

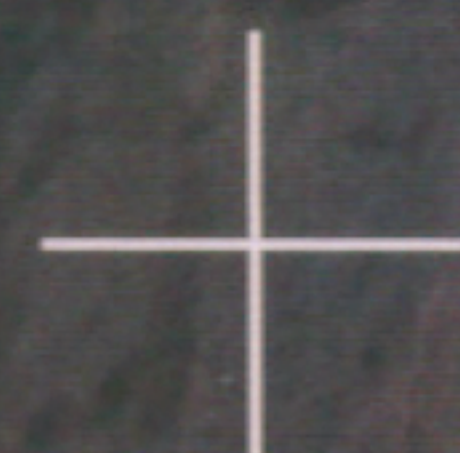


LEXUS

SPRING 2013

TESTING THE WATERS

THINGS ARE HEATING UP IN
JAPAN'S ONSEN SPA RESORTS



BEST OF THE BEST

THE NEXT LS IS ALL ABOUT
'ULTIMATE REFINEMENT'

ILLUMINATED

NIGHT KAYAKING PUERTO
RICO'S BIOLUMINESCENT BAY

CIRCUS SKILLS

WE MEET MARSEILLE'S
FEARLESS PERFORMERS



BENEATH THE FAULT LINES

riddling Japan's landmass and the volcanic peaks dotting its surface, lies a treasure trove of geothermal power that has, for centuries, been used to create the tranquil, restorative luxuries of the onsen spa. This resource, however, is also the subject of a heated, ongoing debate.

Since the earthquake of 2011 and the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, it is now hotter than ever. The country's 20,000-megawatt store of natural energy is being considered for large-scale commercial use more seriously than ever before. Some of the onsen owners, understandably, are a force of resistance.

Many of these underground reserves are in Japan's most naturally pristine areas, often below national parks, so industrial drilling would be undesirable to say the least. Eager to test the proverbial waters ourselves, we set off to see what may be at stake in Hokkaido, the country's northernmost prefecture.

The journey begins in Otaru, a coastal city of 130,000 opening onto the Sea of Japan. Here we pick up our ride, a Lexus RX 450h F SPORT whose resolutely dynamic exterior fits the adventurous mood. The car's assured

handling is as perfectly suited to Hokkaido's dramatic coastline drives as it is to the area's winding mountain roads, not to mention Otaru's simple street grid dating from the Meiji Period (1868–1912).

At that time, Otaru was Hokkaido's economic hub and the area's main harbour for shipping locally grown goods to the rest of Japan. Laden with agricultural products, barges traversed the city's central canal to the port's waiting boats. Though the waterway today mostly ferries tourists who come to taste Hokkaido history as well as the giant crabs caught off of Otaru's shores, it is still lined with storehouses erected more than 100 years ago.

Made from blocks of pale stone, the single-storey storage buildings had to be fireproof as well as able to withstand Hokkaido's harsh winters and heavy snowfalls. Though modest and utilitarian, these vernacular buildings inspired the Otaru Ryotei Kuramure, which is the inn where we bed down for the night – but only after sampling the sumptuous cuisine and soothing baths.

Located in Asarigawa, a hot spring hamlet on the edge of Otaru, Kuramure fronts the street with a row of pitched roof buildings

whose smoky steel cladding completely conceals the inn's interior. But crossing the threshold, a narrow space sandwiched between sliding, barn board doors, is like entering another world. Here darkness gives way to daylight as window walls open on to tree-studded mountains and the vast, blue sky.

We are greeted by Kuramure's owner, Toshiyuki Sanada, who invites us to take a seat on one of the Le Corbusier-designed settees in the reception area before escorting us to our rooms. A native of Otaru, the 44-year-old Sanada fully expected to enter the fishing business like his father but opted for the hospitality industry instead and opened Kuramure in 2002.

'I wanted to create an inn that melds with the contemporary Japanese lifestyle,' explains Sanada. With that goal in mind, architect Makoto Nakayama designed a series of connected buildings arranged around a central courtyard. Inside, a continuous corridor links the inn's 19 guest suites, a book-lined library, a café, a tradition-inspired tearoom, and separate baths for men and women among other communal spaces. Appointed with a blend of eastern and western furnishings, each spot tempts us

'IN ORDER TO CREATE CULTURE, SOMEONE MUST BREAK OUT AND DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT'

Top, left to right: a fishing port in Otaru; Mr. Nakayama, the architect behind the Kuramure inn; a Kuramure guest room, which blends elements of old and new; a chef prepares the inn's signature fusion dishes; an artfully prepared breakfast at Kuramure. Bottom: Mount Yotei, viewed in the RX 450h F SPORT side mirror



to linger a little longer. And that is just the point: Kuramure is a place to be savoured – especially the private guest quarters.

Though every suite has the same components, the décor in each one is unique. In keeping with historic Japanese architecture, rich materials and exquisitely crafted details are all the ornament my room needs. Many elements, such as square tatami mats and shoji paper screens embedded with dried leaves, bow politely to the old but also acknowledge the new. 'In order to create culture, someone must break out and do something different,' explains the architect.

Unsurprisingly, Kuramure's chef takes a similar approach in the kitchen. Using ingredients from Hokkaido's fields, orchards, dairies and, especially, seacoast, he prepares fusion meals for inn guests. Beautifully presented in our private dining room, dinner is as much a feast for the eye as for the palate. After 12 courses, we are full to the gills but still have an appetite for the baths.

Leaving our clothes and inhibitions behind, we wash thoroughly before taking the plunge; in Japan the bath is purely for soaking. Known to mysteriously heal cuts and scratches, Kuramure's bath is divided by a glass partition,

separating indoor and outdoor sections. Though it takes a little courage to submerge, it is worth it: the scalding water releases tension from every muscle fibre. It would be a real loss if baths like these disappeared as a consequence of drilling for geothermal energy. By the time I return to my room, the inn staff has transformed the tatami mats into a sleeping berth. As soon as my head hits the rice hull pillow, I am asleep.

Fuelled by a fresh glass of milk and an array of breakfast dishes, we set out again in the morning. Leaving the seashore behind, we head for the hills. In SPORT mode, the RX F SPORT takes swift corners with ease and accelerates smoothly as the terrain shifts from flat coastal roads to undulating country byways. The Remote Touch controller enables the fine-tuning of the air-conditioning and navigation system with the simplest tap of a finger, the leather-covered wheel itself feels like an extension of the hand.

With no billboards in sight, the scenery is as untarnished as it gets. Travelling inland we pass cows grazing, rows of bright green rice shoots, and asparagus fields ready for harvest. Gradually the open plains give >>