

Pretty Steamed

In beautiful Nozawa Onsen, the day is built around a good bath



BY DAVID K. GIBSON

MANY SKI RESORTS CAN CLAIM THE TRADITION OF AN afternoon soak, be it in the spas of Austria or the hot tubs of Tahoe. But few can date their ritual to the 8th century. Nozawa Onsen, in the Nagano prefecture of Japan, does just that. Scattered throughout the town are 13 public baths — they are the *onsen* in the town's name — and dozens more private ones, and guests fresh from a day on the legendary ski hill* quickly learn the local way to unwind.

Nozawa is a picture postcard of a Japanese mountain village, though it seems as if it were constructed upon some slumbering caldera. Steam from 30 different hot springs rises through the needles of the fir trees and the grates in the streets, and signs warning of severe burns are as frequent as No Parking signs in Vail. Streams hot and cold tumble down the hillside, and locals (and the

occasional foreigner) walk the impossibly steep streets in *yukata* kimonos — the all-purpose bathrobe, pajama, and dinnerwear — and high wooden sandals, looking like reluctant heroes in an Akira Kurasawa film.

The village attracts mostly Japanese on holiday, and they usually avail themselves of the hospitality of a *ryokan*, a traditional Japanese inn, with *tatami* mats and koi and all of the other iconic Japanese trappings. The luxury of these places lies in their simplicity; skiers from the city hop the *shinkansen* — the famous bullet trains — in downtown Tokyo with not even a toothbrush; their ski gear has been shipped ahead, and the ryokan takes care of every other need. They check in to a rather minimally furnished room with a hostess as she serves tea — foreigners are given additional instruction on how to wear the *yukata* — and told when dinner will be. Then, they retire to the baths.

Most ryokan have their own private baths for guests. They're divided by gender and swimsuit-free, and the etiquette surrounding their use is rather strict, though plastic-coated guides — with multiple languages under cartooned instructions — keep foreigners from insulting the natives. Some baths are simple square tubs, with hot mineral-rich water bubbling in through pipes, though many include waterfalls and bamboo troughs, and some include outdoor areas in which to anticipate the next day's snow. Every onsen reflects a hand-built craftsmanship, and no little bit of *wabi-sabi*.*

After a soak, dinner is served on the floor in the *kaiseki* style, with dozens of tiny courses,* each one a visual and culinary work of art. After dinner, visitors wander the streets to sample other onsen of various temperatures and mineral makeups, all of them free to the public — of particular note is the traditional wooden *Oyu* bath, the showpiece of the local onsen culture.

Warm from the baths — too warm to notice the cold wind whipping down the mountain — they find a tavern in which to enjoy sweet-potato *shochu*, sauteed grasshoppers, hot sake (with a pan-fried rockfish in it for flavor), and a refermented sake whose closest Western cognate would be a yogurt martini. The grasshoppers are surprisingly delicious, sweet, and simultaneously crunchy and chewy, and will provide vital nutrients for the day of skiing — or soaking — ahead. ■

The Ogama spring is too hot for bathing, so the locals use it as a communal kitchen.

