

# Jigokudani Monkey Park: Onsen and Macaques

In Nagano Prefecture, Shimotakai District of Japan there lies a park that has a unique attraction not seen anywhere else in the world – it is the natural habitat of the local Japanese Macaque.

Jigokudani Monkey Park lies in the valleys of Yokoyu River; it is within the Joshinetsu Kogen National Park. It is here that wild monkeys spend their days bathing in hot spring water oblivious of the stares from tourists.



The word Jigokudani means 'hells valley' – a description of the steam generated by the hot springs during winter, a sight to behold. The valley has very cold winters and it is amazing seeing steam and boiling water bursting right through the cracks in the snow which is sometimes very thick.

The snow monkeys as they are known descend from the surrounding forests and head to the man-made pool and proceed to bath all day as they enjoy the warmth of the water. It is entertaining to watch the monkeys relate, they sometimes seem so human-like. They however retreat back to the forest in the evening.

This amazing wonder naturally attracts tourists and apart from seeing the animals bathe, tourists and locals visit the place to enjoy the hot water springs as well. Indoor and outdoor pools are available here with natural spring water.

A visit to the area is not complete without an experience of the natural spa, Jigokudani. The natural spa is known as Onsen in the Japanese language. At the village there is a natural spa that is open to visitors and the interesting thing is that as visitors bathe and enjoy themselves, monkeys too join them once in a while.



As the visitors take a hot bath in the Onsen outside, sometimes there is light snow falling leaving the

visitors awestruck by the beauty of the whole experience.

The visitors however do not all come for fun, the natural spa, Jigokudani is said to have medicinal properties. The natural water is said to treat all sorts of aches, chronic skin diseases, diabetes, constipation and menstrual disorders. Locals even have an Onsen therapy which involves bathing at the Onsen to maintain health, normalize any disorders in the body as well as keep diseases away from the spa-goers. A visitor to the area is welcome to stay in the local Korakukan traditional Inn.



The Onsen experience is a communal event in Japan; the local population over the weekend makes a point of traveling to the countryside just to enjoy the hot springs water. Traditionally the Japanese men and women used to bath together. However due to the influx of tourists same sex Onsen baths have been established.

To get to Jigokudani, visitors have to walk through the forest in a journey that takes between 25–40 minutes. This is one of the reasons why you will not find the place crowded. However when the weather gets warmer the monkeys head out deeper in to the forest to look for food, therefore the best time to see them when they are in plenty is during the winter months.

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