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Two women wait outside a bath h

Traveling in Japan's largest cities can be a test of mental endurance. The constant high-speed sensory overload coming at you from every angle, at first exhilarating can eventually become exhausting. The blur of rush hour continues all day with trains, packed to bursting, empty into frenetic subway and railway stations on multiple levels. Endless waves of humanity add to the crush and din of the Japanese megalopolis as commuters scurry into crowded streets, busy offices and labyrinth shopping arcades.

Everywhere you turn there's another garish sign, rows of vending machines lining the concrete, slick black taxis creeping in the neon haze and parked bicycles crowding the sidewalks. In search of zen bliss or a photogenic temple, you move through the flashing colored lights, through the assault of noise and shopping crowds. This much stimulation can wear you down.

When it all gets to be too much and I start to feel like a hamster in a Habitrail and need to unwind, I drop into a Japanese bath house, known as *sento*.

Sento, whose Chinese characters mean "money" and "hot water," originate from the Buddhist temples of 8th century Japan. Over time, *sento* evolved into centers for gathering, socializing and bathing. Until the 1970s, many homes in Japan did not have their own bath and a daily visit to the *sento* was simply part of life's routine. Usually visited in the early evening, a trip to the *sento* was a way to relax at the end of the day, meet friends and

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Urban Japan can bring sensory overload.

enjoy a good scrub and h
soak in a large communal
bath.

For the traveler in urban
Japan, the *sento* provides
opportunity to refresh aft
long day of shopping or
sightseeing or before a ni
out in the neon jungle. It
also found, through mont
of painstaking research, t
a visit to the *sento* is the
perfect remedy for a *sake*
induced hangover.

Sento can be found
throughout Japan from th
smallest of fishing village
the center of the biggest
cities. In a smaller town,
looks for a prominent
smokestack-like pipe emit

steam, but in most cities, it is best just to ask for a recommended *sento*.

There is a fairly rigid set of rules to be followed to ensure a pleasant and successf
visit to a *sento*. Rule #1: Follow what the Japanese inside the bathhouse are doin
they take off their shoes, you take off your shoes.

Usually there are small lockers with keys (don't lose it!) outside the *sento* for sto
shoes. At smaller local bath houses, customers may simply line their shoes up ne
(facing outward) at the entryway. If this is the case, leave your shoes there — th
will be fine.

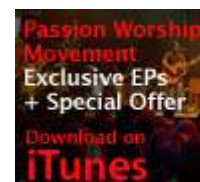
At the entrance to most *sento*, an attendant sits at a counter or
bandai, accepting payment from customers. A typical *sento* costs
around 350 yen (a little over US\$ 3) with some *sento* charging
additional fees for special baths or saunas. Extra fees vary from
sento to *sento*, so ask if you are not sure.

As you enter the *sento*, you can also buy toiletries such as soap, shampoo,
disposable razors and so forth, and, for a nominal fee, borrow bath towels.

After you have purchased your accoutrements, proceed to the changing room,
usually just beyond the main entry. If there is any doubt as to which changing are
you are entering, make sure the attendant sees you and they will certainly correc
you if you are mistaken.

Continued: Coming Clean in Japan: Soak in a Sento

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