



## In Hot Water

I spent so much time last week telling you about the wonderful bath that I have in my home, that you will probably be disappointed when I tell you that I still haven't used it yet this season! I did speak about taking a bath though, so should let you know where ... it was at the Post Office!

I was talking with somebody the other day about the points that I brought up in last week's story - that bathing alone is a waste of resources and is also somewhat asocial, and this person immediately commented that back in the 'good old days' there was never a problem with this; every neighbourhood of every town in this country had at least one public bath.

Each society provides places where people can come together for at least a basic amount of social interaction in a typical day. In a European town it might have been coffee houses, or the benches around a town square; in traditional Japan, it was the neighbourhood bath. When speaking of resource use, of course a public bath used by many people is far more efficient than having each family fill up their own tub, and as for the social aspect, well that's pretty self-evident. For most people in this society, the idea that they would ever have a bath alone was inconceivable.

But by the time I arrived in Japan in the early 1980s, this public bath culture was already well on the way out, and it has now almost totally disappeared. For decades, every new house and apartment has been built with its own bathroom, something that I suppose must have originally seemed like quite a convenience; "We can have a bath without having to walk down the street!" or "It's so nice to have a bath without listening to Mrs. Suzuki's constant complaints all the time ..."

And I suppose that these things are indeed advantages. But I think that - dare I use this expression? - the baby has been thrown out with the bath water! It seems to be an unavoidable part of human nature that whenever we think of a 'new' way to do something, we tend to give much greater weight to the potential benefits, playing down - or ignoring outright - those aspects that may not be so beneficial. By the time we learn that some new technology has 'side effects' that are changing society in negative ways, it is too late, as the old infrastructure has been destroyed, and we cannot easily go back to the old ways.

To look on the bright side though, it is becoming clear that the Japanese people are not quite ready to completely give up their communal bathing. Although the neighbourhood bath is a thing of the past, all resorts have communal bathing facilities; nobody would want to go to such a place if it didn't have a good bath. And this is where we come round to my own bathing opportunity ... Ome, the town where I live, is not exactly what you would call a famous tourist destination, but it is far enough away from central Tokyo that people who live down there think of us as being 'in the country', and so some years back, the Post Office selected Ome as the site for building one of their large resort hotels.

These resorts - Kampo no Yado - were originally for use by postal life insurance policyholders, but since the privatization of the Post Office have been embroiled in controversy over their future. The managers of the resorts are clearly under pressure to 'get some business', and the one here in Ome now offers a 'half-price day' once a week on the use of its bathing facilities.

The bath is right up at the top of the building, in a room with wide windows overlooking the nearly mountains, and is very comfortable indeed, and best of all, it takes me less than a minute to get there by bicycle. So anytime over the next four months or so - at least until the warm weather returns - if you call here and there's no answer, I'll probably be soaking ... down at the Post Office!

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