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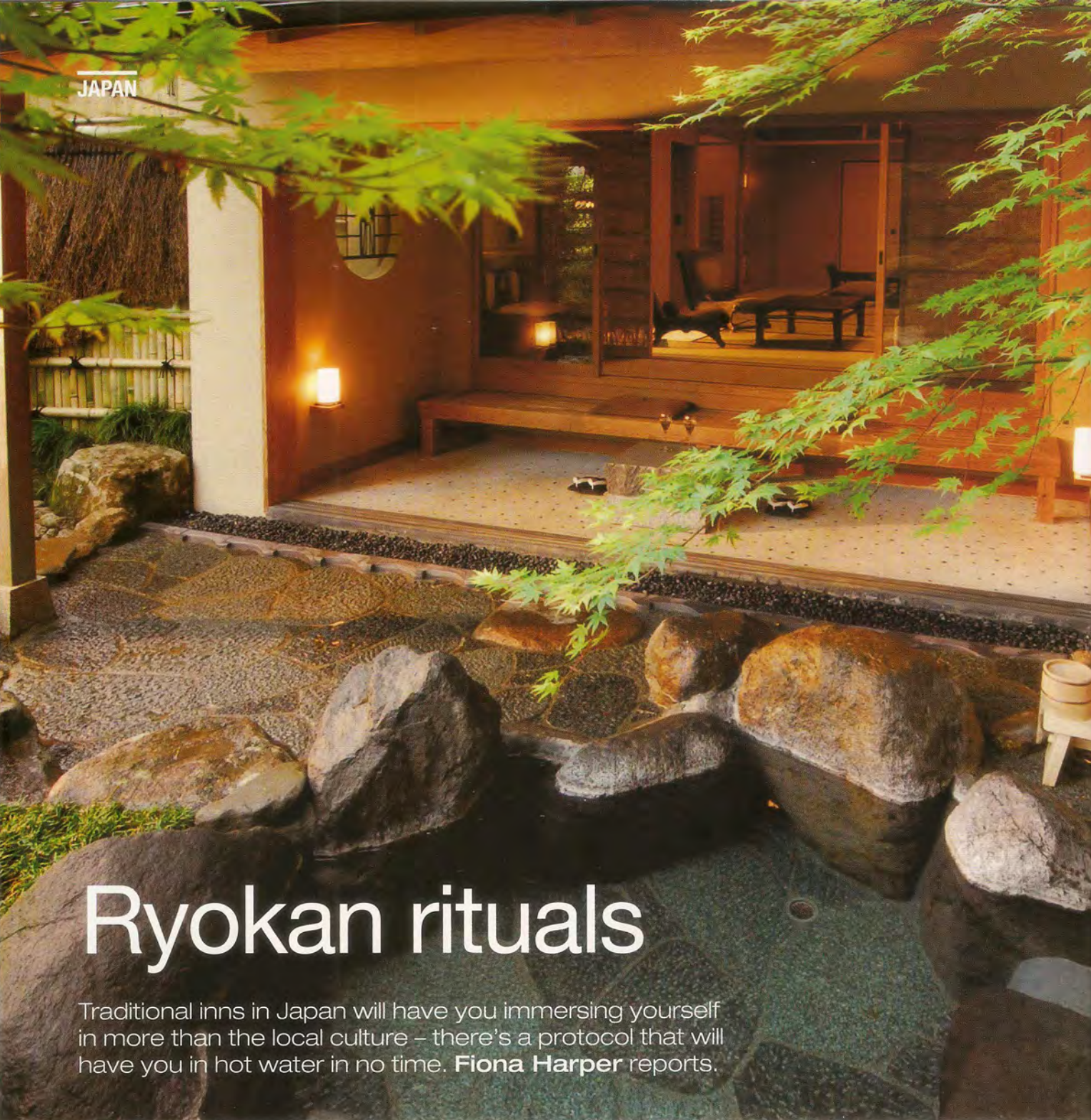
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Ryokan rituals

Traditional inns in Japan will have you immersing yourself in more than the local culture – there’s a protocol that will have you in hot water in no time. **Fiona Harper** reports.

Naked strangers all, we silently soak in the sulphuric waters, lost in our own thoughts. Snowflakes drift softly downwards, vanishing as they land in the thermal spring. Above me, snow clumps upon the bare-limbed trees reaching skywards beyond shrouded mountains. Lured by the soothing restorative properties of thermal springs, I’m up to my neck in hot water, Japanese style.

With more than 20,000 thermal baths, or ‘onsen’ across Japan, there’s no shortage of options for communal

bathing. Many onsen are attached to traditional inns or hotels, known as ryokan, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in two ancient Japanese traditions. So much 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 in its second edition: “When you immerse yourself in a hot spring, you immerse yourself

in Japanese culture.” Mark readily confesses to being an addict, bedding down at more than 100 ryokan over the years. He names divine Relais and Chateaux properties Asaba (very traditional) and Gora Kadan (fusion of east and western styles) amongst his favourites.

But for foreign visitors, ryokan and onsen culture with their traditional protocol can be a little daunting. Staying in a ryokan is one of those precious ‘when in Rome’ experiences, complete with tatami mats, futon, tea ceremony, Yukata robes (traditional



PHOTO: FIONA HARPER

OPPOSITE: Relais and Chateaux - Gora Kadan.

ABOVE: Keeping it simple as guests immerse themselves in the therapeutic hot springs.

summer kimono) and of course, onsen. Or, as the Japanese proverb goes, 'when in a village, do as the villagers do'.

Ryokan standards vary from simple through to sumptuous and everything in between. Imbued with traditional culture, some have adopted western ways with regular beds, creating a Japanese/western fusion. Others, like the Jodogahama Park Hotel amidst coastal national park surroundings in Iwate Prefecture are more traditional. Here, futons are laid upon tatami each evening, with guests offered a

personal in-room tea service along with room orientation upon check in.

Most ryokan rooms will have a small foyer which is where your shoes should be removed. Shoes are never worn inside; rather socks are worn on the tatami and soft sole slippers worn everywhere else. Long cotton Yukata robes, along with a short overcoat called a Tanzen, are the Japanese equivalent of the western bathrobe. Though in this case, it's acceptable to wear your Yukata almost anywhere around the inn, whether dining, relaxing or moving to and from the bath house, even out on the street in some regions.

Way back in the 1200s, travellers bedded down in cheap inns known as kichin-yado and were charged merely the price of wood used for fuel in cooking their own meals. Today, guests are more likely to be charged a nightly rate per person with dinner and breakfast included, particularly in regional ryokan. Guest rooms are sized according to the number of tatami, and therefore the number of futons accommodated. During the day the room functions as a living room with lowset table and chairs and the obligatory tea service. Housemaids scurry between rooms in the early evening while guests are out, replacing

furniture with big puffy futon mats for sleeping.

If your ryokan has its own onsen, I suggest you ignore your private bathroom beyond the absolute necessities and take full advantage of the communal bathing ritual. Teeny modesty towels are provided to cover private bits when walking around the onsen, and placed on one's head once in the bath. Soap is never taken into the bath, rather bodily washing takes place before and after a soak, using the provided amenities for washing and grooming. High-end onsen locker rooms are more like private beauty spas with luxury products free to use liberally.

As the snow continues to fall into the night, I'm loathe to leave the bath, despite advice to soak no more than 10 minutes. Eventually my futon beckons, but only, really, as a necessary diversion before I can return. It's oh so easy to fall under the onsen spell. •

The writer travelled courtesy of Japan National Tourist Organisation
For information: Japan National Tourist Organisation,
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 Japan Ryokan Association,
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