

# Tokyo bathhouses look to tap foreigners but ensure they behave

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KYODO

Bathhouses in Tokyo are taking greater steps to welcome foreigners visiting the capital by preparing a guidance manual and poster in several languages to help them understand the proper etiquette for communal bathing so they can avoid embarrassments.

"We would like to receive foreigners with warm hospitality so they can enjoy the culture of ordinary Japanese," said Kazuyuki Kondo, who runs a bathhouse in Ota Ward.

Public bathhouses, or "sento," which originally became popular during the Edo Period (1603-1868), are still in use, especially by people who do not have bathing facilities in the home.

After bathhouse operators in Ota and the municipal government completed the manual and poster, they distributed them to about 50 sento in the ward in March, with a view to attracting more foreigners visiting Tokyo for business or leisure, as the ward is home to Haneda airport.

The illustrated manual, written in English, Korean and both traditional and simplified Chinese, is intended for use by sento staff to communicate with foreigners.

It contains expressions such as, "The fee is ¥450," "I'm sorry, but please remove your undergarments before entering the bathing area," and "Please be mindful of other customers and enjoy yourself quietly."

The poster, which shows a typical bathhouse layout and a flow chart for using it, also helps customers understand the sometimes complicated system.

Kondo, owner of Hasunuma

Onsen, said the signs are effective and foreign customers are having no problems. He said many visit after learning about his bathhouse over the Internet or from acquaintances.

The Tokyo Sento Association followed suit and provided the same contents in manuals and posters to all bathhouses in the metropolitan area in November, and is considering spreading them nationwide in the near future.

"More and more foreigners will come to Tokyo as Haneda airport will increase its slots for international flights. What's more, we have to prepare to welcome them ahead of the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2020," said Kondo, who previously headed the association's Ota branch.

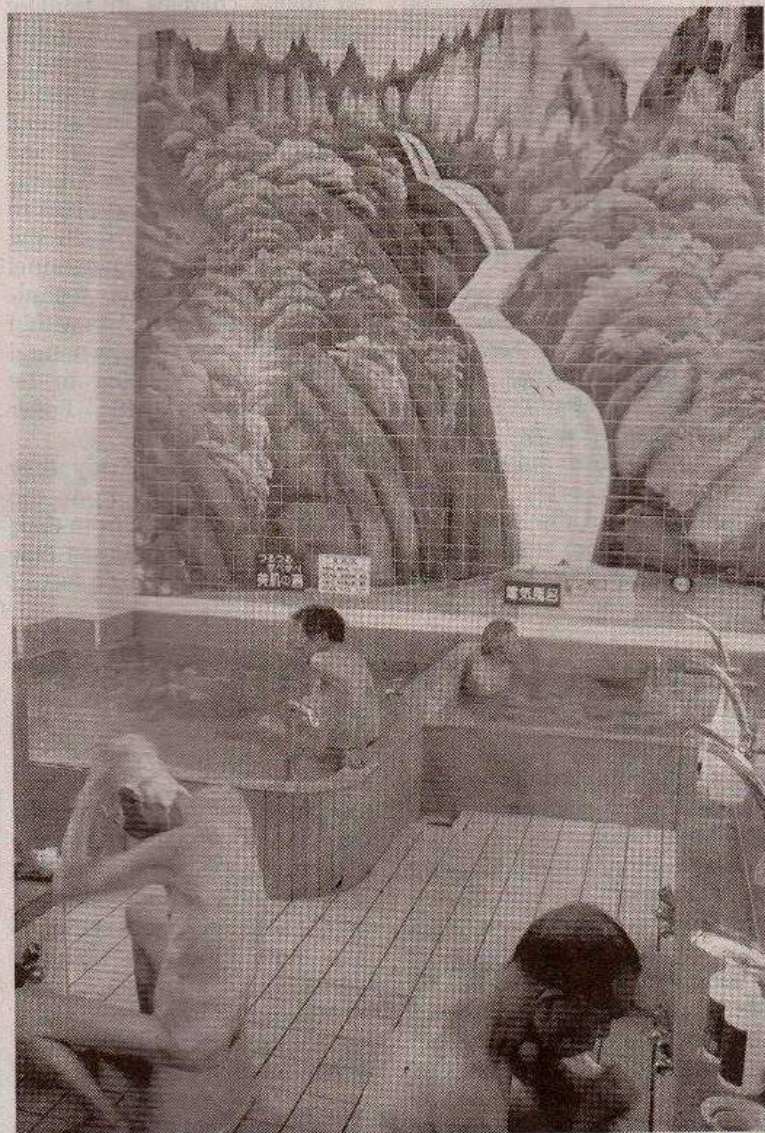
Every sento usually has several large baths over 50 cm deep. The temperature of the water is usually kept at around 42 degrees, and some even tap hot natural spring water, technically making them "onsen."

Besides the basic function of bathing, sento are also community gathering venues that cross generational lines.

As of November, there were 709 sento in the capital, according to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. There are more in areas with many old detached houses and apartment blocks, some of which have no bathing facilities.

Sento have been closing by the dozens in recent years, due largely to the aging of the owners, a lack of successors and rising maintenance costs.

But now they are being re-evaluated as a kind of spa facility in cities and towns where people can relax inexpensively, according to the association.



Prepping for the soak: Hasunuma Onsen, a public bathhouse in Tokyo's Ota Ward, makes use of a guidance manual on bathing etiquette as it hopes to welcome more foreign visitors. KYODO

"I don't expect a surge in the number of foreign users, but I am sure sento have gradually become popular with them," Kondo added.

"Sento can be a good tourism resource, as there must be foreigners who are looking forward to bathing in them, especially among repeat visitors to Japan," said Masaru Suzuki, a professor at Obirin University in Tokyo.

"What is important is how to promote them to travelers. A

useful way would be to ask foreigners who are living Japan to help us," said Suzuki, whose specialty is tourism marketing.

He suggested that foreigners studying or working in Japan be asked to introduce sento through social-networking sites, such as Facebook.

Setting up a "free-of-charge day" for foreigners would also help them seek out their first bathhouse experience in Japan, he added.

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