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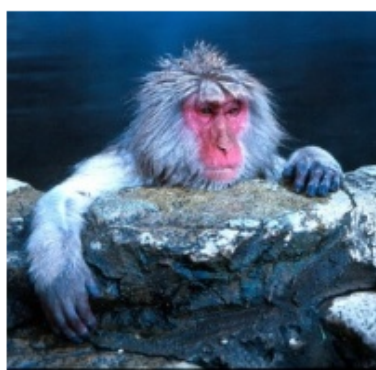
LEISURE - TRAVEL

Hellbent for Adventure?



BY STEVE GILLICK (WRITER), TORONTO, JULY 23, 2012

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Credit: Steve Gillick
Snow Monkeys bathe in the hot waters of Jigokudani

Jigokudani is where you can see the snow monkeys bathing in hot springs. It is slightly off the beaten track but the photographic rewards are well worth the effort.

Dramatic place names are attractive to travellers, especially to those looking for status and the prestige of saying "I visited ____ on my last trip". And there is no shortage. Just a quick Google reveals such places as Heavens Door (UK), Hell (Cayman Islands), Hell (Michigan), Hell (Norway), Hell (Texas), Hell for Sertain (Kentucky) Hells Gate

(New York), Hellhole Canyon (California) and of course there is Intercourse (Pennsylvania), Crotch Lake (Ontario) and Blow Me Down (Newfoundland).

But I actually did spend some time in Hell's Valley in Japan, locally known as Jigokudani. This is the place where you can see the snow monkeys bathing in hot springs. It is slightly off the beaten track but the photographic rewards are well worth the effort. From Tokyo you can take a train to Nagano and then a second train to Yudanaka. Then a local bus can take you to the Kanbayashi Onsen stop where a sign points to a path and you walk through a forested area for about 30 minutes before arriving in Jigokudani.

We stayed at the Korakukan Ryokan, a traditional guest house located very close to the entrance of the Monkey Park. Rooms have the traditional tatami mats on the floor and your bed consists of a thick duvet and blankets laid out on the floor, like your own personal cocoon. After a day of touring you can soak in either the indoor or outdoor hot spring (onsen) and then, wearing your slippers and Yukata (kimono), both supplied

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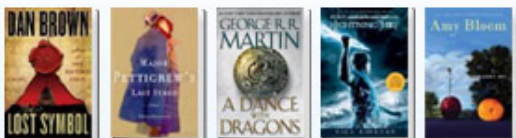
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not spring (onsen) and then, wearing your slippers and yukata (kimono), both supplied by the guest house, you come down to a delicious multi-course dinner of miso soup, pickled vegetables, fish, tofu and rice. As some of the Japanese guests spoke English, we had a great chat with them and shared small bottles of sake during the dinner. The cost including meals was about \$90.00 per person.

Jigokudani or Hell's Valley, is named after the many hot springs and boiling water that oozes and steams out of the crevices in the ground. The main attraction is the snow monkeys (Japanese Macaques) who, during the winter months, come down from the mountains where they have been foraging for food, and immerse themselves into the hot springs inside the park.

You can see monkeys of all ages and sizes enjoying the hot steaming waters; sitting, playing, and seemingly meditating while tolerating the click of cameras from the tourists. All this takes place under the watchful eye of a park warden. Fortunately during our stay, there were only about 10 other tourists and after the mandatory close-up shots of peaceful monkey faces, most of the visitors put down the cameras and just shared in the tranquility, uniqueness and privilege of eye-witnessing this famous nature spectacle.

Once you head back for the evening (the park closes at 3:00 or 4:00 pm) and you take an outdoor hot bath at the Ryokan, it is not unusual to find more monkeys either scampering out of the bath when they see you approaching or, in some cases, the monkeys stay put and you can share your soaking experience with a simian relative!

We checked out of the Ryokan the next morning after breakfast, walked the 30 minute path and caught the bus and train back to Nagano. All in all, this was an amazing experience. One of those times where you say to yourself "There are 6 billion people in the world, and here I am with 10 others, sharing an incredible travel-experience-bond".

If you are hell-bent on having a great adventure, you might consider including Jigokudani on your next trip to Japan



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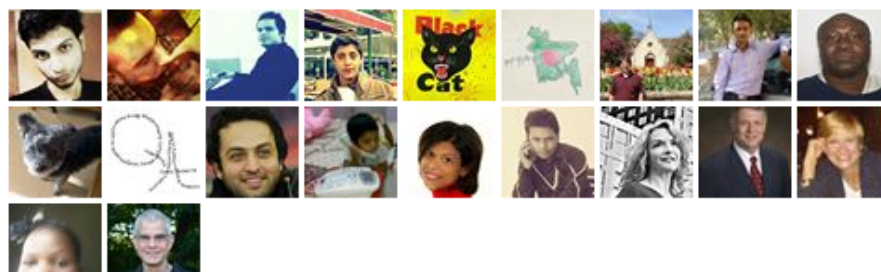
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Steve Gillick is a writer for BrooWaha. For more information, visit the [writer's website](#).

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