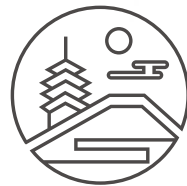




BESSTORY

SACRED ONSEN RESORT
BESHO ONSEN MAGAZINE



BESHO ONSEN
Sacred Onsen Resort
blessed by the Sun & the Land



A sacred site of sun and earth

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The name 'Bessho' was what first caught my attention. It has an unusual ring to it, rhythmic but sturdy, and it has an unusual meaning too. 'A place apart'. A place that is different, other, separate.

Getting to this place apart wasn't the trek I had expected. All it involved was sitting for an hour and a half amongst snoring businessmen on the Shinkansen from Tokyo to Ueda. The separate place of Bessho has its own separate line: the aptly named Bessho Line, which departs approximately every half hour from Ueda. From the round windows of the train, I could gaze at rice paddies, quiet towns, and the mountains that creep at the edges of the landscape. Thirty minutes later, I had arrived at Bessho Onsen Station. The few other passengers quickly departed, and I was alone in the candy-green station. I could see the sunset in the distance, an outpouring of orange over mountains and the barely visible buildings of Ueda. I had heard it might snow, so I wasn't surprised to see fresh snow scattered over the ground. I wondered if it had snowed earlier that day, or perhaps the day before. It was not until the following day that I learned it was not fresh snow at all, but the remnants of a light snowfall a week earlier, still unsullied.

It's about a 10-minute walk from the station to Bessho Onsen's numerous ryokan, but I chose to make a few detours along the way. I had been to onsen towns before, so I thought I knew what to expect. I

looked for the glut of tourist shops, but instead found tempting arrays of local produce. I looked for the kitschy souvenir food items, but saw only old ladies chatting. I strolled through a seemingly endless collection of gently sloping streets, and from a small bridge I gazed at the classic Japanese buildings and the snow-brushed mountains that encircle the town. It was one of no less than 14 bridges that crisscross Bessho Onsen, and here there was no need to navigate around couples posing for selfies. There were only mountains, and that sunset, which maintained its splendour for longer than I expect of sunsets.

Before arrival, I had planned for three days in a town with none of Japan's standard conveniences. That was unnecessary, and I felt a bit silly carrying my over-prepared bags past stocked stores and a large post office. I was in a place apart, but it's still Japan – it's just Japan without the dazed and harried crowds of Tokyo, or the frantic tourists of Kyoto.

They call Bessho Onsen a sacred site, and I thought I knew sacred sites. I've been to shrines and cathedrals and ruins aplenty. I expected a complex mythology to follow Bessho Onsen's claim to sacredness, but I was not about to get one. It's the sunlight, they told me. It's the way the sun touches the mountains and the flat earth of the surrounding farmland, the way that sunlight remains constant throughout the year. In this place apart, the topography itself creates the sacred.

Belief



I was told to title this section 'belief'. Belief in what, I wondered. After all, most Japanese people vehemently deny their own religiosity. It's one thing to visit a temple or shrine. It's another thing entirely to 'believe', with all that word's Christian connotations of internally held conviction.

Bessho Onsen boasts two Buddhist temples and one Shinto shrine. I started out at the main attraction: Kitamuki Kannondo, so named for its unusual north-facing construction. Not being particularly well-versed on the directional conventions of Japanese religious sites, I aimed to explore the temple on its own terms: for the elegance of its buildings, the beauty of its surroundings, or the sense of peace it evokes – and, of course, for the shop-lined promenade that precedes any major Japanese temple. Kitamuki Kannondo's promenade is a stone-paved street dipping into a natural valley. There were the expected souvenirs here, and much-needed snack food, but nothing that distracted from the Kannondo itself. It sits above the streets, a seemingly ancient wood building cradled by a forest of tall pines. I strolled to the edge to look out upon the surrounding scenery. There was no sunset this time, but instead mist that poured through the creases in the mountaintops. I was the only one rapidly snapping photos; the other visitors were there to pray.

It's only a 5-minute walk from Kitamuki Kannondo to the famed Anrakuji Temple. The entrance to Anrakuji asks for a bit of effort: a steep stone staircase up to the main gate, lined by those same tall pines. (For those who can't make the walk, there's also a sloping roadway to the side.) It's not a tiring trek, but it felt like a victory nevertheless, because suddenly I found myself in the midst of a meticulously cultivated temple garden. There's a high wooden bell tower and a richly decorated temple hall. For those who do believe – or want to try – Zen ascetic training sessions are available. I've seen breathtakingly beautiful temples elsewhere in Japan, but only when squeezed amongst crowds of tourists. Here, I met only one young couple drifting about the temple, and an old priest manning the reception desk.

New snow started to fall as I made my way through a gate at the side of the temple. The 300-yen ticket was the only entrance fee necessary to visit Bessho Onsen's religious sites. The gate led me to a wide mountain path, and it took only a few steps up to feel that I was now beyond even the place apart, in a new land of flaking hinoki trees and snow-flecked rocks. The main attraction here is the octagonal pagoda, the only one of its kind in Japan. I expected some elaborate tourist brouhaha to match the pagoda's grandeur and National Treasure status, but what I found in front of me was a simple clearing deep in the forest. The pagoda stood, majestic yet

unassuming, amidst moss-covered graves. I was alone, falling snow visible in the circle of sunlight surrounding the pagoda.

A scenic pathway connects Anrakuji to Jorakuji, Bessho's oldest temple. Jorakuji Temple itself is a vision in contrasts: stark white and deep brown, rigidly straight beams and gently curving embellishments. The roof is thatched in the traditional style – a rare feature in today's Japan, where even finding those capable of maintaining such thatching can prove difficult. Walking behind the temple led me straight to the forest. There was a smattering of new and old graves here. The falling snow had started to stick, and there was only one set of tracks before mine: the paws of an animal, maybe a fox, that wound adeptly through the graves and out into the forest beyond.

Jorakuji's neighbour, Bessho Shrine, matches the town's temples in its encouragement of unimpeded exploration. Bessho Shrine's torii of simple unpainted wood gives a more ancient impression than the typical bright red. The main building appears less like a shrine than a stage, open on both ends to allow unfettered views across the town. Like most of Japan's shrines, Bessho Shrine is comprised of numerous small buildings and stand-alone decorations, comprehensible only to the highly trained. To the rest of us, understanding each part matters less than partaking in the atmosphere of peace they form. I wandered around structures of wood and stone. The snow fell only in the empty space in front of the main shrine. The precise definition of belief seemed like a concern for other places.

Jorakuji Temple



Kitamuki Kannondo



Bessho Jinja Shrine



Anrakuji Temple



Bessho Onsen and its surroundings are possessed of an unhurried, untroubled kind of beauty. It is the beauty of the most quintessentially nostalgic Japanese scenery, a tranquil world that even to a newcomer holds the feeling of a memory. It's here that you can immerse yourself in the type of Japanese landscapes we see in the movies, the landscapes that inspired poets of old, the landscapes average tourists will only catch sight of from a train window. The nearby mountains and thick forests envelop my vision, but just outside the town are expanses of fields and rice paddies. When winter ends, flowers will colour the land: cherry blossoms, cosmos, hydrangeas, lotus flowers. In late spring, fireflies light up the river that runs

through the town. Dragonflies flit around the water in the autumn, and cicadas sing in the summer evenings. The area is dotted with lakes and ponds, some natural, some that form when the farmers release water from the rice paddies. It's a landscape that lets you imagine times long ago, to see in front of you not just a body of water but a reminder of another age.

Taking in the scenery is an experience in itself, and one can easily lose a day or two discovering the local mysteries. But for those seeking to wander, the mountains and forests surrounding Bessho Onsen are more than just a stunning backdrop. There are no set courses or over-hyped activities at Bessho: it's a place for you to explore

Japan's nature in the way that appeals to you.

A relaxing night at a ryokan, and a well-balanced breakfast of local delicacies, provides the energy for a day out in the mountains. For the sport-lovers among us, a stay at Bessho Onsen makes for easy access to Nagano's popular skiing and snowboarding locations. The surrounding forests bear a quality of mystical impenetrability, but a lively day hike reveals them to be not so impenetrable after all. We've been sold an idea of Japan that is nothing more than robots and geisha, but the wilds of Nagano Prefecture offer us something different: mist and sunlight, green and shadows, paths where we can meet fellow explorers and paths we can discover alone.

Mountain treks, however, aren't the only way to become an explorer here. A peaceful stroll out of the town centre brings you to Japan as few of us are able to see it today, a land of green fields and countryside paths. If you want to go further afield, bikes are available for rental. See farmers cultivating fruits and vegetables as they have for hundreds of years, and storefronts unchanged from decades past. Whatever direction you choose to wander in, there's a good chance you'll stumble upon one of the area's numerous temples and shrines. There's no need to fear getting lost around here. Anyone you meet will be happy to help, and anyway, isn't getting lost the reason you came?

Misty mountains, quiet countryside



Curing the spirit



It's taken me eight pages to get to the town's hot springs, known in Japanese as 'onsen'. Strange, I know, for a town where the onsen are famous enough to be part of the very name. But perhaps the town's onsen need little emphasis precisely because they're already there in the name, flaunting their fame as if impatient for the recognition they deserve. The onsen of Bessho Onsen are the most ancient in the region, with well-known healing properties – but if you know anything about Japan's onsen culture, you already guessed that last part. All Japanese onsen lay claim to a healing property (or several). It can be dizzying to try to remember every health condition a given onsen is meant to heal, but you don't have to. You just have to take a warm shower, wash yourself thoroughly, and slide naked into the water.

No impressive histories or healing claims will drift through your mind in Bessho's famed onsen, and neither will any worries or concerns. I spent my first evening at Bessho Onsen soaking in the outdoor baths of Uematsuya Ryokan. The stars above were clearer than any I'd seen in months. Outside, it was quiet; visitors had returned to their ryokan, and residents to their homes, or perhaps the local pub. Persimmon fruit from the autumn still hung shrivelled on the trees above the bath. The water carried a faint sulphurous smell, but it was not overpowering. No matter how beautiful the place or exciting the travel, the body still needs relaxation.

Bessho Onsen is, at the name implies, an onsen town, and that involves the opportunity to participate in one of Japan's unique cultural activities: the leisurely traversing of the town in a colourful yukata, taking the time to enjoy both hot springs and cultural sights. Most ryokan provide a wide selection of yukata for strolling about town, and staff will help dress you in your garment of choice. (Don't be embarrassed to ask for help – even many Japanese people, particularly those of the younger generation, aren't able to wear yukata without assistance). The following day, I was fitted with a yukata in my favourite red at Kashiwaya Ryokan. I wasn't alone; despite the cold, visitors

exploring the town in their yukata was a regular sight.

There are a total of three public bathhouses scattered across Bessho Onsen, and each requires only the minimal entrance fee of 150 yen. All are located in traditional Japanese buildings, reminiscent of temples in their architectural style. Entrance involves pressing the button on an old-fashioned ticket vending machine much like those used to order ramen in a busy city. The sight of the buildings alone is captivating enough to disarm a visitor; the smooth warmth of the water reminded me yet again that I was in a place apart from the ordinary.

Onsen form the crux of Japan's renowned wellness culture, but other wellness staples have also become integrated into the spiritual practices here. If you're up to it, make the most of the mountain air and clear sunlight with morning yoga or tai-chi at Bessho Shrine. As for me, I found I was up to doing little more than delighting in the town's beauty. For types like me, there's an option unfamiliar to many foreign visitors: the 'ashi-yu', or public foot-bath.

A common feature in Japan's onsen towns, 'ashi-yu' are entirely free, easy to use, and require no public nakedness. One simply removes socks and shoes, and places one's feet in the fresh running hot springs water. The only point to remember is to carry along a small towel with which to dry your feet when you're done. Bessho Onsen has two 'ashi-yu': the prominently located Nanakuri, and the newer Oyu-Yakushi.

The snow was falling in full force when I decided to rest at Nanakuri. It was at first vaguely unsettling to stare at my bare feet against a white frozen sky. Yet my whole body was warm – far warmer than I had felt in two layers of socks and heavy boots. The structure appeared like a simple gazebo overlooking Kitamuki Kannon Temple, but to my weary feet, the hot water was both medicine and joy. In the warmer months, the 'ashi-yu' is a hub at which to meet visitors and locals alike. In the depths of winter, it's pure healing.

Classic local dishes feature in Bessho Onsen's restaurants, and perhaps the most well-known of these is Nagano's famed soba. For lunch, I followed a mountain path to one of the town's soba restaurants. The restaurant, like many in Bessho, was covered in trinkets, memorabilia, and oddities I could not place. Most of these decorations turned out to be local crafts, from wooden dolls said to bring good luck to poles dangling with ribbon-like banners, ready even now for use in Bessho's annual festival.

Although the restaurant specialises in soba, the owner seemed equally eager to draw attention to his painstakingly created udon. The udon noodles take three hours to make, including two hours of stomping on the dough with bare feet. No part of this labour-intensive udon goes to waste: the thick edges of the dough are retained and cooked along with the standard noodles. These edges are named 'Ittan-momen' in reference to the sheet-like Japanese yokai spirit, or the cute character of the same in the well-known manga 'Gegege no Kitaro'. The noodles make for a refreshing and filling lunch, especially when paired with crisp tempura. Meals come with endless cups of bitter soba tea, a drink cursed with a name that does nothing to advertise its gently comforting flavour.

After a full ryokan breakfast and a generous plate of soba, teatime was hardly necessary – and yet somehow irresistible. There is a Japanese-style café located near the 'ashi-yu' Nanakuri, which serves an array of drinks, along with sweets ranging from homemade cakes to classic Japanese treats like 'cream anmitsu' (agar jelly cubes topped with fruits, sweet red bean paste, and ice cream). The café gives you a literal taste of the nostalgic atmosphere even native Japanese city-dwellers long for. Water is boiled over a wood-burning stove. The walls are mostly windows, lightening the antique interior (and making for excellent people-watching). I gobbled up the cream anmitsu at preternatural speed, along with more than one cup of warm green tea.

Similarly charming cafés pepper the neighbouring streets. You can find stylish gelato restaurants, upscale coffeshops, and even coffee brewed with onsen water. A bakery pairs first-rate bread with a minimalist wood-on-concrete aesthetic, and inside, a dining space offers organic soups and sandwiches.

A tofu shop is also located along the town's main street. Its wall of windows grants passersby a rare glimpse at tofu being made in the traditional way. I scurried in as the snow began falling hard enough to obscure the scenery, to be met with a basket labelled 'Healthy Donuts'. It's hard to believe that the ingredient of okara (soy pulp) qualifies these bites of deep-fried bliss as anything resembling 'healthy', but they're a delicious respite from the cold.

There's a distinctly Japanese style of food and architecture that is seemingly 'Western', and referred to as 'Western', but resembles nothing Westerners typically encounter – unless one happens to inhabit a quaint Alpine hut. A café at the edge of town features an all-wooden interior and one wide table. A straw hat can be seen through the door, and a window looks out on an ivy-covered garden. It's a cosy design, with a layout obviously intended to encourage customers to speak to one another. And speak to one another they do. I went in seeking nothing more than a cup of coffee, but found myself engaged in lively conversations with the shop owner and three other customers. A rather vocal cat joined in the discussions. Everyone knew each other, everyone knew the cat, and everyone was eager to get to know me. I was offered a lecture on the town's future, a tourist map, a fresh donut, and inexplicably, a piece of cheese. Despite the café's old-fashioned style, the menu features the kind of trendy drinks one would expect from a Tokyo café.

I ordered a walnut latte and honey toast. "Both the latte and the toast contain honey," the owner warned me. "Do you mind lots of honey?"

I assured her that I'm fine with honey.

When she brought out the indulgent snack, she placed a mostly full jar of honey beside it.

"Just in case there's not enough honey," she explained.



Devouring the atmosphere

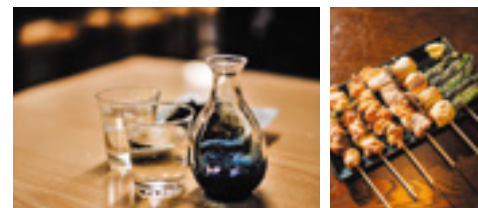


Like you've never tasted before



As night fell in Bessho, I realised that the town's quietude had led me to some false assumptions. I had assumed, for example, that this was the sort of town where places didn't stay open past 6, and where visitors followed an unstated requirement to take dinner at one's ryokan. Dining at the ryokan is indeed an appealing option: I was served a 9-course kaiseki meal in my room, every course as vivid in flavour as it was in colour. But if you choose to forgo the ryokan meals – or you just want to go out for a drink – you can taste a bit of life as the locals live it.

A parade of yellow lights entices visitors into the yakitori izakaya (pub specialising in grilled chicken). It's not a big place – I counted four tables, plus the counter – but the size and slight smokiness creates a homelike feel. Standard Japanese beers are available, as is local sake. There's an eclectic selection of items scattered around: a samurai hat, a wooden bear statue, letters from adoring fans, a rather cute plastic pig. The TV wasn't on when I visited, but it had the look of a TV that would struggle with colour reception. The owner was concentrating diligently on each charcoal-grilled skewer, but never broke his string of cheery banter with the customers. This bar isn't a place where one gulps down a skewer of yakitori before dashing off to catch the next train. It's a place for meeting and chatting.



Nearby, a warmly coloured Western-style bar serves cocktails amidst displays of cheeky vintage miscellany. Outside tables are available to enjoy drinks and snacks in warmer weather. Just across the street, another yakitori izakaya proves a popular haunt. It's common in Japan to enjoy a cool pint of beer before meals, but this izakaya also stocks shochu, richly flavoured homemade plum brandy, and Bessho's own wine. There's an extensive food menu here, with over 50 items ranging from Japanese meals such as ramen and donburi rice bowls to side dishes and regional foods.

The regional delicacy, it turns out, is horse meat. It's not an appealing option, but it's hard to see why it would be less justifiable than any other kind of meat. Here, horse meat is added to soba or udon noodles, or simply fried and arranged on a plate in front of you. And then there are the other regional staples. 'Hachi-no-ko' is the Japanese word for bee larvae, which are stir-fried and served in a bowl, looking something like a dish of shrivelled earthworms. 'Inago', or grasshoppers, are given a teriyaki seasoning, but retain a distinctly grasshopper-ish shape. Controlling the population of these bugs is necessary to protect the rice crops they feed on, and they're nutritious to boot. As the locals see it, making them into food kills two birds with one stone. I not-so-politely refused the offer, so I cannot comment on the taste. No, eating bugs is not common practice in Japan. But Bessho Onsen plays by different rules.



As it was

At first, the town was just called 'Bessho'. Early records describe it as a farming area, but one with profound connections to spiritual practice. The reasons for the unusual name include a mixture of Shinto mythology and Buddhist worship. In the Heian period, an expansive compound for Buddhist study was built nearby, and Bessho was the separate place, the place apart, reserved for the initiates' education. Cultivation of the spirit is as vital to the history of this place as cultivation of the land.

It wasn't until the Showa period (from the 1920s to the 1980s) that tourism came to Bessho. 'Onsen' was affixed onto the town's original name to remind any potential visitors of its renowned hot springs. The ryokan business boomed; the hot springs were no longer famed sources of healing for weary farmers, but a draw for visitors from across the country and overseas.

Bessho's popularity as a tourist destination helped ensure the preservation of the town's most ancient customs. The annual matsuri (or festival) is practiced now as it has been for over 500 years. The matsuri recalls the town's pervasive spirituality, as well as its agricultural roots: held every July, in the midst of the summer heat, the colourful spectacle entreats a god for rain. Carefully rehearsed dances performed by the girls of the town involve the next generation in this tradition. The rain god at whom the matsuri is directed assumes the form of a 9-headed dragon, and that mythical origin is reflected now through the matsuri's parade of banners in vibrant cloths. As the towering banners are carried up and down winding paths, they are said to resemble the shape of a dragon curling its body around the mountain.

The matsuri, however, is not the only splash of colour in Bessho's yearly schedule. The town holds traditional celebrations for many of Japan's annual holidays, providing visitors with a glimpse into an intriguing set of cultur-

al customs. Worshipers flock to Kitamuki Kannon on New Year's Day for their first temple visit of the year. In February, spirited crowds turn out for the temple's nationally renowned Setsubun celebrations, which include participants in goblin costumes. In the summer, events for the family-centered holiday of Obon include taiko drumming and dancing. At any time of year, Bessho Onsen provides visitors with a chance to see another side of Japan. But if you can catch one of the seasonal events, you'll be able to truly encounter the vibrancy of the region's traditions.

Even on ordinary days, any traveller to Bessho Onsen will find themselves steeped in history of another sort. Roughly 450 years ago, the area surrounding the town was home to famed warrior Sanada Yukimura. A legendary samurai of the Sengoku period, Yukimura is primarily famous for his roles in the Battle of Sekigahara (which he lost) and the Siege of Osaka (which resulted in his death). His defeat, I was told, is precisely why he is beloved today. Sanada Yukimura is known as a hero who used his exceptional skill and dedication to fight even against overwhelming odds. Legend has it that he was feared by all – even by the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu himself – for his stalwart fearlessness.

This fearlessness has made Sanada Yukimura a timeless hero. "Samurai hero number one," a local insisted enthusiastically. And throughout the town, odes to this adored hero abound. There are Sanada Yukimura goods to purchase, Sanada Yukimura-themed food to eat, and even a Sanada Yukimura bathhouse. For solitary travellers spending a night at Uematsuya Ryokan, an entire Sanada Yukimura room is available. There are drapes and a stone hearth in Sengoku-period style, and a replica of the samurai's deer-horn hat. After I was served my elaborate meal by the hearth, the owner himself came to visit – in full costume as Sanada Yukimura.



For another time

When I returned to Bessho Onsen Station, the retro building was almost empty in the heavy snow. Warm and free to look around, I noticed features I hadn't noticed before. The painted ceiling, the wooden fans, the tiny refrigerator storing local drinks for sale. It was this last detail that drew my attention, and I rushed to purchase a tiny bottle of apple juice before the train departed. I nestled it in the pockets of my bag, one final treat for the trip back.

I was at first the only passenger in the two-carriage train, but a few stations later the carriages began to fill. There were cheerfully chatting high-schoolers, adults in business wear, and seniors who seemed well accustomed to the ride. Nobody looked rushed or impatient.

The sights of Bessho Onsen left me with an impressive collection of photos, but what occupies my memory is not the sights. It's the things that don't show up on a screen. The people of Bessho want to talk, they want to let you into their lives, they want to share. The pride they feel for their town was palpable, and it's easy to see why. As I transferred to the Shinkansen headed for Tokyo, I could already see the crowds forming, the parents hurrying, the businessmen on their phones. I was no longer in a place apart, but I was already planning the next trip back.

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