

Spirited Away at Sekizenkan

Sekizenkan in the Gunma Prefecture Onsen resort town of Shima is thought to be Japan's oldest hot-spring inn. Fans of Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away* head there to soak up the atmosphere of the inn which served as the setting for the classic animated feature film.

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Japan is blessed with a huge number of hot springs – some 27,000 all told – and Japanese people have relaxed in their waters since ancient times. Many hot spring resorts boast histories reaching back over 1,000 years, while there are a number of hot-spring inns which have been in business for several centuries.

Shima Onsen in Gunma Prefecture, about three hours from Tokyo by car, is one of the oldest hot spring resorts in Japan. Many hot-spring inns can be found in the area, both deep in the mountains and alongside the river which runs through the resort. Legend has it that the mountain gods gifted the hot spring in the year 989 as a water source with the power to heal 40,000 different ailments. The “*shima*” of the resort name means “40,000.”

The Honkan main building of Sekizenkan in the heart of Shima Onsen is thought to be Japan's oldest hot-spring inn building. Constructed in 1691, the honkan was originally a simple two-story wooden building of the sort typical of those promoting hot-spring cures in the Edo period (1603-1867). The third story was only added to the building in 1910.

In 1936, the Sanso building was constructed on the hill immediately behind the main building and this represents the cream of the architecture on the site today. Sanso is a registered tangible cultural property that is widely admired for its architectural features, in particular its elaborately decorated transom windows. Sanso has accommodated many celebrity guests over the years.

The lobby of the main building, with its thick beams and polished pillars, wears the same dignified appearance today that it has since the Edo period.

“It is our duty to maintain and pass down the authentic appearance of these 300-year-old features,” says Sekizenkan's Seiichiro Ochiai. “We carefully dust and wipe the facilities clean every day, and carry out repairs whenever necessary.”

In 1986, the Kashotei building was constructed on the site in the midst of old pine trees and a bamboo grove.

Guests in the Honkan enjoy the traditional, modest style of accommodation typical of inns offering hot-spring cures in days gone by, with the exception that they cannot cook for themselves. Typically hot spring cure inns are for long-term residents and are self-catering, but because Sekizenkan is an important cultural property, self-catering is not permitted. Instead, guests at Honkan are offered tasty and nutritious box lunches featuring vegetables and other local foods. Other features of the Honkan remain true to the traditions of hot spring cure inn hospitality. Guests are





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expected to lay down their own bedding, and they share toilet facilities as well as the hot spring baths. The freedom to take a bath and throw down a futon whenever one likes makes for a uniquely laid back experience for the guest.

The fourth building belonging to Sekizenkan is Maeshin, which was built in 1930 and is also a registered tangible cultural property. The ground floor of the building is constructed from ferroconcrete while the upper two stories are made of wood. The large Genroku no Yu bathhouse on the ground floor has arched western-style windows allowing natural light to pour in. Unusually the bathhouse has no

- 1 Genroku no Yu, the large bathhouse at Sekizenkan. The five stone-built bathtubs sunk into the tiled floor are filled to the brim with continuously flowing and untreated natural hot spring water.
- 2 Sekizenkan in Shima Onsen, Gunma Prefecture. The original Honkan main building is on the left; Maeshin is on the right.
- 3 The thick beams and polished pillars of the main building's lobby remain true to their seventeenth-century origins.

showers or taps. Guests wash themselves using the unfiltered and untreated hot spring water which gushes continuously through the bathhouse at a rate of 900 liters a minute and which collects in five stone bathtubs set in the tiled floor. Bathing in the water is said to be effective for rheumatism, movement disorders and scars, while drinking the hot water is believed to be good for diseases of the digestive tract, constipation, hives and obesity.

“The interior of the second and third floors, which are not open to the public at the moment, are said to have inspired the setting of *Spirited Away*,” says Ochiai. “And we often hear from guests that the tunnel connecting the main building and Sanso reminds them of a scene from the movie.”

Standing on the bridge over the river, the old buildings of Sekizenkan seem to spirit the traveler away to days of yore, when the view from this point was little different from how it appears today. 



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All photos: Takemi Kato