

# How I ended up naked, with a monkey, in a hot tub

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Japanese macaques (or snow monkeys) like to share the local onsen with humans.

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*Sometimes things don't go as planned – and those moments often make for the best stories. Tripping columns offer readers a chance to share their wild adventures from the road.*

"*Hadaka no tsukiai*" is the Japanese phrase for "naked companionship," the bonding that occurs in public baths. In the nude, there is nothing to hide and status means nothing; *onsen*, or hot springs, may be the most relaxed and uninhibited places in Japan. And here I was baring it all. To a monkey.

The directions to Korakukan ryokan, a rustic inn in the mountains, read like a scene in a Haruki Murakami novel – take the train to Nagano, a bus and then walk two kilometres through the forest. It gets dark quickly. There may be monkeys on the path. Do not look into

the monkey's eyes.

Thankfully, we arrived in full daylight but not after slipping and sliding along the snowy path, wearing cheap boots bought on a Tokyo street.

The inn has segregated baths, but the star attraction is the outdoor, stone hot spring, located next to the river and a surging geyser. Here, everyone is welcome, including the snow monkeys who venture over from Jigokudani, the nearby park.

The animals are an anomaly – supposedly the only monkeys that take hot baths in the world. Since the solemn, hot-spring soaking monkey appeared on the cover of Life in 1970, Japanese macaques have held many imaginations. It's their eerie human-like expressions. Sliding into the hot water, eyes closed and mouth gasping, they look just like a Canadian immersing themselves into the hot tub after a rough day on the slopes.

But do I really want to get naked in a hot spring with a monkey?

Wearing only a small, flimsy towel, I stumble outside onto the snowy path of the hot spring. An icy gust of wind blows past, but the coast is clear. I shuffle along in Japanese slippers when, turning a corner, I shriek at the large mound of fur in front of me.

I had read that an occasional snow monkey might come by, but not heaps of them huddled together and dozing. One regal-looking primate sits right in the spring that I want to enjoy. Its disinterested glance seems to indicate that it's okay to join him. So I do. But as I slip in, it occurs to me that this is a vulnerable position to be in: naked, in water, with an animal that could attack at any moment.

Perhaps it was the mountain scenery or the hot, medicinal water working its magic, but soon I was completely relaxed.

My human company began to increase. Two timid young men, holding their towels carefully, looked more concerned with the naked foreigners than with the animals in the bath. Next came a family with three young children. Soon, everyone was cooing at the monkeys, taking each other's photos and exchanging simple Japanese and English phrases, completely at ease.

Different ages, genders, nationalities and even species sharing the same hot spring. I may never find this type of naked companionship again.