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## *Russian visitors boiling over Japanese bathhouses*

By Jon Letman

Everybody loves a hot bath. The Turks have the hamam, the Japanese have onsen and the Russians have banya. Public bathing comes in many forms, but would you take a bath with a drunken sailor?

Probably not, and that is exactly why bathhouses in the Hokkaido city of Otaru say they have posted signs banning foreigners. With thousands of Russians visiting Otaru, Hakkodate, Wakkanai, Toyama and Niigata annually, the number of Russians in Japan increases each year and yet a vast cultural chasm between these people remains.

Separated from Russia by a mere 43 kilometers at its closest point, the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido is awash with Russian fishermen from Sakhalin and Primorye who dock in Japan to unload their catch of crab and octopus while they stock up on electronics, tools and household goods. Stroll along the canal in downtown Otaru and you will see burly Russian fishermen in their fur shapkas and weathered parkas walking beside elderly Japanese women in kimonos and petite Japanese girls with Hello Kitty dangling from their cell phones. The chance to break through decades of suspicion and misunderstanding has never been better and yet, aside from business exchanges, most Russians and Japanese have little contact.

Just how much wariness of the Russians there is can be seen in any Japanese store frequented by Russians; the number of staff is double other shops and the Japanese watch the Russians' every move anxiously as fisherman call out, "Madame" and "Mama-san." In the case of Japanese onsen (hot springs) and sento (public baths), the situation is one of outright rejection. All foreigners have been barred from Otaru's hot springs because of past misconduct by some Russian fisherman, including eating and drinking in the baths, diving and swimming in the bathing pools, drunkenness, causing a general ruckus, and scaring away local customers.

The two sides show scant understanding behind the formal smiles and handshakes. And there is lingering animosity stemming from the unresolved dispute over the southern Kuril Islands, which the Soviet Union seized at the end of World War II. And so, when rowdy Russian fisherman make a splash in Otaru bath houses, it only confirms the worst suspicions many Japanese still harbor towards foreigners.

It's not just a problem of Russian rowdiness; Japanese views of Russians border on hilarious. According to the local press, Russians possess guns and drugs and are infested with head lice.

This writer himself was refused entry to an Otaru hot spring on the grounds that, in the words of a Yu no Hana onsen staff, "it appears foreigners cause sickness." According to Hidekatsu Okoshi, owner of Osupa hot spring, an informal survey conducted of 837 of its customers indicates that 50 percent are against admitting foreigners (especially

Russians) to the onsen with 30 percent saying they will not patronize the hot spring if foreigners are allowed entry. Proprietors of bathhouses claim their hands are tied; if they take down the "no gaijin" (foreigners) signs, they fear their business will suffer but as it stands now, they are under an increasingly vocal volley of criticism.

Otaru city's home page <http://www.tokeidai.co.jp> addresses the problem, but like the bathhouses themselves, the explanation of the current situation and what is being done to resolve it is in Japanese only. Much is written about possible solutions, but the point is lost when Otaru states, "Refusing entrance (to the baths) for only Russians could be seen as an extreme case of racial discrimination and so there is no choice but to refuse all foreigners as a whole." This statement is especially ironic considering that Japan, in 1996 adopted the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Meanwhile, Otaru proudly maintains its Sister City relationship with Nakhodka even as it refuses Russians entry to some bathhouses.

But today in Otaru the situation is changing.

Following numerous complaints about the "no gaijin" policy, some bathhouses have taken down the signs. To this day however, two onsen, Yu no Hana and Osupa still refuse to admit foreigners. City officials seek a solution but claim they have no legal power to force the bathhouses to remove the signs, fearing legal reprisals from the bathhouses if they take stronger action. One strategy devised by the Sapporo Legal Affairs Bureau is to distribute pamphlets in Japanese reminding people that discriminating against foreigners is not an acceptable practice.

But, like the snows of Otaru, prejudice doesn't melt overnight. One representative of Taisho Yu onsen, which removed their "no gaijin" sign, admits wishing that it were still up, shuddering at the thought of receiving Russian visitors.

Not all Russian fishermen who visit Japan are angels and the complaints against unruly fishermen are not unfounded, but if Russians and Japanese are to get beyond just doing business together and form a truly successful and amicable relationship, they need to rid themselves of past prejudices and suspicions and seek a genuine understanding of one another.

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