

All in for birthday-suit bathing

LYNN GAIL navigates the rules and etiquette of stripping off in a Japanese onsen.

AS I shuffle awkwardly through the foyer of a Japanese inn wearing slippers two sizes too big, I run through a mental checklist. Is my yukata (Japanese pyjamas) tied correctly (if the right lapel is in front it means the person is deceased and in a coffin).

Am I shuffling at the right speed with a calm "resting face" expression? Most importantly, will I know what to do once inside the onsen where etiquette is king? It's my first experience of public bathing in a Japanese hot spring (onsen) where birthday-suit bathing is non-negotiable.

Spending time at an onsen is one of Japan's oldest and most popular pastimes. With more than 100 active volcanoes, the water is geothermally heated.

The country's history books are littered with references to natural hot springs, some dating back more than 1000 years. The tradition became popular during



NO PLACE FOR EGOS: Bathing in a Japanese onsen resets the clock

the Edo period (1603-1867) and is woven into the fabric of everyday lives. Parents introduce onsen bathing to children when they are toilet-trained.

Step 1: I slide the slippers

off placing them next to 30 identical pairs and wonder how I'll remember where they are. Each pair is perfectly lined up. Feeling exposed and self-conscious I place my belongings in a row of

identical baskets. I have a notion this is a lesson in ego, where individuality has no place.

Step 2: Disrobing - do I (A) attempt to cover the bikini bits with a towel of kitchen

tea towel measurements or (B) stride confidently, completely naked, to the wash areas?

I go with plan A, quickly realising it's a futile attempt at modesty and pull the tow-

el away. Most public baths provide the necessary toiletries to rid the skin of possible contaminants. It's onsen 101 to wash thoroughly before slipping into the steamy baths. Each shower has a supply of soap, shampoo and conditioner and a low stool with a wooden wash bucket.

The women around me are clearly knowledgeable in onsen etiquette and are washing every crevice; in a country where toilets have a music button to quieten ablution "noises" I'm surprised to find them so at ease.

I copy their cleaning regime, but on entering the pool commit a faux pas by accidentally dropping the towel in the hot spring. A smiling woman shows me how to tie the towel over my head, keeping it clear of the water.

Just as the mineral water helps to cure an ailing body, it can also heal the mind. The water is around 39°C, my apprehension has melted away. I reflect on a tradition that soothes the soul and resets the clock in a world where time seems to tick faster every day.

Look! Before you go in...

1. 入浴前に足湯で足を温めましょう。 Please take off your underwear before you go in. 脱衣室内で下着を脱ぎ、足湯で足を温めましょう。

2. 入浴前に体を洗ってください。 Please wash yourself well before getting into the tub. 入浴前に体を洗ってください。

3. 入浴時はタオルを持ってください。 Please keep your towel out of the tub. 入浴時はタオルを持ってください。

4. 入浴中は携帯電話を電源オフにしてください。 Please use the shower while sitting, and turn it off when you don't use it. 浴槽内では携帯電話を電源オフにしてください。

5. 入浴中は携帯電話を電源オフにしてください。 Please refrain from washing your clothes or underwear. 浴槽内では洗濯機や乾燥機を使用しないでください。

6. 入浴後はタオルで体を拭いてください。 Please wipe yourself off before coming out to the dressing area. 入浴後はタオルで体を拭いてください。

IF YOU GO...

ON Wendy Wu Tours' immersive Trails of Japan 14-day tour you can experience two authentic Japanese inns (ryokan) and a Buddhist monastery, each with onsen. Including flights the tour starts from \$9640 per person twin share. For more, visit www.wendywutours.com.au and search for Trails of Japan.

Lynn Gail was a guest of Wendy Wu Tours.

Photo: A poster indicating what to do and what not to do in an onsen. Apart from being a social outing and a respite from long working hours, hot spring bathing is widely recognised for its health benefits. Many onsens also offer massage facilities.

COMING UP



Oamaru, Frame's childhood home.

NEXT month in our New Zealand special we visit the hometown of its greatest writer, Janet Frame, who called Oamaru, 250km south of Christchurch, her "Kingdom by the Sea".

The author of 13 novels, four story collections, one book of poetry and three masterful volumes of autobiography brought to life in the multi award-winning 1990 film *An Angel at my Table*, Frame was born in Dunedin in 1924 and died in 2004.

Writer Sandy Guy has long wanted to visit the region that was home to one of her literary heroes: "It's almost as if you know places like Oamaru, deftly described in Frame's stories, before you actually visit them."

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