



# CONVERSATIONS WITH SNOW MONKEYS



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*An international travel  
writer offers a peek into the  
world he views through his  
camera lens*

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**S**tanding still is not the norm for the 21st-century rover. Actually, the converse is today's supposed authentic way of being – surging across life, driven by efficiency, and the proverbial bull's eye is revered. Even with slow movements mushrooming everywhere, exigency for more, better and – let's just say it – “the best” trumps every time.

In a small corner of the world, on the perfect islands of Japan, the art of standing still, of checking out and trickling into a peaceful state of mind, is prevalent and held in high esteem. Originally from the Edo period of Japan, circa 1603-1896, the ryokan was a type of traditional inn, serving travellers on the roads and, in later years, highways. But today these lodgings serve as a place of retreat and finding stillness for anyone interested in calmative refuge.

Ryokans, usually located in scenic forest or ocean areas, are most often built around a hot spring (onsen in Japanese), and since the country is volcanically active, these onsens are bestrewn throughout. The most famous of onsens are the ones in Shigakogen, where snow monkeys show you just how to enjoy an onsen in the absolute best way – quietly sitting in the snow, allowing time to pass by, with the mind finding its stillness.

Onsens have modernised in recent years, however; they still offer tatami-matted rooms and patrons are still required to wear a kind of summer robe, the yukata, around the premises – and they most certainly still serve regional and seasonal fare at every meal. The updates have come in offering all amenities: from a toothbrush to a quick shuttle from airports and city centres. City-slickers can now easily hop on over for a night or two of laze-about in the hot springs, and they do, without even needing to pack a bag.

The geothermal onsen water varies in mineral levels, and the Japanese believe these baths not only relax the mind and body, but have legitimate healing properties, part of their version of balneotherapy. Even the Park Hyatt in Tokyo, the city's finest hotel, has its own version of the onsen, with a 40° heated bath (in the film *Lost in Translation*, Bill Murray had a great soak there too) and an icier one right next to it for blood circulation raptures.

The idea is to sit on a tiny, wooden, hand-crafted stool and first wash yourself – not in the quick shower sense – punctiliously. The cleansing ritual itself is the gateway to finding a moment of stillness. Meticulously scrubbing every inch and then dipping into the hot water of the onsen. If all things line up perfectly, you'd be outside in the snow with a washcloth folded over your head, or inside next to a rock waterfall, steeping in the real sense of the word.

The simplicity of it all is what makes it so spectacular – no fancy spa jingles or bibelots; it's just you and yourself, no different from anyone else. ■