

Outside Tokyo

Japanese Hot Springs

"Don't Pull the Plug," read the title of a recent newspaper article on the current anxieties of Japanese *minshuku* owners. As the rising yen forces more and more travelers out of their expensive Western-style hotels into the cheaper, more traditional establishments that delight the foreign visitor with their authenticity, the *minshuku* owner is both pleased with the income and anxious at what his uninformed foreign guest might do to his bath.

He fears opening the door to his bath to find it frothing with soap bubbles. The Japanese-style bathtub is for soaking and relaxing in, *not* for washing. Or what if he finds the plug has been pulled and the tub is empty? This could cause chaos at five in the afternoon when there is no hot water for the other guests. For hot springs baths in particular, it is no easy matter to "run another tub."

Happily, many foreign residents are already familiar with the rules of Japanese bathing etiquette, especially those like me who have become addicted to Japanese hot springs, better known as *onsen*. With over two thousand *onsen* spread throughout the archipelago, ours is a readily satisfied addiction. A bather can find nearly any type of tub he desires in nearly any type of setting, indoors or out.

Natural hot springs range in temperature from a very hot 42°C to a cool 25°C and contain a vast array of minerals in varying quantities. They are generally categorized by their mineral content and alleged curative powers. For example, a hot salt bath is said to soothe muscular aches and stress. Iron naturally helps to treat anemia, and the sulfur bath will pamper the skin.

Hot springs and mineral waters have been gurgling up through Japan's volcanic soil ever since the mythical god Izanagi supposedly first bathed here before creating the country. Bathing features prominently in ancient rites, not to mention the countless stories subsequently written about and set in *onsen* towns. Yet this is only to be expected, since bathing has been an important means of socializing for many centuries.

Bathing is both a physical and spiritual act, although the spirituality today seems concentrated in the power of the mineral waters to reveal the secret of Eternal Youth. In the past, both Shintoism and Buddhism advocated immersion to purge the soul as well as the body.

Onsen are especially popular in Japan today as people rediscover their restorative and health-promoting qualities. Such *onsen* booms have occurred periodically throughout Japan's long history. This time, modern mass media have heightened the publicity, and the average worker has the money and free time to get away for a bit of relaxation at a hot

springs. Riding the crest of this wave, innovative innkeepers have devised wonderful attractions to lure people to their *onsen* and away from Guam and Hawaii—the stiffest competition at present.

For the health conscious, there are medicinal springs offering excellent waters, diets and exercises tailored to fit your ailment. Doctors often recommend hot springs for certain conditions like rheumatism, skin diseases and stress-related problems.

For those seeking beauty, there are waters supposedly able to smooth away wrinkles and dissolve overly-ample midribs. Outdoor pools called *rotenburo* have always been a major attraction, and there are now a growing number of *rotenburo* designed for women only that are bigger and have better views than the second-class pools allotted to women in the past.

Any foreigner eager to combine sightseeing, relaxation and the study of Japanese ways will find the hot springs the perfect venue, particularly in winter when everyone needs a bit of warmth and comfort. Add to this the bonhomie atmosphere typical of *onsen*, where no one stands on ceremony, and a lonely foreigner will soon forget "the old country." Bathing buddies are the best of friends, claim the Japanese. If you are thinking of welcoming the New Year in at an *onsen*, make your reservations now since this is one of the busiest times of year.

Bathing etiquette

The *onsen ryokan* is little different from other Japanese inns except for the strange, gaseous odors that waft out to greet you at the door. After you arrive, you can don your *yukata* (cotton kimono, courtesy of the inn), take off your watch and rings, grab your hand towel (also courtesy of) and head for the baths. These are usually open 24 hours.

Once in the bath, it's time to silently recall the golden rules. Don't pollute the water with soap suds. Make sure you wash and rinse thoroughly before you enter the water itself. Faucets, stools and basins to use while you wash are usually aligned along the bathroom

walls. But this is not the place to wash your underwear. And please don't pull the plug.

You will find that the hand towel is used for everything. Drape it modestly in front of you as you make your unobtrusive entry, and once you are seated on a stool, whisk it around to spread soap and water over every inch of your body. After rinsing yourself and your towel thoroughly, you can lower your spotless self into the bath proper, wringing out the towel and placing it on your head. This last is considered the mark of an old hand, and it will also help your singing. Some say it prevents fainting.

Hot springs you might try

Many of my favorite *onsen* are located in remote areas of Tohoku or Hokkaido, best avoided in winter and difficult for first-timers since they don't have very many foreign guests. Therefore, while I would encourage any bather to try such springs at some point, here I will concentrate on *onsen* closer to Tokyo, ones which cater to foreign visitors. These are places where you don't need a Japanese companion to figure things out for you.

Izu Peninsula

This area 100 km southwest of Tokyo is rich in hot springs, variety of tubs, scenery and seafood cuisine. The only problem is that everyone knows this, and because it is mild all year round the *onsen* tend to be crowded. If, however, you use the train to avoid the traffic jams, and seek out the more secluded *ryokan* away from the bustling station area, you will be glad you came.

Atami and Ito

These two *onsen* giants are situated high on the eastern seaboard. They both have long, colorful histories and all kinds of mineral waters. They are havens for those craving mountain views and seascapes from the same window. Since competition is so fierce here, innkeepers will serve you well.

Shimoda and Atagawa

Further south on the eastern coast, each of these hot springs offers something special. Shimoda is the historical town Commodore Matthew Perry took his Black Ships to in 1854 and where some of the earliest American visi-



tors to Japan lived. Atagawa is smaller with climbing, cobblestoned streets winding from inn to inn. Through the clouds of vapor spiraling up from the springs and escaping from the boxes steaming the traditional hot springs cakes, you can glimpse the blue-green edges of the Pacific Ocean.

Yugashima and Odaru

Located in central Izu, these two *onsen* perch above glassy paddy fields, their *ryokan* wedged between the craggy hills characteristic of this part of Izu. Both are small and accessible only by bus from the eastern rail routes. Yugashima is a serene place with traditional inns and *rotenburo* on a river. Odaru is also known for its *rotenburo*, particularly one magnificent example fed by a steep waterfall.

Hakone-Yumoto

Like Atami and Ito, Hakone-Yumoto has always been a very popular *onsen* resort. It is situated near Ashinoko Lake, a beautiful spot with a grand view of towering Mount Fuji on clear winter days. The mineral waters are hot, salty and bountiful, with some baths large enough to hold 1,000 people.

Tonosawa and Dogashima

Tonosawa and Dogashima are part of the Hakone group of sixteen hot springs. They are quieter than those near Ashinoko Lake. The mountains crowd around leaving little space for developers to confuse the natural green with the gaudier hues of tourist trappings.

Special mentions

If you have the energy and time, I would encourage you to consider Takaragawa and Hoshi hot springs, both in Gunma Prefecture and reached by the Joetsu Shinkansen and then local buses. Takaragawa has large outdoor pools, separated from the river by chunks of rock and surrounded by snow in the winter.

This is a delightful experience in winter as you sit snug and warm while all around it is frosty and white. Hoshi is just as tempting. The baths are indoors, made of sweet-scented wooden frames resting on the pebbles of a riverbed. Both *onsen* are "one-inn" hot springs, a guarantee of tranquility and restful soaking, since the distractions in winter are few.

Finally, lest I forget, let me remind you to remember to use the right bath. Whatever the custom might have been, baths are now segregated by sex, marked with the *kanji* (Chinese characters) *otoko* for men and with *onna* for women. If you aren't sure, it's better to ask someone.

Tourist information office telephone numbers for reservations and further information are:

Atami: (0557) 82-3053

Ito: (0557) 37-6105

Shimoda: (05582) 2-1531

Yugashima and Odaru: (05583) 2-0290

Hakone Yumoto: (0460) 5-5700

Tonosawa and Dogashima: (0460) 5-5700

Takaragawa (Osenkaku): (0278) 75-2121

Hoshi (Chojukan): (02786) 6-0005

If you have a friend or a travel agent who can help with the phone call in Japanese, it will make things easier. These areas are, however, well acquainted with foreign visitors, and you should have no trouble once you get there. Happy soaking!

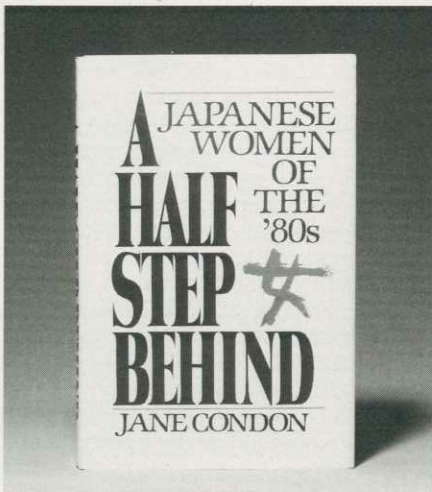
Anne Hotta

Author, *Guide to Japanese Hot Springs*
(Kodansha International, 1986)

Bookshelf

A Half Step Behind: Japanese Women of the '80s

By Jane Condon
Published by Dodd, Mead & Company
1985, New York
319 pages; \$16.95



Here is a timely and unusual work, timely for its look at Japanese women and unusual for its in-depth portrayal and refreshing lack of condescension. Over the past several years there have been numerous articles and books on Japan written by Americans as Japan's remarkably rapid postwar growth and its \$40-50 billion trade imbalance with the United States have inevitably attracted American attention. While the Americans were at first admiring and eager in their quest for the secrets of Japan's success, the pendulum has now swung back and they have gradually become critical. Turning their sights on Japanese society, they charge that the Japanese are workaholics living in inhumanly cramped housing, and Japanese women are pitiful, oppressed creatures, the last a view that has many Japanese women rather taken aback.

A Half Step Behind, however, goes behind these quick categorizations and lets Japanese women speak for themselves. Knowing from my own experience how reticent Japanese women can be, I am amazed at how Jane Condon has gotten so many women to open

up about their experiences and innermost feelings with the full knowledge that everything they said might later appear in a book. What kind of magic could the author possibly have used?

Actually, it was not magic at all, just the honest integrity of a good reporter. Jane Condon was born in Brockton, Massachusetts in 1951. After studying political science at Wellesley College, she earned a master's in education at Harvard. Condon has worked as a journalist for *Fortune* and *Life* magazines and has contributed to *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. In 1981 she came to Japan with her banker husband and, until their return to the United States in December 1985, worked as the Far Eastern correspondent for *Time* and *People* magazines.

During her four years in Japan, Condon traveled extensively throughout the country, interviewing a total of 200 women in places like Sapporo, Sendai, Kanazawa, Tokyo and Kagoshima. From beginning to end, Condon maintained a journalistic approach, letting the women speak for themselves during long, unhurried sessions. While she did not intrude herself, her presentation of these interviews shows a deeply felt warmth and caring.

The title *A Half Step Behind* is intended to represent the position of women in Japanese society today as Condon judges their present standing. In the past, the obedient Japanese woman was expected to walk at least three steps behind the man. Today she has moved up considerably, but is not quite yet on an equal footing.

The 25 women whose stories appear in *A Half Step Behind* have been carefully chosen to represent "Family," "Education" and "Work." Comparisons are made among women in old-fashioned arranged marriages, those in modern marriages of choice and wives whose families adopted (literally) the groom. Divorce, feminism and pornography are covered, as are birth control and abortion. There are school teachers and students, zealous "education mothers" and young girls who have failed their university entrance exams and are boning up to try again. The "Work" section alone includes the career woman and the short-term office helper, the farmer and the blue-collar factory worker, the geisha and the bar hostess.

Throughout, the author's focus is on the common humanity of all her subjects, women and men. One phenomenon illustrating this common humanity was a 1983 television drama series. A fictionalized program about a poor country girl who, after many trials and tribulations, makes good, *Oshin* was broadcast throughout the country and proved extremely popular with a 45% viewer rating. It seemed that everyone, from housewife to corporate executive, was watching the 15-minute morning program. The heroine, *Oshin*, was lauded as the epitome of the perfect Japanese. Neither the program nor its extreme popularity warranted much serious news coverage, but to Jane Condon the widespread