

HAKONE SPECIAL

Rest and relax in Hakone

Soothe your cares away in beautiful mountain setting

By MICHIRU YOSHINO
Contributing writer

Located in the heart of Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park, and famous for its hot springs, majestic views of Mount Fuji and museums, Hakone is a mountain retreat, where fresh air and hot springs will soothe away the stress and tension of everyday city life.

The sights

There is so much to see and experience here, but you should try not to miss:

Owakudani (the great boiling valley), a volcanic hot spot with sulfur fumes and hot-spring water bubbling out everywhere. This is where you can have "kuro-tamago (black eggs)." Boiled in the hot springs, the eggshells are mottled black because of their chemical reaction with the sulfurous water. According to Japanese legend, every egg you eat will add seven years to your life.

The red torii gates of picturesque Hakone Jinja Shrine, with their feet firmly planted in Lake Ashinoko. On a clear day, Ashinoko offers breathtaking views of Mount Fuji.

The sculptures and artworks of the Hakone Open-Air Museum that dot its sweeping green lawns, and its fine collection of paintings and pottery by Picasso.

And the seasons. In spring, the green mountain slopes blush pink with the arrival of the cherry blossoms. The vivid tones of azaleas and the pale shades of hydrangeas follow in summer. Then as the seasons march on, Chinese Silver Grass covers the entire plain while the changing colors of the leaves herald the



LAKE ASHINOKO in Hakone offers many wonderful photo opportunities of Mount Fuji. PHOTO COURTESY OF JNTO

arrival of colder days.

Hot springs

Hakone has many "onsen ryokan" (traditional Japanese inns featuring hot springs). Facilities vary widely, although prices generally go up on weekends. Many hotels open up their guest baths to visitors. Some popular hot-spring complexes include Tenzan Tojiyo and Hakone Kowakien Yunessun. The former is a large, popular hot spring with indoor and outdoor baths, saunas, and so on. The latter is a gigantic indoor complex featuring rapids, Dead Sea-style salt baths and Jacuzzis. The outdoor area offers waterfalls and a water slide, as well as sake, coffee, green tea and wine baths.

How to get there

Hakone once served as an important traffic hub at the gateway to the Kanto region. Straddling the historic Tokaido highway, it was famed for its tight control of anyone trying to enter without permission from the Tokugawa Shogunate. Today it's much more

easily accessible.

Hakone is just 85 minutes from Shinjuku Station in Tokyo on the Odakyu Romance Car limited express. It can also be easily reached by the Odoriko limited express service with the JR East Pass. From Odawara, the Hakone Tozan Line continues to various resort towns. This scenic mountain railway starts from Hakone-Yumoto and toils up to Gora. From Gora, you can take the Hakone Tozan Cable Car funicular that climbs further up to Sounzan. Owakudani can be reached by the Hakone Ropeway that leaves from Sounzan and drops down to Togendai on Lake Ashinoko. Meanwhile, the Hakone Komagatake Ropeway goes to the top of Mount Komagatake. And don't forget the Hakone pirate sightseeing ships that sail across the lake from Togendai to Moto-Hakone. The Hakone-machi Odakyu Hakone Free Pass, which offers several days of unlimited use of most forms of transport, is a good way of getting around. The pass can be purchased in Shinjuku, Odawara or at any other major station on the Odakyu Odawara Line.

The art of hospitality

By CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON

Contributing writer

In some of the world's most touristy areas, the abundance of opulent hotels, enlightened designers and masterful chefs has become more of an attraction than the place itself.

Nestled between Tokyo, Mount Fuji and the Izu Peninsula, the Hakone region might be the place to sample Japan's highest expression of hospitality. Yet, Hakone has remained a mystery shrouded in the fog of its bamboo-studded mountains. "Many foreign people don't have a chance to find out what hotels there are in the Hakone area," says Masae Tokiwa, marketing communications manager at the Odawara Hilton. "Even most Japanese people don't know how good the hotels are in this area."

Recent trips to the Hyatt Regency Hakone and the Hilton Odawara gave me an idea why connoisseurs of fine food, interior design and art have been hiding out here for more than 100 years.

Hyatt Regency Hakone

The use of natural space, lighting and pattern found in the finest Japanese art can also be discovered at the newly opened Hyatt Regency Hakone Resort and Spa. Some hotels seem designed to soothe you the moment you walk in. For me, the spell begins with the scent of wood piled beside a fireplace in the lounge, here called the "living room," as if in a European ski lodge.

Upstairs, my bedroom appears as a Zen garden. The striped carpet induces calm while the absence of clutter allows the walls to absorb the diffuse lighting. The lighting throughout the Hyatt is the work of a master (Takashi Sugimoto). Light sources are concealed within a black lantern, a white sofa-side lamp and a two-tiered ceiling.

The Zen carpet calls me to massive windows that open into the ecosphere of a majestic tree. Though some of the 79 rooms have valley or mountain views, I prefer the rare chance to dwell within the forest. Watching birds land, tweet and flutter away, I feel like a privileged guest in their home. And I fall into the first of a

series of naps.

The lesson in light design continues at Izumi onsen. The soft illumination turns cold monolithic stone columns into soft, malleable surfaces that soothe the stress out of my bones, and allow the water to reflect the green of plants outside the glass, play on the ceiling and transform a shower into a moonlit waterfall.

Emerging shiny and rested for dinner, a curvaceous corridor of glass casings containing Japanese pottery leads me into the cozy living room, where complimentary glasses of wine and champagne await guests from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m.

In traditional Japanese garb of "yukata" and "tanzen," guests linger in furniture whose upholstery is made from kimono. Here, the lounge is the "living room," the dining room, the "the dining room." "Because it's a lodge, we want to be like hosts welcoming our friends into our home," says the hotel's PR specialist Sachiko Higuchi. "This is a place where you can really rest."

And dine. The sumptuous nine-course French meal unfolds in a room defined by a cellar of wine and champagne. Guests bring dessert into the living room, to watch sherbet melt beside crackling embers.

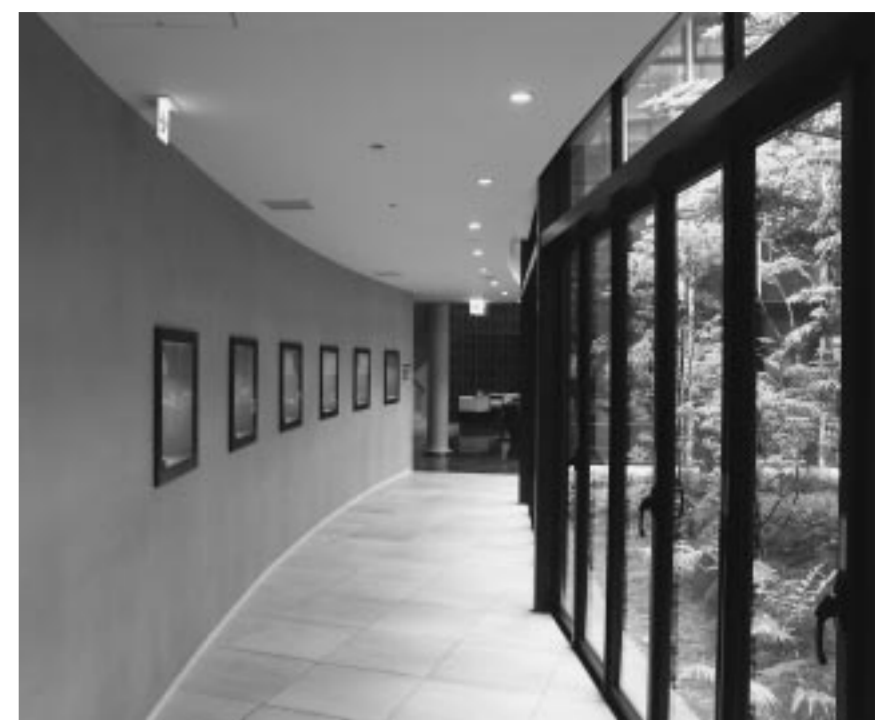
With time precious in such an enlightened space, I sleep only six hours and awaken at dawn to open the windows to the cool mountain air. A wave of fog rolls through the forest and into the room, bringing a whiff of a mountain hot spring. So this is Zen: a perfect moment when the purity of life is discovered anew.

Though Tokyo seems like a distant memory, it's just two hours away, down the hill to Gora Station and then Hakone-Yumoto, Odawara and the hard light of the cities beyond.

Hilton Odawara

Floating on my back in the outdoor whirlpool, I watch clouds drift from the mountain to the ocean and ask myself, "Why haven't I heard about this place before?"

"People often come here and say 'Oh my God,' I didn't realize this kind of place was so close to Tokyo," says Masae Tokiwa, marketing communi-



ART AND NATURE — A curvaceous corridor at the Hyatt Regency Hakone Resort and Spa features the green natural scenery of Hakone on the right and glass casings holding Japanese pottery on the left. CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON PHOTO

cations manager at the Hilton Odawara Resort and Spa.

With 172 sea-view rooms, family-size cottages, a putting green, outdoor and indoor tennis courts, gym for badminton or basketball, bowling alley and over a dozen banquet or meeting rooms, the facilities are ideal for gatherings of business groups, sports teams, wedding parties or social clubs. "It's different than just having a meeting in the center of Tokyo. There's a lot of room for brainstorming and building teamwork," says Tokiwa. "Guests can just walk around and feel the nature. That's one of our distinguishing points. We have a lot of space and leisure facilities, plus the business facilities."

For ¥3,000, day-trippers can enjoy the spas and lunch with a global selection of mineral waters. The ¥10,000 dinner course, enhanced by a fruity Tasmanian wine, was like a jazz concert of continual surprise.

Executive chef Masashi Mizuguchi goes to nearby farms and fish markets, and concocts such rarities as tomatoes stuffed with "shirasu" fish and avocado, abalone in barley risotto and a cinnamon-topped cappuccino cup full of mackerel-based soup. The sea

bass miraculously had thin strips of potato and truffle wedged between juicy flakes. The homemade bread was so good, I had it for dessert!

Dinner becomes a two-hour event. This month's buffet lunch, meanwhile, features an Okinawan array of "goya," pig's ears, candied pork and fruity desserts. I ate so much, I had to nap in a high-tech massage chair in the relaxation room before entering the Bade spa complex. While many hot springs in Japan feel cramped or segregated, this one teems with fun and freedom. Kids, celebrities and retirees in bikinis swim across warm open waters, twirl in whirlpools, exhale under fountains, lay in submerged beds or bounce around giant red balls that look like cherries in a cocktail. I needed four hours to sample every type of hydrotherapy, and if not for the 7:30 p.m. closing time, I might still be there.

Despite its mountainside perch, which is a 15-minute drive from Odawara, this slice of paradise is less than two hours from Tokyo by train and then hourly hotel shuttle buses from Odawara or Nebukawa stations.

'Japonisme' returns to Japan at the Lalique Museum

A comb might not seem like much to most people. But to French artist Rene Lalique, Japanese combs were objects of grace and beauty, embodying the attention to detail, subtlety and space that is the foundation of Japanese art.

Though Lalique was born in France, his brilliant work with jewelry, glass and architectural ornaments bears a

heavy Japanese influence. Thus his work, which bridged the Art Nouveau and Art Deco movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, feels very much at home in Hakone.

A new exhibition at the Lalique Museum in Hakone features his combs and other work influenced by the "Japonisme" that inspired many European artists in the 19th

and 20th centuries. The exhibition, "The Charm of Hair Ornaments — Lalique's Combs and Japanese Traditional Kushi," will showcase about 20 hair decorations, together with masterpieces of Japanese "kushi," or combs, of the Edo Period and early Showa Era.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, kushi were widely used by Western and Japanese women to express their character. The shape and the material used for them changed in the mid-Edo Period, and they were introduced at the Paris exposition of 1867. Along with netsuke and "inro," (cases for holding small objects), they accelerated Japonisme in Europe.

The motifs used on Lalique's combs, such as swallows, dragonflies and hanging wisteria, show the heavy influence of Japonisme in France in the Art Nouveau period. Like other masters, Lalique took risks with his

motifs. His combs drew attention to motifs that, though common in Japan, were not popular in Europe. At the Paris Exhibition of 1900, his combs showed a fantasy world with audacious motifs, such as snakes or men leaning forward out of the frame. He also used horn as a base material for his combs at a time when other artists in Europe shunned it.

The Hakone exhibit adds to the rich collection of more than 200 works of art, including an indoor fountain, chandeliers and 40 pieces of precious jewelry. The museum, which opened about two years ago, is a fascinating place to visit during a trip to Hakone. Its natural surroundings in the Sengokuhara Heights area and the spacious layout inside recreate the world of a Parisian salon as Lalique saw it.

Unlike Tokyo museums, which can be quite a physical challenge, the Lalique Museum is furnished with cozy

couches on which visitors can take a rest, surrounded by glittering works of art. The cafe-restaurant Lys, which offers French cuisine in a casual setting, has spectacular views of zelkova trees and an outdoor terrace to bask in the fresh mountain air.

The museum is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is between ¥800 and ¥1,500. The special exhibit runs through Nov. 25.

While the shinkansen or Odakyu Romance Car, with connections through Odawara or Hakone-Yumoto stations, will eventually get you to the Sengoku Annaijo Mae bus stop near the museum, perhaps the most convenient option is to take the direct two-hour service to the museum on the Odakyu Hakone Highway Bus from in front of Odakyu HALC Department Store in Shinjuku, Tokyo.

Ticket giveaways

The Japan Times is giving away to readers accommodation vouchers for each hotel and tickets for the Lalique Museum.

- A** Hyatt Regency Hakone Resort and Spa Twin Room (1 pair)
- B** Hilton Odawara Resort and Spa Hilton Plus Room (Twin room) (1 pair)
- C** Lalique Museum complimentary pair tickets (2 pairs)

Please apply through our Web site at

<http://classified.japantimes.com/hakone/>

The deadline is July 22.

Winners will receive the prize without prior notification.



AN OUTDOOR TERRACE at the Lalique Museum offers art in the beautiful natural setting of Hakone's mountains.

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Lalique's Combs and Japanese Traditional "Kushi"



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