spa Towns and Villages Rocked by Water Scandal

HOT spring resort towns nationwide have been hit hard by a spate of revelations that inns and hotels in hot spring resorts have been cheating customers by passing off heated-up tap water as natural hot spring water. The scandal surfaced in July when some hot spring facilities in Shirahone, Nagano Prefecture, were found to be using spa powders to make heated tap water milky to make it look like natural spa water. Other famous hot springs were also found to be involved in similar scandals. Japan's local tourism industry has tried to lure tourists, saying, "Please unwind at a hot spring." But the bubbling up of scandals has brought to light moral degeneration among owners of hot spring facilities and inadequate ways of

disclosing information on the ingredients of hot spring waters. The heated debate over the nation's hot springs is expected to continue.

The Shirahone scandal prompted local governments and hot spring towns and villages across Japan to start investigations in order to keep tourist suspicions from spreading. But the investigations revealed that some inns in Ikaho town, Gunma Prefecture, had passed off heated-up tap water as natural hot spring water. It was also found that an inn in Yugawara town, Kanagawa Prefecture, was collecting a bathing tax from visitors despite having offered tap water. The revelations amplified tourist distrust in hot springs.

The number of inns and hotels

increased rapidly during the hot spring boom. This, combined with diversified tourist demand for open-air and in-room baths, made it difficult for hot spring facilities to secure a sufficient amount of hot spring water, analysts say. Although the Hot Spring Law makes ingredient analysis and certification obligatory for the source water, it does not do so for the water at the point of use, such as in the inns' baths. And as documents showing source ingredient analyses have no time limit, some that are decades old continue to be posted at many facilities. In order to restore public trust in hot springs, measures need to be taken to make it mandatory for the owners of hot spring facilities to post such analyses appropriately.