

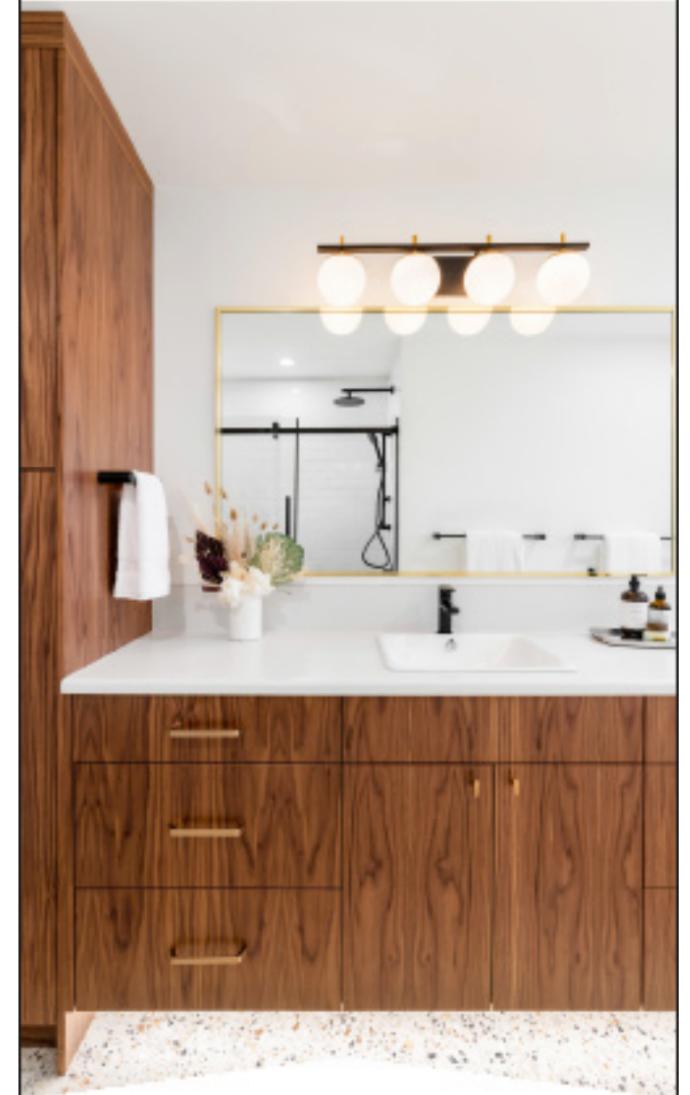
# TAKING TOJI

The Japanese way to wellness



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WORDS  
SUZANNE MORPHET

**The idea that we might soon be back to something akin to our pre-COVID-19 lives** is apparently a new source of stress.

Yes, according to a clinical psychologist writing in the UK's *The Telegraph*, some of us are anxious about restrictions lifting. This fearful state of mind even has a name: "re-entry syndrome."

If that describes you—or even if it doesn't—I know what we could all use as soon as it's safe to travel again: a trip to Japan.

From healing hot springs to mindful forest bathing, the Japanese make wellness a priority.

I've visited Japan twice, once to hike on a camino-style holiday on the southernmost island of Kyushu with Walk Japan, and once to ski and snowshoe on the northern island of Hokkaido, a trip organized by Hokkaido Treasure Island Travel.

Let me tell you—after a long day of hiking or playing in the snow there's nothing better than immersing oneself in a geothermic hot spring au naturel. I also discovered there's no other way I'd rather start my day than with toji—what the Japanese call the "hot water cure."

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As a country that’s highly active geologically, Japan has literally thousands of hot springs bubbling up from deep under the ground, carrying therapeutic minerals to the surface. And for thousands of years, people—and sometimes monkeys—have been putting that hot water to good effect. Visiting the neighbourhood onsen is a daily ritual and infinitely more relaxing than jumping in the shower is for us.

On the island of Hokkaido, considered the hot spot for hot springs in Japan, onsen are everywhere.

The day I went backcountry skiing at Chisenupuri, for instance, near the resort town of Niseko, I could see—and smell—clouds of sulfurous steam billowing up from the onsen at the bottom of the mountain and crystalizing in the cold air. For cat skiers, a ticket to the onsen was simply part of the package, just like avalanche gear.

The easiest way to experience hot springs is to stay at a variety of ryokans, traditional Japanese hotels with tatami (straw) flooring, futons for sleeping and delightful onsen to wash away your worries.

Many ryokans are small inns with intimately sized bathing pools, but some are large, resort-style hotels with a seemingly endless assortment of baths and water of varying shades of green, depending on their mineral properties.

But no matter the size, onsen etiquette is the same everywhere. Upon arrival, remove your yukata (the cotton robe provided by the ryokan) and enter the steamy bathing area naked. You can carry a washcloth, but bathing suits are not allowed.

Select a wash station, where you’ll find a low stool, a hand-held shower, a bucket for tossing water over yourself, and soap, shampoo and maybe salt scrubs. Wash yourself thoroughly, being careful not to splash anyone else.

“In Japan we always think about the other person,” said Aya Masuyama, one of my guides on Hokkaido. “We try not to bother others. That’s the first thing.”

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Once you're squeaky clean, you're ready to immerse yourself in the pools of your choice.

At most onsen, men and women have separate bathing areas, but often the baths rotate; what was the men's area one day will be the women's the next, so everyone gets to experience all the baths.

Only one onsen I visited had a mixed-gender bath, where women were required to wear a one-piece garment that looked a bit like old-fashioned bloomers but covered both buttocks and breasts. Strangely, I felt much more self-conscious wearing this garb than just my birthday suit.

(I wondered what the men would be wearing and positioned myself to see them as they entered from a far door. Those washcloths I mentioned earlier? Yep, held strategically below their waist!)

My favourite ryokan was Yuyado Daiichi, on the banks of a babbling brook in mountainous eastern Hokkaido, with floor-to-ceiling windows in the lounge where you could sit by the fire or watch exotic (to us) birds at the feeder.

Its onsen offers a variety of baths inside and out, including—much to my astonishment—a log bath cut from Canadian old-growth spruce, no doubt from BC.

Yuyado Daiichi has also perfected omotenashi—Japanese-style hospitality. Dinner was an extravagant, multi-course menu meticulously prepared and served to us in private booths. Breakfast was equally impressive: a beautifully presented buffet with 60-some dishes. After breakfast, we watched—and even helped—a young man swing a wooden mallet to pound rice for mochi, which is a rice cake filled with sweet bean jam. When we checked out later, the mochi were individually wrapped for us to take with us.

The last ryokan I stayed at, Akan Yukunosato Tsuruga, is also memorable, partly for the sheer beauty of its location on Lake Akan and partly for the size of its onsen, with 33—yes, 33—different baths, open around the clock.



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The lake fills the caldera of a volcano that erupted 150,000 years ago. The rooftop bath on the hotel's eighth floor appears to merge with the lake itself, a stunning architectural trompe l'oeil. But it was the outdoor bath in the Japanese garden where I headed at sunrise on my final morning. It had snowed the night before and the carefully manicured pine trees wore white crowns that sparkled in the sun. I eased my way into the steaming water and found a nook be-

tween boulders to rest in and gaze across the snow-covered lake. When I turned back, I noticed that several Japanese women had entered the bath and were chatting quietly. Each one had a folded white washcloth upon her head—a clever way to keep it dry—and I smiled thinking how much these women resembled the snow-topped trees. Ahhh, yes, toji is a cure for all kinds of things, perhaps even a wild imagination. **B**

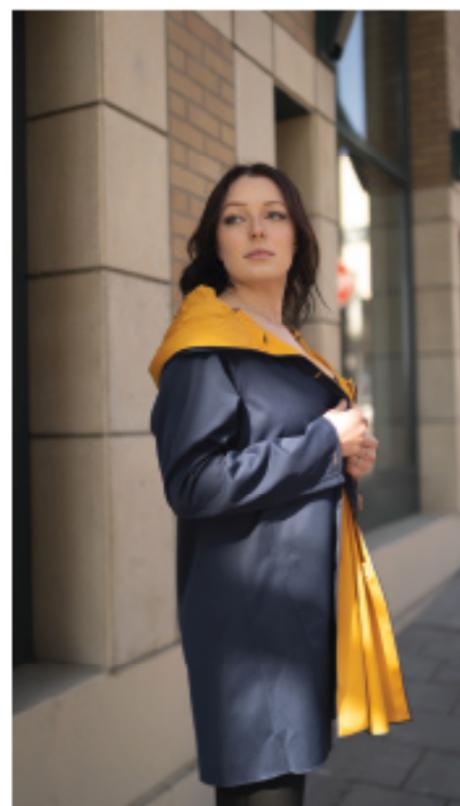


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