

Tourist Spots of Beppu "Jigoku"

(Article written by Hiroshi HOSHINO, January 1987 issue of Oita This Month)

1. How about a "Hell" Tour?

"Welcome to Hell! Now don't be afraid."

An English sign put up recently at one of the hot spring ponds in Beppu begins like this. Tourists reading this sign might have been already shocked by the English pamphlets inviting them to an excursion of "hells" consisting of a sea hell, a mountain hell, an oven hell, and so on. There is even a blood-pond hell! It looks as though Beppu is hell on earth. Well, as a citizen of Beppu, I certainly hope it isn't. Then, why so many hells?

Actually, hell here means hot spring pond. But not for bathing-----unless you want to be cooked. The word "hot spring" evokes the image of taking a bath, but not all hot springs are suited for bathing. Some are just too hot. In some of them boiling water is coming out. The intensity with which hot water and steam gushes out really manifests the awe-inspiring natural force. Such boiling ponds were suggestive of hell in the Buddhist concept, or people might have formed an image of hell based on such ponds. Anyway, they came to be called jigoku, the Japanese word meaning hell. That's why you find statues of Buddha and devils in some of the jigokus.

Now here's how to write it in Japanese for your convenience. 地獄 (地 ji=earth, 獄 goku=prison) So when you see these characters, it means a hot spring pond for seeing. Incidentally, hot springs for bathing are called onsen and written 温泉. This word also means spa. Many hot spring baths are named so-and-so Onsen ○○温泉, so when you see these characters, chances are that you are at a public bath.

2. From Hell on Earth to Tourist Attractions

Formerly these jigokus or hells were more of a source of nuisance to their owners because they were constantly troubled by the neighboring farmers complaining about the damage the steam containing sulfur and other substances did to their crops. Occasionally they had to dispose of the bodies of the people who committed suicide by jumping into the ponds. They were literally hells to them!

Now they have turned into popular tourist spots. Among the ten such jigokus, some have water of different colors. The one with greenish blue water is called Umi Jigoku, or the Sea Hell because it's suggestive of the tropical sea. Chinoike Jigoku, or the Blood-Pond Hell is

noted for its vermilion water and mud. There is a jigoku with many small ponds of grey muddy boiling water. Bubbles formed there look like shaven heads of Buddhist monks and thus the place is called Bozu Jigoku, or the Buddhist-Monk Hell. The other characteristic jigoku is a geyser called Tatsumaki Jigoku, or the Tornado Hell.

The admission to each jigoku is 250 yen. 1

3. Umi Jigoku

If your time is limited, Umi Jigoku is perhaps the most recommendable. So, in this month's article, let's take a closer look at this jigoku.

As you go through the gate under a thatched roof, enjoy fully the view in front of you! A large pond with tranquil water. Beautiful water lilies and lotuses are floating from June till November. In the background is a hill with lush greenery of trees. Now, don't stop there too long. There's so much to see in Beppu. You can enjoy the scenery on your right as you walk on the tree-lined lane along the bank of the pond. The water looks greenish. It's somewhat like the sea, but it doesn't look particularly warm.

Well, it isn't. It's pond of cool water. Formerly, hot water was in that pond and the whole pond was so big that it looked like the sea. Hence the name Umi Jigoku, or the Sea Hell.

The trees on the hill are particularly beautiful in the spring and fall. In spring, it's one of the most popular sports for flower-viewing. In Japan, we have a custom of going on a picnic during the cherry blossom season and call that kind of outing *ohanami*, or flower-viewing. After cherry blossoms comes the azalea season. In fall, the hill becomes like a tapestry of different colors.

Well, where is the hot spring pond? Oh, steam is going up further ahead of you. Even along the lane you take, you see signs of hot spring energy. Hot steam is coming up here and there. So far, everything looks so peaceful and you must get the feeling that you are in paradise rather than hell.

Well, if you go straight from paradise to hell, you'll be shocked by the contrast. So you go through a rather mundane area as a buffer zone. A souvenir shop!

Right after entering there, to the right, you see a whitish powder of flake-like substance. It's *yunohana*, or instant hot spring powder. If you put it in your bath, you can enjoy a hot spring bath at home.

As you leave the transitional area, you are welcome by the roaring sound of the hot spring

pond. Boiling water with steam is constantly coming out energetically. Sometimes there is so much steam that the pond is barely visible. But when the steam curtain is open, you must be attracted by the greenish blue color of the water. Now, why is the water greenish blue?

Many guidebooks and the Japanese explanation coming from the speaker there attribute it to iron sulfate contained in the water. It is true that iron sulfate is partly responsible for the beautiful color. But according to a specialist, it's more because of the cleanliness of the water. In other words, for the same reason why the tropical sea is greenish blue. It makes it even more appropriate for that pond to be called the Sea Hell.

Umi Jigoku came into being in 867 when Mt. Tsurumi (1,375 meters high) erupted. We owe many hot springs in Beppu to the volcanic activity of Mt. Tsurumi. Now, it is dormant², but still provides us blessings of nature. You can go to its top by cableway. The view of Beppu and Oita from there is fantastic on fine days. To go there from Beppu Station (West Exit), take Bus 34, 36 or 37 and get off at Beppu Ropeway. It takes about 30 minutes and the fare is 390 yen.³

According to historical documents, the eruption in 867 was very violent and did a lot of damage to the area. Can you imagine what the government at that time did to quell the ire of the volcanic deities? Well, it gave the deities higher ranks than before. In those days, it was common to give titles to mountains which were believed to be embodiments of divinity.

Why don't you go around the pond to enjoy it from every angle? After that, you might be ready for a bite. How about eggs boiled in the pond? Five for 250 yen. I wish we could get one or two instead of five, though.

Going through the souvenir shop, why don't you turn right and go up the slope a little? To your right is a greenhouse where giant lotuses are seen in a pool from June till November. The leaf of the kind called Victoria Regina has a diameter of 1.5 meters---large enough for an elementary school child to sit on!

There is another pond of hot water near the greenhouse. This time, the water is red. If you don't have enough time to visit Chinoike Jigoku, or the Blood-pond Hell, that might serve as a substitute. But if you have time, do visit the real one.

Before leaving the compounds, you might as well look back and appreciate the beauty of the picturesque pond and the hill in the background.

Notes:

1 It's 400 yen as of September 2015.

2 According to the revised definition of active volcanoes, Mt. Tsurumi is an active volcano now.

3 It's 420 yen as of September 2015.