



The Japanese Bath (a.k.a. Heaven on Earth)

Todd Jay Leonard, Professor, Fukuoka University of Education

There are few things in life as satisfying and luxurious as a traditional Japanese bath. Over the millennia, Japan and its people have truly perfected bath-taking—elevating a mundane process of daily hygiene into a veritable art form, one that is steeped in ritual and, in my opinion, could be regarded as a precious and treasured cultural asset of Japan.

Many first-time visitors to Japan are a tad apprehensive about two aspects of taking a Japanese bath: 1) entering bath water that has been used by someone else; and 2) bathing with strangers in communal or public baths.

Admittedly, on my first visit to Japan as a 17-year-old high school exchange student I, too, was not very keen about baring it all with a group of strangers...or getting in a tub after several people had already used it. However, after just one time, I was hooked. All apprehensions were cast aside, and I am now a big fan of all types of traditional Japanese baths: the home bath, communal or public bath, and traditional *onsen*.

In fact, today I tend to be much more apprehensive about getting into an American-style “hot tub” than I am about entering a Japanese bath because before entering the actual Japanese bathtub, proper etiquette obliges bathers to first thoroughly soap, scrub, and rinse off their bodies before setting foot into the hot water. Most people enter a “hot tub” without bathing, knowing that so much chlorine is in the water that, like a pool, a shower afterward is needed.

I find it quite interesting how from childhood, Japanese children are exposed to traditional Japanese baths and learn early on the technique needed to wash properly their little bodies. In addition, I love the custom in Japanese families where children’s bath time is nearly always done with Dad. From the time the children are babies, Dad is the one who usually bathes with the children giving Mom a short break after dinner. Most every adult Japanese person can pull out a photo with Dad in the bathtub, usually as a small baby, taken by Mom.



Quite numerous in the old days, mixed public baths (that allowed both men and women to bathe together) are not so common today. The Christian missionaries who came to Japan in the late 1800s tried very hard to nix this custom, and eventually were largely successful except for traditional *onsen* with *rotenburo* that feature several outdoor baths. A number of these allow both men and women to bathe together still today.

At first, I was quite self-conscious about bathing in mixed company, but this anxiety subsided once I was fully immersed into the soothing, hot water. In reality, people are quite friendly and welcoming in such baths. I suppose because everyone there loves taking traditional-style baths so much that under circumstances that should seem awkward or embarrassing (*i.e.* men and women bathing together in the nude) are actually quite normal and natural. The “nudity” aspect is not the focus at all—the medicinal, mineral rich water is why people are there, and generally this is the main topic of conversation in such instances.

Really self- or body-conscious people may find a Japanese public bathing experience to be much too torturous to bear; but in fact, it is such a common and natural part of Japanese people’s lives, that no one pays other bathers much attention. Perhaps by sitting low to the ground, and in front of a small mirror, psychologically it gives one a sense of privacy. After all, it would be rude to stare, and besides, everyone is in their birthday suits, so what’s the big deal?

When friends visit from home, I often recommend they first try out the home bath. For the shy and uninitiated, perhaps the privacy of a home bath is more appealing to try first before bathing in a communal bath with strangers. Next, I like to take them to my favorite traditional-style *onsen* in the mountains that offers a variety of baths, including a communal outdoor bath that is mixed. This particular bathhouse is actually a traditional Japanese inn. It is located so far away from civilization that it has no electricity. Cell phones are unable to pick up any signal. For travelers wanting to truly get away from it all, this is the place to go for total relaxation away from the clutches of modern technology. At night, oil lanterns are lit all around the inn and the surrounding grounds, giving it a magical and surreal appearance.

Generally, Japanese people have very beautiful skin, often resembling silk. I believe this has a lot to do with the bath ritual they perform daily. I am always amazed at how thorough people are, even children, when bathing at a public bath. Children scrub and scrub their little bodies with such determination, learning by observing and mimicking their parents. These rough washcloths exfoliate, sloughing off dead skin cells from the body. This keeps the skin smooth and silky. Since many Westerners opt for a morning shower, forgoing the use of any type of washcloth, they are only washing off the dirt and grime for the most part, and not all of the dead skin cells.

Old habits are hard to break, I suppose. Even though I have lived in Japan for over twenty-years, I still insist upon a morning shower largely because this is a part of my American upbringing and culture. In addition, though, I relish taking a luxurious and relaxing Japanese bath before bed—the best of both worlds!