

kumano

ancient therapy

In the mystical lands of Japan's Kumano Kodo lies a time-tested path to rejuvenation

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kodo

My quest for rejuvenation has had a shaky start. Only hours into my getaway in peaceful Kumano Kodo on Japan's Kii Peninsula, I feel cold and far from relaxed. The three-hour journey from Osaka was delightful, but I'm caught in a torrential downpour waiting for the last bus, leaving me soaked.

Photo: TANABE CITY KUMANO TOURISM BUREAU

For my stiff body, the good news is that I've just arrived in Yunomine, a mountain village with a World Heritage-listed natural hot spring that has been used as a site of healing for a staggering 1,800 years.

Eager for a soak in the town's famous bath, I head straight for my *minshuku*, or Japanese inn, to drop my bags. The matriarch makes her own assessment. "First dinner, then bath," she tells me firmly. Knowing the Japanese are masters in the art of bathing, I feel it's wise to obey, so I take a quick shower, slip on the cotton *yukata* robe in my room, and head for the dining lounge.



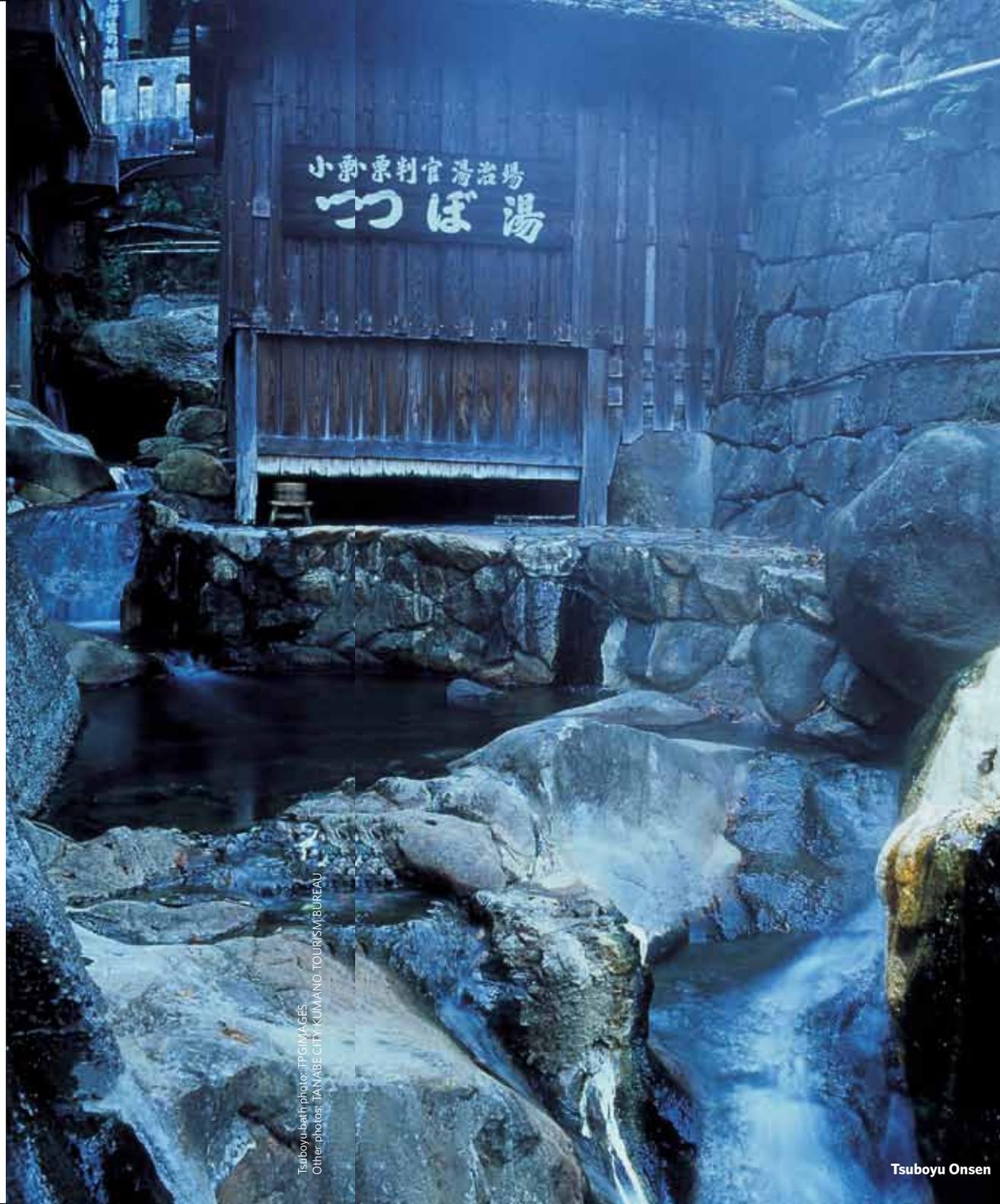
I have come to Kumano Kodo to try relaxation therapy ancient-style. For more than 1,000 years, people have journeyed to this sacred mountainous region to seek spiritual and physical rejuvenation through visiting temples, walking forested paths, and bathing in natural hot springs.

FABLED hot spring TSUBOYU has been used for HEALING for 1,800 years



THE SACRED TRAILS

The Kumano Kodo is an ancient name given to a network of pilgrimage routes across the Kii Peninsula, which link the three sacred shrines Kumano Hongu Taisha, Kumano Hayatama Taisha and Kumano Nachi Taisha. A pilgrimage destination since the 10th century, the sacred sites and trails were given UNESCO World Heritage status in 2004.



Tsuboyu bath photo: TPGIMAGES. Other photos: TANABE CITY KUMANO TOURISM BUREAU

Tsuboyu Onsen

onsen tips



USING TSUBOYU BATH

- Bath can be used by a maximum of two people for 30 minutes
- Rinse your body before entering the bath
- No swimming suits, soap or shampoo allowed



USING KAWAYU BATH

- Bathing suits and towels can be worn in the river baths
- Sandals are advisable as the rocks may be sharp
- No soap or shampoo allowed

After dinner, it's time for a short stroll through the village's lantern-lit streets to the fabled *onsen*, or hot spring, called Tsuboyu. Even in a country reputed to have more than 2,500 natural hot springs, Tsuboyu holds unparalleled historical importance in Japan.

"This exact stone bath has been used as a purification site by pilgrims since before the 10th century," says Brad Towle, director of the region's tourism body, who has lived here for almost 10 years.





take me there

**TSUBOYU
ONSEN**

WHERE:
Yunomine village

COST: ¥750 (¥450 for 12 and under)

TICKETS: *Purchase bath tickets from the counter beside Toko-ji Temple. Tickets will be exchanged for a number and an allocated time to use Tsuboyu. A ticket to Tsuboyu also allows admission to both the Kusuri Medicine Bath and the public bath.*

WHEN: *Open year round, 6am-9.30pm*

**KAWAYU
ONSEN**

COST: *free*

WHEN: *Natural river hot springs can be used year round at any time of day. The giant winter sennin-buro bath is open December-February, 6.30am-10pm.*

WHERE TO STAY: *Accommodation in the Kumano region can be booked through the Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau website. tb-kumano.jp/en*



Yamabushi trail

“It is directly linked to people’s belief in Kumano’s healing and regenerative powers.”

Tsuboyu’s spring-fed stone bath, which is the only World Heritage-listed hot spring that can be used for private bathing, is tightly managed and tickets must be bought in the village. Once inside Tsuboyu’s simple wooden shack, I rinse my body and slide into the neck-deep bath. As my muscles give in to the piping-hot water, I’m struck by the site’s profound history, and can see why people have attributed almost magical powers to it for so long.

The next day of onsen-hunting takes me three kilometres away to Kawayu, a tiny town on the banks of the Oto River. The most popular activity here is making baths in the riverbed that fill with hot water, something that seventh-generation innkeeper Makoto Kobuchi enjoys seeing year after year. “Guests always look confused when we hand them a shovel, until we tell them they can dig their own hot spring bath,” he says. For an easier option, the concrete public bath is available

year round, and in winter the town digs an enormous bath, called a *sennin-buro*, that can accommodate hundreds of people at once.

Back at my accommodation, the day spent digging my own bath has made the evening meal even more spectacular. Kawayu is famous for *yakuzen ryori*, or medicinal cuisine, and the father and daughter team running my minshuku have cooked up an array of dishes bursting with vitality — herbs and wild vegetables from the forest, a hotpot of Kumano beef simmered in onsen water, and crisp tempura. Later, I return to the river for a bath before bed.

After two days spent at onsens, I’m ready to experience some of Kumano’s many pilgrimage trails that criss-cross the peninsula. The next morning, as I take my first steps into the dark forest, I feel energised, calm, and ready to walk in the company of ancient trees, mossy rocks, and friendly spirits. ◀

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