

The hot springs of Beppu, Japan

One of Japan's most famous onsen resorts, Beppu's culture is rooted in its volcanic activity. **Rupert Parker** gets to the bottom of an ancient ritual

Volcanic Kyushu, Japan's most south westerly island, has had eruptions as recently as 2018.

The up side of this is its numerous hot springs and their medicinal properties.

Both Kumamoto and Oita Prefectures have hot springs, but Beppu is the centre of onsen culture, with eight springs serving hundreds of baths. Every day millions of litres of hot water gush from the ground creating dense plumes of steam and making the town look like it's on fire.

The suburb of Kannawa is where the onsens are clustered, ranging from basic public spaces to luxury pools in boutique hotels. The springs contain various minerals turing the water red, yellow, blue, green, white, brown and even black.

There's a strict protocol: once you've removed your clothes you have to rub yourself down with soap and a flannel, before immersing your body.

There are springs where the temperature is too high to bathe - known as Jigoku or 'Hells': like the steaming bright blue Umi Jigoku (Sea Hell) or Tatsumaki Jigoku (Waterspout Hell), where a geyser performs.

Local ways

Best of all are the hidden onsen in the hills above, which are not much more than holes in the ground, although some charge for their facilities. Tsukahara Onsen is near Mount Garan where a two hour circular hike passes bubbling mud and a smoking crater.

A local delicacy is eggs steamed for 20 hours, which emerge blackened but with a distinctive smoky flavour. The steam is also used to cook vegetables like sweet potato and pumpkin, plus pork belly and chicken.

Complete the experience with a sand bath. You lie buried in a pit of sand warmed by the springs for 15 minutes, enjoying the sea view until staff dig you out and you shower off. It beats a bucket and spade break! •

Book it with... **Wendy Wu**

The 13-day Japan & the Scenic South is from £5,490pp. wendywutours.co.uk



TIME ZONE: GMT +9

CLIMATE: Sub-tropical, warm and temperate, with some rain.

KYUSHU'S

CAPITAL: Fukuoka

GETTING THERE:

ANA flies from Heathrow via Tokyo to Oita, 8 miles away

MORE INFO:

welcomekyushu.com

