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# LIVING IN SINGAPORE

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# A Tale of Two Onsen

By Asif R. Chowdhury

The very first time my Japanese colleagues offered to take me to an *onsen* on the outskirts of Tokyo, I was quite excited. I had heard of their therapeutic properties and was looking forward to soaking in these hot springs. However, once I entered the *onsen* and the etiquette of the Japanese public bath had been explained, my enthusiasm quickly died. It turned out that Japanese *onsen* etiquette requires that one must be in one's birthday suit when using the baths. Obviously, men and women bathe separately, but I was still well out of my comfort zone. I was at a point of no return so, timidly, I entered the bath along with my Japanese friends and colleagues.

Very soon my apprehensiveness evaporated and I began to relax in the steaming hot bath. It felt heavenly, especially since we had just come straight from completing our eight-hour hike up and four-hour hike down Mount Fuji. The next morning, following my soak in the hot springs, I felt as good as new and, from there on in, I was hooked.

Japan lies within the Ring of Fire, where ten percent of world's active volcanoes are located, which gives the area abundant access to natural hot spring water. Bathing in an *onsen* is deeply rooted in the tradition, culture and history of Japan and links with the ritual of *ofuro*. *Ofuro*, meaning Japanese bath, is the custom of taking a hot bath at the end of every day, in which most Japanese people partake. *Onsen* is essentially taking this practice to geothermally heated natural spring water in a public bath.

According to the official figures, there are over 3,000 *onsen* resorts in Japan today. But there are two *onsen* worth mentioning due to their uniqueness. Both provide the rich *onsen* experience but lie at opposite ends of the spectrum. Oedo Onsen, Monogatari, a large-scale *onsen* with a theme-park feel to it, is a very recent addition to Tokyo, while Dogo Onsen, located on Shikoku island, is steeped in tradition.

Established in 2003, Oedo Onsen, Monogatari, is in the Odaiba district of Tokyo. The baths use natural spring water pumped from 1,400 meters underground, which service its thirteen baths containing different minerals with unique therapeutic qualities and offer different levels of heat. There are also a few outdoor baths surrounded by beautiful Japanese landscaping, as well as a 2,300-meter-long footbath winding through a pristine Japanese garden, bringing guests a feeling of being close to nature.

In line with the theme-park concept, visitors wear colorful *yukatas*, similar to *kimonos*, which add to the experience of milling through the streets and shops, evoking the four-hundred-year-old Edo period. There are multiple diversions besides soaking in the hot baths as the complex has

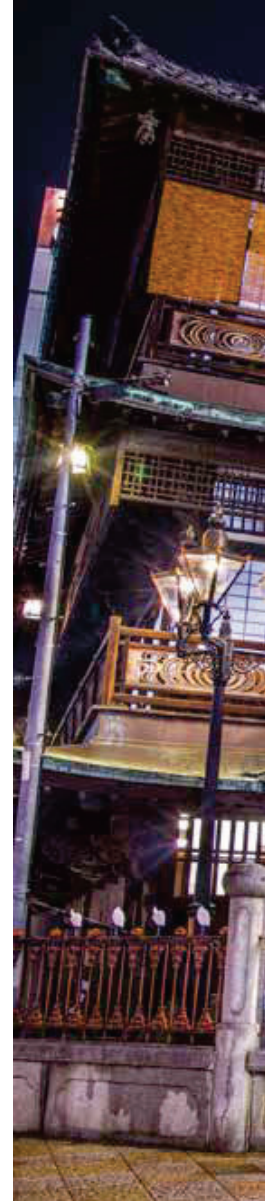
several restaurants offering authentic Japanese food, as well as bars, juice bars, souvenir shops, ice cream shops, resting areas, massage and body-scrub facilities, and theme park-style activities. It also has traditional Japanese tatami style rooms for guests wanting to spend the night.

The Oedo Onsen entrance fee is higher than most other *onsen* in Japan at ¥2,200 to ¥2,600 (SG\$27 to SG\$32) depending on the day of the week. The fee includes access to personal lockers, a set of *yukata* to wear, a pair of indoor sandals, access to all the baths at the entrance. The *onsen* operates a cashless system through use of wrist bands that allow guests to buy food and souvenirs at the stores, or use any of the additional services, such as body massages. Guests can settle the bill on exiting.

Getting to Oedo Onsen is relatively straight forward from almost anywhere in Tokyo. Taxis from Haneda Airport are approximately ¥6,000 (SG\$73), while the train will set you back ¥800 (SG\$10). The *onsen* is located five minutes from Telecom Center Station on the Yurikamome line, two stops from Tokyo station. It opens at 11am and stays open until 9am the next morning, meaning visitors to Tokyo can dip in the hot baths after a day of sightseeing or to alleviate fatigue from jet lag.

While Oedo Onsen is only fifteen years old, Dogo Onsen, has a history that dates back over 3,000 years and is Japan's oldest thermal spring baths. Is truly a national icon. The current grand structure was constructed in 1894 and declared a cultural asset of Japan on its 100th anniversary. The first thing a visitor will notice is its majestic structure. The three-story traditional wooden building with its stunning curved Japanese-style roofs give it the appearance of a castle from ancient times. The long history, the legends and the characteristic Japanese architecture have inspired many works of literature and art. It features in the classic Japanese novel *Botchan*, by Natsume Soseki and, more recently, in Hayao Miyazaki's 2001 animé *Spirited Away*.

Dogo Onsen offers two public baths, the larger of which – *Kami no Yu*, or 'bath of the gods' – is on the first floor. The second set of baths, *Tama no Yu* (bath of spirits), on the second floor are comparatively smaller, but locals consider bathing with the spirits to be more prestigious. Hence, entry





to these costs a little more.

This *onsen* in particular has been used by the Japanese imperial family for generations and the bath house holds separate areas with dedicated baths for the family members. One of the baths, known as Yushinden, is reserved exclusively for the emperor and it has a separate entrance.

Prices are reasonable and one can access the public baths for ¥410 to ¥840 (SG\$5 – SG\$11), with the higher price providing access to both sets of baths. For ¥1550 (SG\$19), guests can gain access to their own private room and private bath to relax for 90 minutes. A tour of the imperial bath facilities is also included in the higher entry fee. *Yukatas* are available for rent and there is a locker service available for storing shoes and personal possessions.

Dogo Onsen is located in Matsuyama, a small town on the eastern side of the island of Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four primary islands. The best way to get there is to take one of the daily one and a half hour flights direct from Tokyo, then either local bus, train or 30-minute taxi journey from the airport. While there is not much else to see in Matsuyama, the town is reminiscent of Japan at the time of the *Samurai* and it would not be uncommon to see many Japanese tourists in *yukatas*, especially around the area of Dogo Onsen, which adds to the air of antiquity.

A visit to a Japanese *onsen* is a cultural joy of Japan not to be missed. Leave your self-consciousness at the door and truly enjoy this quintessentially Japanese experience.



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