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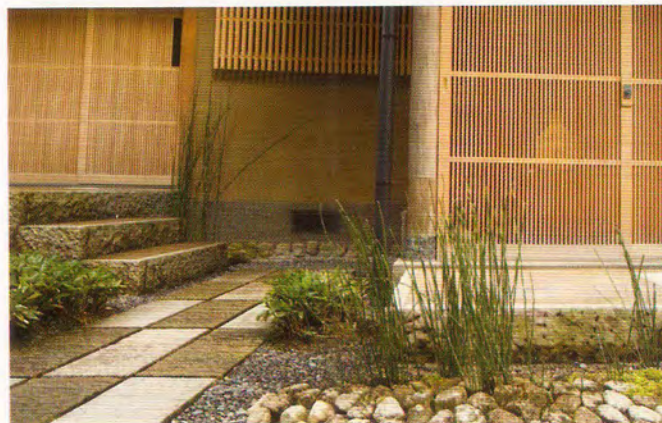
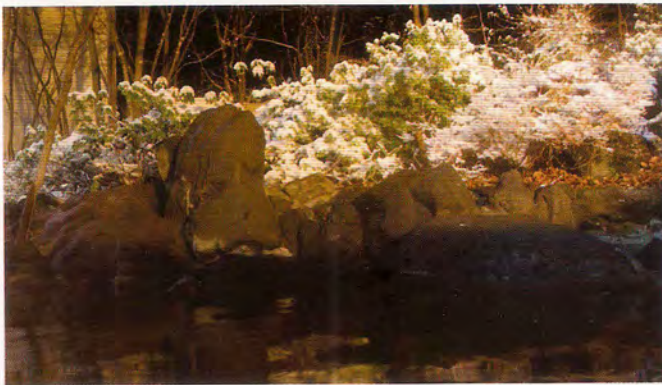
**ROB WILLIS (OAM)**  
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# Rituals of the bath

Fiona Harper



**D**espite the temperature hovering just above zero degrees Celsius, I'm actually feeling rather heat-fatigued. Rising steam vanishes into the crisp evening air, while beyond the granite boulder-edged bath I'm immersed in, all sound is absorbed by a snow-dusted forest. Naked amongst strangers, we soak companionably in silent contemplation while soothing hot water washes away tension. Lured to the Hokuriku region south-west of Tokyo, I'm up to my neck in hot water, Japanese style.

Bathing, whether communal or solitary, is a serious business in Japan. Cleansing the body, naturally enough, is the main purpose, but the whole ritual of body and mind purification is steeped in tradition harking back eons. Bathing is a time for reflection and relaxation, often with the whole family getting involved. Thanks to Japan's location on the volcanic Rim of Fire, thermal hot springs, known as onsen, bubble out of the ground country-wide. Depending on your definition, there are anywhere between 5000 and 20000 onsen across the country, so there's no shortage of options for communal bathing. They come in every variation from extraordinary natural settings through to starkly industrial and everything in between. Whether high up in snow-capped alps or tucked away in hotel basements, bathing in Japan is definitely one of those "when in Rome" type experiences.



Many onsen are attached to traditional inns known as Ryokan, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in two ancient traditions related to bathing and sleeping. Such is the culture of bathing entrenched into Japanese society, the term furo-aholic (meaning a bath-aholic) is given to one who ritually bathes. According to well-soaked photographer Mark Edward Harris, author of *The Way of the Japanese Bath*, a gorgeous pictorial publication: "When you immerse yourself in a hot spring, you immerse yourself in Japanese culture". Mark readily confesses to being an addict, bedding down at over 100 ryokan, soaking in innumerable onsen over the years.

He names Relais and Chateaux properties Asaba (very traditional) and Gora Kadan (fusion of Eastern and Western styles) amongst his favourites. Though my own personal favourite ryokan is secluded HOSHINOYA Kyoto, perched on the slopes of the Oigawa River valley near Kyoto, with privately plush bathing rooms in each of its traditionally-styled suites.

But for foreign visitors, public bathing and their traditional protocols can be a little daunting. Whether visiting a hot spring onsen or a public bath in the city, the ritual is the same. Indeed, much of Japanese culture revolves around etiquette so it's important to get it right. Baths are nearly always segregated, and always taken naked. There's no room for shrinking violets, though the Japanese are so inherently polite and respectful, that shedding ones clothes feels rather liberating. The idea is to be clean before immersion, so bathers wash away the day's grime before soaking, seated on plastic stools along a bank of hand-held showers. Teeny modesty towels are used to cover your private parts while walking around, which are then folded and placed on your head, or on the side of the bath while you soak. Towels are never immersed in the water, nor is it cool to use it like a face washer while soaking. After bathing, it's back to the wash area again, then into the locker room to dress. Upmarket onsen locker rooms are akin to day spas with banks of well lit mirrors, hair dryers and beauty products.

Back in the bath at Tsuruga Kirameki Spa Relaport, I'm loathe to drag myself back indoors to the washing area, all too quickly completing my bathing experience. It's recommended that you soak no more than 10 to 15 minutes, but submersion is kind of cathartic, particularly outdoors when the air is decidedly chilly. However dinner beckons, which turns out to be a local delicacy of Fukui Prefecture, snow crab, accompanied by that other Japanese tradition, sake. Sake, seafood and springs: is there a better way to enjoy Japanese hospitality? No. I don't think so either. 🍷

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