

Healing Waters
Mia Stainsby
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Wellness/From Japan to Finland, other cultures have long understood the worth of water.

In North America, baths have never quite reached the hallowed status they have in other cultures.

For centuries, in the rest of the world, public forms of bathing have spiritual and social connotations. The world has understood that verbs like cleansing, healing, renewing, energizing, calming and communing are verbs of the spirit as much as of the body. And water, in many cultures, is a life-giving metaphor.

Romans, Greeks, Eastern Europeans, Turks, French, Indians, Finns, Koreans, Russians, ancient Mexican civilizations, Thai, Chinese, Cambodian, Japanese, Africans, Muslims, Peruvians, native North Americans and many other world cultures have rich bathing traditions, sprinkling, splashing, steaming, sweating, pouring or immersing for a myriad of social and religious reasons.

In Japan, as in other cultures, public baths, may have declined over recent generations but are, of late, in revival mode. Evidence suggesting there are healing properties in the negative ions present in the water and steam in bathhouses may have helped.

And sure, we have borrowed from here and there. We've got our saunas in gyms and recreation centres. We've got our bubble baths and bath salts. But the North American bath is really the two-minute shower.

In recent years, however, thanks to our multi-cultural population and the spa-smitten generation, bathing has taken on a whole new meaning and we are seeing a rebirth of ancient bathing practices, particularly in spas. (The word "spa" originates from the Latin *salus per aquam*, which means health from water.) In Vancouver, Hollywood celebrities--the distant early warning signals of trends--head to places like Absolute Spa when they're in town. After a hard day's work, they treat themselves to all manner of baths to maintain their star quality. At Miraj, they experience the comforting rituals of the traditional hammam bath; at Vida Wellness Spa, they get the full Indian ayurvedic treatment. Further afield, at Echo Valley Ranch and Spa near Clinton, they offer Thai healing massages and herbal baths.

"It's absolutely a trend," says Wendy Cocchia, president of Absolute Spa. "People are feeling they need the dual effectiveness of de-stressing and doing something therapeutic." Home bathroom designs, she says, reflect this trend with private spa-like settings.

"We know it is refreshing to immerse and drench ourselves in water, and we are generally aware of its therapeutic value," say authors Rosita Arvigo and Nadine Epstein in their book *Spiritual Bathing*. "Yet most of us have lost touch with our spiritual relationship to water."

"Until recently, water was one of the most universal spiritual concepts on our planet. Buried somewhere in the genesis of every culture is the idea that water is divine, life-giving, healing, cleansing and renewing...Divine or not, water is the enabler of life, the elan vital for our planet and the precondition for its blossoming."

They say our affinity to water is related to the electrical charge our bodies carry. "When our energy flows outward and inward at a constant rate, we feel peaceful and content. The electric field is in balance. When we are feeling sad, angry, resentful, anxious, or confused, the field becomes static or turbulent."

"Water has a unique transformational power to absorb the energy created by emotions. As the solvent of emotions, it can alleviate feelings of negativity, heaviness and confusion. Water refreshes, calms and balances."

In Europe and Japan, the medical community accepts balneotherapy (using mineral waters, particularly natural hot springs) as treatment for therapy and preventative medicine for a wide variety of conditions and imbalances, including detoxifying, respiratory problems, inflammations, arthritis, central nervous system conditions, orthopedic and gynecological diseases.

Marshall Sanghera, an ayurvedic practitioner at Absolute Spa at the Century Plaza Hotel, says westerners are warming to new bathing concepts like ayurveda massage and bath, part of the Indian "science of life."

But in the West, bathing traditions are still in their infancy. In India, for example, aromatherapy isn't just about pleasant aromas. Healing is the primary goal and not all the oils are pretty.

"Here in the West, they do it more for the smell," says Sanghera. "If they don't like the smell, they don't want to try it. In India, if it smells bad but it's good for you, they'll use it. Here, we're still into the aesthetics of aromatherapy. We're taking it one step at a time."

"This deeply healing, connecting and soul-fulfilling practice is a powerful prism through which to learn about and understand the world's cultures and religions," say Arvigo and Epstein, referring to the spiritual aspects of bathing. "It is one of those mysterious spiritual threads that connects all of humanity--east, west, north, and south, from ancient through contemporary times."