JAPAN—LAND OF HOT SPRINGS

by

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The land of Japan from Kyushu to Hokkaido is almost as thickly studded with hot springs as the sky is with stars. The latest figures show that there are something like 1,000 mineral springs in the empire.

If the abundance of thermal springs in Japan is remarkable, the extent to which they are used is equally noteworthy, for no race is more partial to hot spring baths than the Japanese. In a country where the poorest man takes his tub every second or third day, if not every day, in a public bath house, this hardly surprising. Incidentally, it may be added that the custom of drinking thermal spring water for therapeutic purposes is quite a recent development in Japan, where from remote antiquity hot springs have been used chiefly for bathing, and not for drinking, as in the West.

The registered number of visitors to hot spring resorts in Japan is approximately 20,000,000 annually—a fact which is explained by the habit of visiting them for recreation as well as for recuperation. Nowadays it is common for city folk of average means to spend the week-end at such places. The Government Railways used to operate special "hot spring trains" for their benefit.

In 1929 the Japan Hot Springs Association was organized to improve the accommodation at various resorts and to promote research into the use of thermal spring water. I do not mean to dwell upon the Japan Hot Springs Association because references to that organization are given in the pamphlet given you.

Being a volcanic country, Japan is particularly rich in acid springs, sulphur springs, acid vitriol and alum vitriol. Such springs are very scarce, if not entirely absent, in other countries, except for a few to be found in Germany, New Zealand and America. Perhaps the most representative acid spring in Japan is Kusatsu, famous both at home and abroad for its high temperature as well as for its efficacy in cases of syphilis, leprosy and other skin diseases. Kusatsu Spa was brought to the notice of Western physicians by Dr. E. Baelz, who came these shores in 1876 and made a special study of hot springs. It was only recently that the hot springs at Kusatsu have been examined scientifically. Last year Drs. Manabe and Misawa, Professors of Medicine at the Tokyo Imperial University, published in the Journal of the Japan Balneo-Climatological Society the result of the study they had pursued assiduously for two years from 1935.

The characteristic feature of Kusatsu Spa is a peculiar and effective method of bathing...
known as the "time bath," so called because the hours and the duration of the bath have to be fixed owing to the extremely high temperature, about 48.5°C, at which it is taken. The dreadful three-minute ordeal through which the bathers are compelled to go with a discipline almost military in its strictness is too well known to need more than passing mention. The author of Things Japanese writes: "The whole life at Kusatsu is so strange that he whose stomach is not easily upset by nasty sights would do well to go and inspect it. To squeamish persons we say most emphatically, 'Keep away!'

A method of bathing which contrasts strikingly with the "time bath" is "sand baths," or suayu. This system of bathing is also peculiar to Japan. As the term indicates, sand baths are available where hot springs are found on the seashore, as at Beppu, the Karlsbad of Japan, and Ibusuki, at the southern extremity of Kyushu. Sand baths are taken at ebb tide, since the sea water coming in at high tide reduces temperature. The bather literally buries himself alive in the sand for a certain time. They are particularly efficacious in the treatment of lumbago, rheumatism, neuralgia, etc. Since Beppu is a well-equipped resort of international appeal, many visitors from abroad try a sand bath for the fun of the thing, if not for the therapeutic purposes.

Elsewhere we find the development of natural hot shower baths, or yudaki, as the Japanese call them. As may be expected, yudaki can be had only where thermal waters are abundant, as at Noboribetsu in Hokkaido and Kirishima in Kyushu. Hot water is piped into bath tubs or pools, indoor as well as outdoor, so as to fall from a height of some ten feet, which has the effect of applying a sort of natural massage to the bather. This kind of hot shower bath treatment is believed to be of special benefit to mentally deranged persons, because it aids the proper functioning of the brain and the spinal nerves.

In the West there are few instances of different kinds of springs being found at the same resort. In Japan, however, nature has been more generous in this respect, as at Beppu, which is a comparatively small city and yet the springs with which it is endowed are almost as varied as they are numerous. Simple thermal, iron, simple carbon-dioxide, common salt sulphur, acid vitriol, alum vitriol—all these minerals are found there. Nasu Spa, near Nikko, Naruko Spa, near Sendai, Noboribetsu in Hokkaido, and many others also boast of quite a catalogue of springs.

What may be called the hot spring season in the West generally lasts from May to October. Here the majority of the spas are visited all the year round, though, of course, some are more popular than others according to their situation. For example, Unzen near Nagasaki, Noboribetsu, Kirishima in Kagoshima prefecture, and Hakone are essentially summer resorts, while Beppu, Ibusuki in Kagoshima, Shirahama, near Osaka, and all the spas in the Izu Peninsula are favourite winter resorts. Then again, in Japan most hotels and inns at hot spring resorts are equipped with hot spring baths, whereas in Europe few hotels except perhaps those at Wiesbaden, Gastein in Germany and a few others, are so provided and visitors must go to the bath houses built outside the Hotels.
Most of Japan's hot spring resorts are situated amid picturesque scenery. Some are found perched on mountain-sides with unobstructed views over the blue waters of the sea, others near the shores of the sea or a lake, if not right on the beach, and yet others on the banks of streams noted for their rocky cliffs and gorges. Spas at comparatively high elevations afford the opportunity of profiting from the air as well as from the steaming mineral waters. In mountainous parts there are a number of open-air hot spring baths—a veritable godsend to mountain climbers, skiers and hikers. One of the best known of these natural alfresco baths is the Shirahone basin at an altitude of some 5,000 feet in the Japan Alps. Many tourists gain added pleasure by visiting hot springs when forests of deciduous trees are verdant with fresh leaves in early summer, or when mountain slopes are aflame in late autumn. Then some hot spring resorts in the mountains, like Unzen and Kirishima in Kyushu, are celebrated for the beauty of their azaleas abloom in May.

Many spas enjoy wide-flung views over the sea, particularly Atami, which, together with Ito and many others, is on the picturesque Izu Peninsula, the eastern coast of which well deserves its title of the Riviera of Japan. Shirahama Spa located on the Pacific shores, not very far from Osaka, also belongs to this category. This alkaline salt spring resort can challenge comparison with any for scenic beauty. The Osaka Imperial University is planning to build a hot spring institute there. In addition to scenic, scientific and therapeutic attractions many resorts are popular with those who are out to combine bathing and angling. Nagaoka Spa on the Izu Peninsula, for example, attracts many disciples of Izaak Walton, because there they can try their luck at both river and sea fishing.

It must be confessed that the general poorness of accommodation detracts from the natural merits of the Japanese spas. In this point at least they cannot compare favourably with those in the West. Unlike most spas in Europe, practically all those in Japan are owned by individuals—a fact which accounts for the small-scale accommodation of the sanatoria. It is perhaps only at Atami, Beppu, Hakone and Unzen that one finds accommodation anything like the standard of first-rate European spas, such as Karlsbad, Montecatini and Vichy. Accommodation available at almost all other spas in this land leaves much to be desired. This is no wonder, because hitherto most of them have been intended for native visitors. It was chiefly with a view to remedying this defect that the Japan Hot Springs Association came into being in 1829, but in spite of such efforts it seems probably that even in Japan where excellent hot springs are so numerous, large-scale accommodation will be limited to one or two spas at the expense of others where the waters are in no way inferior. Meanwhile, the general level of accommodation is being raised for the benefit of visitors, both native and foreign.

It was as late as 1931 that the first institute affiliated to the Kyushu Imperial University was established at Beppu for the scientific study of the curative properties of the waters. That Beppu is an ideal place for this kind of institute may be easily gathered from what has been said already. Also several other universities are branching out along similar lines.
Among others there are the Noboribetsu Institute of the Hokkaido Imperial University, the Misasa Institute of the Okayama University of Medicine, the Shirahama Institute of the Osaka Imperial University and the Unzen Institute of the Nagasaki University of Medicine, the first two having already been completed. Most radio-active springs in the world are cold, but the waters of Misasa Spa have the distinction of being thermal, while, with the exception of Gastein Spa, few hot springs contain a larger amount of radium emanation.