

# Some like it HOT

Nick Dall will never forget the first time he slipped into a tranquil and steaming Japanese hot spring ... completely starkers

We'd just finished our supper of ramen noodles at the end of a long, busy day touring Kyoto and Kobe. A Japanese friend and his wife were showing us around. 'We go to *onsen* now?' asked Hachiro. At first I thought he was talking about a bar or a nightclub, but the ladies explained that an *onsen* is actually a traditional Japanese hot spring.

We drove out of Kyoto and into the hills above town. Once we'd paid the entrance fee, the girls went one way and we went another. We walked through to a locker room where we stashed away our clothes and valuables. Apart from a tiny modesty towel, which you can use when walking between the hot baths, you have to be completely naked to use an *onsen*. Of course, I was a bit embarrassed at first, but after a while you realise that no one's looking. And besides, it was dark.

We proceeded to the shower area where we made a great fuss of ostentatiously cleaning absolutely every nook and cranny of our bodies with copious amounts of foaming soap suds. When, at last, we were sufficiently uncontaminated, we made our way to the springs.

The glowing city lights formed a perfect horseshoe around the harbour and, in the distance, we could make out the twinkling airport perched on its man-made island in the bay. A series of steaming, natural rock pools were laid out like a necklace along the hillside. Bamboo screens, neatly raked stones and potted bonsai completed the scene.

We found an available pool and got into the healing waters as quietly as possible. We put our towels on our heads and leant against the hard, smooth rock. Cicadas chirruped in the background and the gentle conversation drifted on the breeze. Japanese people place great value on *hadaka no tsukiai* or 'naked communion': with nothing but water between you and another person, it's meant to be easier to talk about your innermost secrets.

I've been to quite a few South African hot springs, but this was light years away from the shrieking kids at Tshipise or the tangy odoriferous waters of Goudini. 'This is one of the best things I've ever done,' I declared.

'You should come back in winter time,' said Hachiro. 'There's snow on all of these hills and the water feels much hotter in the cold air. It's like ... magic.'

I may have to take him up on the offer sometime. ✨