

How to onsen

Experiencing a traditional hot spring bath, or onsen, is an essential part of visiting Japan – but be sure to brush up on your etiquette beforehand

Hot spring bathing isn't just a popular pastime in Japan; it's a hallowed cultural institution. Until you've tried it, you can't even begin to call yourself a true Japanophile.

Hot springs, known as onsen in Japanese, are created wherever volcanically heated water emerges from the ground – which is all over the country. The baths can be indoors or outdoors, private or public, housed in city

bathhouses or in beautiful natural locations. Although they're for communal use, they're nearly always segregated by gender, unless you rent a kashikiri (private) bath.

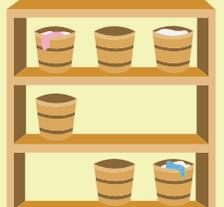
You're most likely to come across an onsen at a ryokan, or traditional Japanese inn – but before you soak your cares away, be sure to familiarise yourself with onsen etiquette!

1



Bring two towels with you to the onsen (at ryokan inns, these are usually provided at the baths). The big one is for drying yourself, and the small one is for washing. Shampoo and soap are usually provided too, but bring your own if you like.

2



Get undressed in the changing room and leave your clothes and belongings in the baskets or lockers provided. Leave your large towel with your clothes, but take the small towel with you. Be warned – it's strictly birthday suits only once you leave the changing room!



3

Enter the bathroom and find a shower that's free. There are small stools and buckets provided. Sit down on a stool, fill the bucket with water and use your small towel to wash yourself thoroughly with soap and water. It's rude to stand up, in case you splash your neighbour.

4



Once you've rinsed yourself clean of soap, get into the bath for a soak. Be careful not to dip your hair or your small towel in the water; do as the Japanese do and place your towel on your head while you bathe.

5



When you've finished bathing, get out and wash yourself at the showers. Wipe any excess water away with your small towel before heading into the changing room, so that you don't make the floor slippery for others.

6



Get dry, get dressed and go!
Most onsen provide hairdryers, and some provide all kinds of fancy products too. If you've borrowed towels, deposit them in the indicated bins before heading out to conclude with a nice cold drink.

A REMINDER

Those with tattoos might be refused entry to onsen. In Japan, tattoos are closely associated with organised crime and gang membership, so it's something of a social taboo. If you have a tattoo, you can use private baths, or (if it's small enough) cover it with a plaster to visit the public baths.

