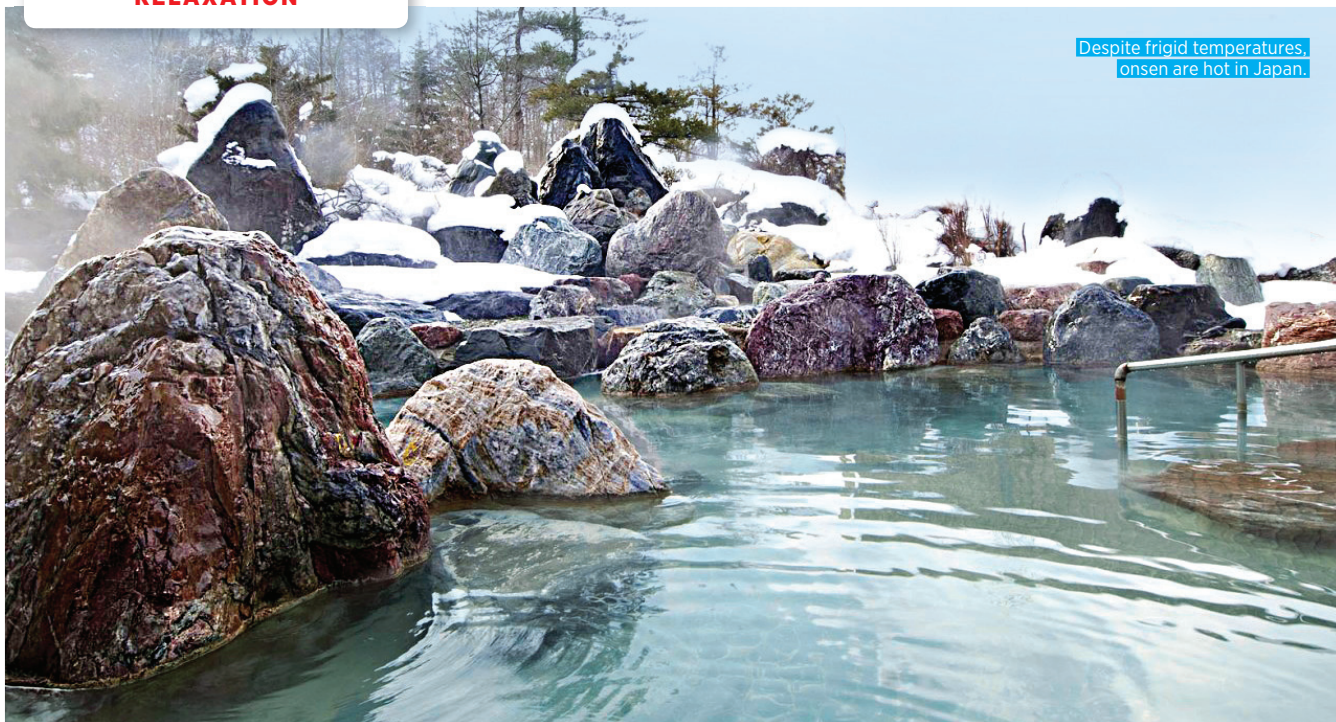


RELAXATION



Despite frigid temperatures, onsen are hot in Japan.

Spahhhhhh

Japan's traditional **HOT SPRINGS** are tonic water for the body and soul.

SNOWFLAKES MELT ON MY SKIN AS I HEAD naked toward the steaming waters of Houheikyo onsen. Within seconds, I am relaxing in the hot spring's 102-degree water, and I quickly forget about being outside in freezing weather. Physically, I am in Shikotsu-Toya National Park in the hills above Sapporo, Japan, on the island of Hokkaido; mentally, I am in a world far, far away. This is what an outdoor onsen is all about.

Onsen are as quintessentially Japanese as sushi and ramen noodles, but unlike them can be truly appreciated only in the Land of the Rising Sun. It is a pity, then, that so few foreigners take the time to partake in this Japanese obsession, which acts as a portal to the old Japan.

There are more than 3,000 hot springs, or onsen, in Japan. Traditionally, onsen were natural pools full of geothermally heated water. These days, though, some onsen

have given Mother Nature a hand by drilling down hundreds of yards into the earth to tap the hot waters.

For visitors to Japan, it's easy to overlook the fact that the country is mostly mountainous and to instead become mesmerized by the shimmering lights of places like Tokyo's Shibuya district. But this produces a blinkered vision of the modern Japan. Outside the cities is where you'll find the old Japan — and this is onsen country.

DOGO-ONSEN HOT SPRING, LOCATED IN Matsuyama on the island of Shikoku, is where it all began. In a story I would like to believe, the gods of Earth (*Okuninushi-no-Mikoto*) and medicine (*Sukunahikona-no-Mikoto*) bathed here 3,000 years ago. Sukunahikona, who was at death's door, was cured after the experience. Another origin legend tells of an injured heron that was healed in Dogo onsen's waters. That story is likely to be closer to the truth but is not nearly as colorful.

The reputed healing properties of the waters eventually became part of Shinto purifying rituals. With the arrival of Buddhism

in the sixth century and the religion's emphasis on purity, onsen bathing became increasingly popular. During Japan's Edo Period (1603–1867), hard-toiling farmers would partake in *toji* (onsen therapy) to soothe their aching limbs and help their injuries heal.

Now, *toji* is used by stressed-out Japanese workers to rejuvenate. People see onsen not so much as a part of their everyday lives but as a means of escape from them.

"Now, many people visit onsen to relax and take advantage of the healing benefits that they offer, and they enjoy it, not just heal and recover," says Hirokazu Nunoyama, secretary-general of the Japanese Spa Association.

ONSEN COME IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES. Some, like Dogo, are housed in buildings hundreds of years old. Others are outside and/or part of upscale resorts. Expect to pay up to \$20 for the bathing experience itself, and considerably more if you're staying overnight at a *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inn).

"Good onsen should have really hot water that doesn't smell like chlorine, and in my opinion, should be off the beaten path or should have historical or cultural significance," says Ray Bartlett of OnsenJapan.net.

Japanese often choose an onsen based on the type of water. • **CONTINUED ON PAGE 47**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 42 • Some women tend to seek out waters rich in sodium bicarbonate to help make their skin soft. The muddy waters of iron-rich hot springs are said to be good for anemia sufferers and for helping the body retain heat. There are even waters containing hydrogen sulfide, which is said to be effective for softening the skin and for curing acne.

FOR THE UNINITIATED, THE FIRST ONSEN visit can be intimidating. But it actually becomes a relaxing experience once a few simple rules are understood ... and the fear of being naked in front of strangers abates.

After getting undressed, it's time to bathe. Usually there is a line of stools and bowls in front of water faucets. You must wash yourself thoroughly with soap and water from head to toe. This is *not* negotiable. The biggest onsen sin is not washing and rinsing yourself properly.

Then, it's off to the hot spring. Traditionally, nothing other than your body is allowed to enter the water. Swimsuits are banned, except in a few mixed-gender baths. Small but strategically placed towels can protect your modesty before entering the bath but should not be submerged.


If you have a tattoo, you may be in for an unpleasant surprise. Many onsen do not allow people with tattoos, as they are associated with *yakuza* gangsters.

Houheikyo onsen sports a *rotenburo* (outdoor bath), which is especially invigorating when the temperature plunges in Sapporo. A small wooden shelter provides me with refuge from the snow, as it piles up on the nearby rocks like a Chinese roof. One of my fellow bathers is using this natural refrigerator for his *sake*. The mineral-rich water contains iron, sodium bicarbonate and calcium, and it's said to be good for

neuralgia, myalgia and hemorrhoids.

Perspiration drips down my face as I make polite conversation with a local. He swears the water helps him recover from fishing injuries, and he visits regularly. In the changing room afterward, I discover a fountain; devotees drink its water as an elixir. It's supposed to be a remedy for digestive and liver diseases, as well as for constipation.

The best I can say is that it has a distinct taste, thick with minerals. Sake it isn't.

Still, my onsen experience has reinvigorated me, body and soul. And I'll drink to that. 

MARK ANDREWS is a writer based in Asia whose work has appeared in such publications as *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the *South China Morning Post*, *The Japan Times* and *The Straits Times*.



CARVING A NEW EXPERIENCE

15 flame-grilled meats served tableside

50-item gourmet salad area

Ultimate caipirinhas, sumptuous wines, and much more

For rewards, log on **texasdebrazil.com**

Fly American to Tokyo's Haneda Airport

As of **June 1**, American Airlines customers can fly direct from New York/JFK International Airport to Tokyo's Haneda Airport on our comfortable and spacious 777 aircraft. This is in addition to American Airlines' existing service to Japan from cornerstone markets Dallas/Fort Worth, Chicago and Los Angeles.

For additional information on Japanese hot springs, go to AA.com/americanway

DENVER • FORT LAUDERDALE • HALLANDALE BEACH • MIAMI • MIAMI BEACH • ORLANDO
TAMPA • CHICAGO • SCHAUMBURG • BATON ROUGE • DETROIT • LAS VEGAS • YONKERS
COLUMBUS • PITTSBURGH • MEMPHIS • ADDISON • DALLAS • FORT WORTH • HOUSTON
SAN ANTONIO • SALT LAKE CITY • FAIRFAX • RICHMOND • ARUBA • PUERTO RICO • TRINIDAD