

LEARNING THE SPIRIT OF *Omotenashi*

Located in beautiful natural surroundings, Hanamaki Minami Onsen-kyo Village in Iwate Prefecture is one of the best-known hot spring (onsen) resorts in Tohoku. One of the most venerable local inns is Hotel Shidotaira, which has a history dating back 180 years. In March last year, the hotel took on two trainees from Taiwan. They have both continued with their training in spite of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Masaki Yamada reports.

Every year Hotel Shidotaira has around 2,000 foreign guests, 90% of whom are tourists who have come over from Taiwan. In an effort to improve the level of service it provides its overseas guests, the hotel took two trainees, Hsieh Li Chun and Chang Pei Shan, who came to Japan from Taiwan on the working holiday system.

They are both still working happily at the hotel, despite the fact that the Great East Japan Earthquake struck a mere eight days into their training. Although the buildings were fortunately undamaged by the earthquake, the hotel was left without power for three days. In the absence of working heaters in their

rooms, guests had to warm themselves by kerosene heaters set up in the lobby by the hotel's employees. Disruption to parts of the transport network meanwhile prevented many guests from returning home. The two trainees worked alongside their Japanese colleagues to look after all remaining guests at the hotel. Such is their determination to learn about the spirit of *omotenashi* or Japanese hospitality, that the thought of returning to Taiwan never even crossed their minds.

Despite a temporary decline in guest numbers at the hotel during the period following the earthquake, after a month or so guests started to come back, from both inside and outside Japan. Things are more or less back to how they were before the earthquake now.

"We get everything here, from fresh greenery and cherry blossoms in full bloom to beautiful autumn leaves and snow-covered scenery. Guests can lie back in an outside hot spring and enjoy gazing out at seasonal views all year round. I think that's what brings in so many guests from Taiwan," comments Hsieh, who has also experienced working at a hotel in Taiwan. "It



Hsieh Li Chun (left) and Chang Pei Shan in the buffet restaurant at Hotel Shidotaira

BOTH PHOTOS MASATOSHI SAKAMOTO

Hsieh Li Chun (second from left) and Chang Pei Shan (second from right) with Japanese co-workers in a banquet room at Hotel Shidotaira



never snows in Taiwan, so the snowy scenery in winter is particularly popular with people from Taiwan, because it's so rare for them."

One of the main aspects of Hsieh and Chang's work is to serve guests in the banquet rooms and buffet restaurant, where guests can enjoy some sixty kinds of food. Working in another country, with different eating habits and table manners, proved challenging to begin with, but both women have got to grips with their work now and can provide the attentive level of service for which Japan is renowned.

"When we're setting up for a party, everything has to be just right, even down to the position of chopsticks, bowls and hand towels, so they are easy for guests to reach. You would never get that attention to detail at a Hotel in Taiwan," comments Hsieh.

Employees line up at the entrance to the hotel to

welcome guests or see them off as they leave. Hsieh singles this out as something else that you wouldn't see at a hotel in Taiwan.

"Particularly when guests leave, we all keep waving them off until their car is out of sight. I think that's a wonderful thing to do. It really captures the spirit of omotenashi," says Hsieh. "When Taiwan donated a lot of money to help rebuild after the earthquake, Japanese guests kept thanking me. That made me so happy!"

In an effort to get even more guests from Taiwan to stay at the hotel, Hsieh and Chang also write a hotel blog aimed at showcasing everything Hanamaki Minami Onsen-kyo Village has to offer to people back in their home country. 

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