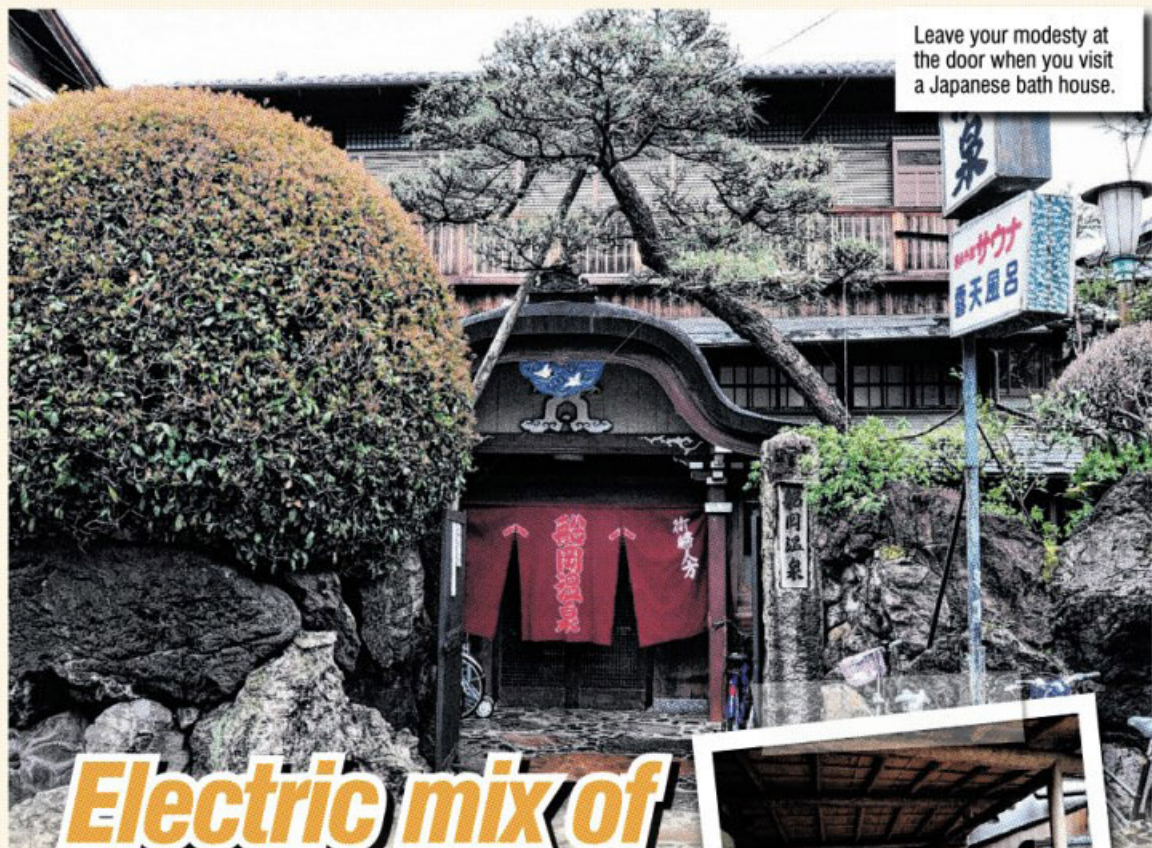


DOWNLOAD
THE FREE
APP TODAY



Escape

Leave your modesty at the door when you visit a Japanese bath house.



Electric mix of sensations

ROB GRANT was butt-naked, in Japan, when he discovered electricity and water can mix

AFTER five days stumbling across the Japanese ski fields, my body was stiffer than sun-dried jeans and a long soak in a deep bath seriously needed.

Being electrocuted, however, was not top of my Kyoto itinerary.

Visiting a traditional bathhouse is a true eye-opener for the gaijin (foreigner) in Japan.

Following a hand-scrawled map from my budget ryokan, I eventually find the rock-lined entrance to the nearly 100-year-old Funaoka Onsen.

GET A CLUE

As an onsen virgin, I was clueless about bath-time etiquette, which like Japanese life in general, has clear rules.

The first is crucial: don't pick the wrong door, as men and women bathe separately.

Guided by the panicked waving arm of the door lady, I work out blue equals male, red female. Once in the neat changing rooms, clothes come straight off. No messing.

On my maiden visit, I naturally don the larger of two towels provided to preserve my decency. But this was a rookie error. It's the tiny napkin-size cloth you take into the inner bathing sanctum.

Whatever you've got to offer is all on show.

Inside the bath area, you might expect all eyes on you. In reality, no one is the slightest bit interested. Not so much as a raised eye.

They are far too busy scrubbing, cleaning, plucking, shaving, oiling and pampering themselves in the mirrored preening area besides the baths.

An array of tubs are on offer and, using a dangling toe and inquisitive sniff, I identify the super hot, herbal, ice-cold and jacuzzi styles.

It's 20 minutes after arriving and a friendly old-timer beckons me into a seemingly innocent bath, with just a hint of mischief in his eyes.

Stepping into the ripple-less water, and lowering myself slowly, it was hard to fathom what this bath was offering, until ZAP! A current of electricity flowed through the middle of my body and the oddest sensation enveloped my inner bits.

IT'S ELECTRIFYING

I had found the denki-buro, an electric bath complete with underwater electrodes on either side.

My memories of high-school physics are pretty vague, but I'm

sure mixing water and electricity was frowned on. And what about those movie murder scenes involving plugged-in toasters and baths?

Meanwhile, my Japanese friend smiles, assuming I was seeking this all along. Grinning at him with gritted teeth, I slowly settle into one of life's oddest, yet surprisingly pleasant, experiences.

By moving my midriff around, I work out the closer you get to the electrodes the stronger the current.

A couple of centimetres away was enough for me, but I later saw local aficionados pressing their backs manfully right against the edge. Maybe next time.

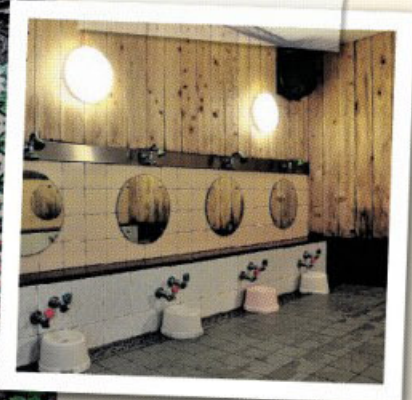
I have never confirmed Western medicine's point of view on the health merits or dangers of the denki. But being frazzled in my birthday suit confirmed one thing to me: for sensory overload of the wackiest kind, Japan is second to none.

IF YOU GO

To visit Funaoka Onsen, take a Kyoto City No.9 bus to the Horikawa-Kuramaguchi stop, walk 400m west on Kuramaguchi-dori and look for it on your left (just past the Lawson convenience store). Or take a taxi.



One of the many baths types on offer.



The bath house can be plain, like the washroom above, or beautifully tiled, left.