

# Naked communion

Japanese hot springs – onsen – are a way to break down barriers and for people to get to know each other in a relaxing atmosphere. David Minton shares his account of the country's traditional bathing experience

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Onsen is a term for hot springs in Japanese and for most Japanese people, onsen is not only a regular part of their life but also a respite from it. Perhaps it's a little like how many of us think of spas in the west. As a volcanically active country, Japan has around 3,000 onsen fed by natural hot springs, with another 14,000 individual springs scattered all over the mainland and the many islands.

For thousands of years onsen have played a major part in Japanese culture and lifestyle; the history and etiquette are closely related to the sento (public bath). Onsen use naturally hot water from the country's geothermally heated springs while the public baths, in comparison, are filled up with heated tap water.

The legal definition of an onsen states that its waters must contain at least one of 19 designated chemical elements such as radon and metabolic acid and be 25°C or warmer.

Traditionally, men and women bathed together at the onsen but single-sex bathing has become the norm since the opening of Japan to the west during the Meiji period between 1868 and 1912.

The Tombo-no-yu (left) at the Hoshinoya Resort is an open air hot spring with mountain views



Today onsen play a central role in Japanese tourism and many have become destination resorts focused on peace, quiet and beauty. During my visit to Japan, I tried out four different types of onsen and discovered how they stood out in the marketplace.

## ZERO-CARBON ONSEN

Lots of resorts serve a special evening meal to complement onsen and I experienced this, alongside tranquility and stunning scenery, at the Hoshinoya resort at Karuizawa which is just 71 minutes west of Tokyo on the Shinkansen bullet train. I exited the train station to a land of rolling hills covered in lush greenery where the tops are hidden in mist, 1,000m (3,280ft) high.

Since their discovery in 1914, the Hoshino Hot Springs, located at the foot of the active volcano Mount Asama, have relieved fatigue for many, but now a new showcase for Japanese onsen, culture and lifestyle has opened. Hoshinoya resort won the first Japanese Ecotourism Award in 2009 and is now working on being one of the first zero-carbon hotels in the world; and the onsen in this unspoilt setting – which uses naturally heated water and materials such as cypress wood, marble and granite – is no exception.

The first thing that helped me to forget about the stresses of the city life was the electric buggy that took me to a simple yet modern wooden-framed room overlooking a series of lakes and rivers along a valley. Natural waterfalls nearby helped to generate some of the hotel's green electricity. I found myself floating further away from all the trappings of western society as I slipped into my daytime yukata (robe) and headed for the onsen.

Japanese people often talk of the virtues of hadaka no tsukiai (naked communion) for breaking down barriers and getting to know people in the totally relaxing atmosphere of an onsen. It rep-



The Hoshinoya Resort at Karuizawa, 71 minutes from Tokyo, won an Ecotourism Award in 2009 and is working on being zero-carbon



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The Benten no Yado Itsukushima (above) is a traditional inn which has a simple, yet high-end offering with magnificent views (below)

PHOTO: ©2010 BENTEN NO YADO, ITSUKUSHIMA - ONSEN

resents an opportunity for the Japanese to melt down the hierarchical nature of society through mutual nakedness and intimacy. My freshly laundered yukata was removed and stored in a beautiful wicker basket which just sat on an open shelf – security at this onsen, like all public places I visited in Japan, was not an issue. In return, I picked up a small modesty towel, slid open a door to the male cleansing room and began my ‘naked communion’.

All around the room there were bathing stations equipped with shower taps, where you’re required to squat on a wooden stool and wash your hair and body with great vigour. After the washing, there’s a rinsing process where you wash away all traces of soap – entering the onsen while still dirty or with traces of soap on the body, is socially unacceptable.

My small towel, not much bigger than a face cloth, provided a modicum of modesty as I walked between facilities. From the washing area, I immersed myself in the first indoor hot tub before moving to the Tombo-no-yu: an open air hot spring which had spectacular views of the mountains. Relaxed already, I moved onto a series of meditation baths which had been designed to stimulate all five of the senses. Bath Hikari in the light and Bath Yami in the dark provided a unique environment where time just sped away as I happily floated about. The magic of the experience continued over dinner where every dish was presented as a stunning work of art.

### A TRADITIONAL OFFERING

Not all onsen are as modern as the one at the Hoshinoya resort, but it seems all are unique. On the island of Miyajima, less than an hour from the city of Hiroshima by water taxi, I sat in an onsen and took in the magnificent views of the torii gate which marks the entrance to the Itsukushima Shrine – a national treasure and UNESCO World Heritage Site. By day the torii gate appears to be floating in the water

Onsen represent an opportunity for the Japanese to melt down the hierarchical nature of society through mutual nakedness and intimacy

at high tide, while at night the shrine and the gate are illuminated and surrounded by walkways over the water that are lit with stone lanterns. This was the setting for Benten no Yado Itsukushima: a ryokan (traditional Inn), which reflects the traditional Japanese way of life that is still so deeply ingrained in contemporary culture. The rooms were very simple with tatami-mats on the floor, a bath made from local hinoki cypress wood and a futon that goes down at night. This ryokan has been built into the hillside along with a simple wooden onsen which provides the most perfect peaceful reflections across the bay before I was served a dinner of fresh seafood. I later read that the view from the onsen has been ranked as one of Japan’s top 10 sights – a judgement with which I have to concur.



The Itsukushima Shrine entrance

PHOTO: TORII GATE ©JNTO

### FROM THE FUTURE

On the way back to Tokyo I had one more stopover planned; and although it didn’t get the views like those on Miyajima, I did get to follow in the footsteps of the famous at the Yamaha Tsumagoi resort – a venue of choice for the rock band Queen and a previous training ground for the Japanese football team. Yamaha, the Japanese music

## FIRST PERSON



LaQua (left) is an urban spa in Tokyo; parts of the Yamaha Tsumagoi resort are traditional, while the onsen (right) has a futuristic feel

▶ giant, owns two resorts and Tsumagoi is a multi-purpose site just outside the western city of Kakegawa. The resort, which is set in a quadrant, with long drapes flowing down the buildings, has an imperial feel to it. While the resort had a traditional setting, the onsen was more futuristic – the entrance to the hot springs, with automatic sliding doors and a delicate lighting scheme, gave a sense of walking into a Ridley Scott sci-fi movie. All the pools had artificial waterfalls with thermal waters and nearby were linens and towels so soft that you wanted to linger longer. The special evening meal needed some translation to begin with, but it was such a culinary delight that I was actually thankful of social media sites where I could share my views with friends across the network.

### URBAN ONSEN

Back in Tokyo, I found that the urban onsen had been designed to transport me back to the experiences I'd had in the countryside. At LaQua, the spa zone in the Tokyo Dome City development, the

natural waters bubbled up from the Koishikawa Hot Springs just 1,700m (5,577ft) underground. The promotion of the qualities of the water was more up front in this city onsen, where many notices informed me of the benefits of the waters. The therapeutic and thermal properties of the waters are intended to help with poor circulation, shoulder discomfort and neuralgia and they are also believed to benefit the skin.

LaQua operates over five floors that are all interconnected to the Healing Baden Zone – the main area of water and outdoor space on floors eight to nine. LaQua is billed as a “first class space for healing” but on the night I went it was full of corporate groups whose bosses wanted to go and take to the waters before an evening of eating and drinking with colleagues.

Of the 3,000 onsen in Japan, no two are alike. Yet the use of natural and unique design features, coupled with meticulous attention to detail and customer focus, means that every visit is one to remember and recommend. ●

According to **Hirokazu Iida**, president of Shuei Wellness Co in Tokyo, there are three distinct types of onsen. These include a small number of city onsen, which are frequented by families, friends and business colleagues who “bathe together, laugh or talk loudly and afterwards have a party with beer and food”. In comparison there are onsen at traditional Japanese inns (ryokans) which are more focused on relaxation and are split into budget or high-end facilities. There are also stand alone onsen, in a natural setting, points out **Tae Kawasaki**, president and founder of The Day Spa based in Osaka.

**Yoriko Soma**, the president of SpaFinder Japan, elaborates on the positioning of ryokans. “Onsen ryokans used to be central to Japanese tourism, but in the 80s switched to cater to corporate guests. Since the downturn, however, such ryokans and mass-market onsens are dwindling and these traditional offerings

### What role do onsen play in the Japanese wellness industry?

We asked four key professionals in the Japanese spa industry to give their take on onsen and how they fit into the country's spa market

are reinventing themselves.” While onsen and spas have traditionally been separate – bathing in onsen is an old custom in Japan and spa facilities didn't come onto the scene until international operators launched there in mid-2000 – Soma says that high-end ryokans with onsen are beginning to offer spa treatments.

**Tomonori Maruyama**, chief researcher at the Mitsui Knowledge Industry who has closely observed the spa market in Japan agrees that

many onsen ryokans are becoming “reincarnated as small luxury hotels with very healthy Japanese food. Some of them have unique wellness programmes focused on Japanese nature, culture and ingredients or provide traditional therapies such as shiatsu, acupuncture and moxibustion. These new ryokan spas act as cultural ambassadors now.”

Kawasaki says the mix of onsen and spas is a good one: “It is our nature to receive a body massage after bathing in an onsen, so it is the perfect combination to have a spa treatment area at ryokans with onsen (ryokan spa).” She says that these facilities would typically attract domestic customers and they're especially popular with families, couples and groups of females. However, the new high-end ryokan spas are now attracting more international guests – but she admits that the lack of bilingual staff and information is a barrier that needs to be overcome if this market is to grow.