All in for birthday-suit bathing

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

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

introduce onsen bathing to children when they are toi-

the Edo period (1603-1867) off placing them next to 30 and is woven into the fabric identical pairs and wonder of everyday lives. Parents how I'll remember where they are. Each pair is perfectly lined up. Feeling exposed and self-conscious I place Step 1: I slide the slippers my belongings in a row of

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

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 towel 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.



IF YOU GO...

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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.

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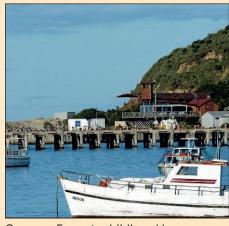
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Writer Sandy Guy has long wanted to visit the region that was home to of one of her literary heroes: "It's almost as if you know places like Oamaru, deftly described in Frame's stories, before you actually visit them."



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