

Gonna make you sweat

Detoxing and relaxing in the same bath

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The Japanese love bath-time, whether it be in a hot spring (*onsen*), a public bathhouse (*sentô*), or a soak in the tub at home (*o-furo*). Bathing in Japan really is something of an art that verges on an obsession. Of course, the Japanese didn't invent it (the ancient Romans take credit for that), but they certainly have perfected it. In fact, a whole business has been built around the bath from onsen vacations to purpose-built bathroom TV and radios to every conceivable bath product and accessory.

The Japanese have revered the medicinal properties of the waters of the various onsen throughout their country for centuries. This archipelago is located on one of the world's most active volcano fault lines, and this results in an abundance of naturally heated water, often rich in a variety of minerals that offer various health benefits. In fact the Japanese even have a word for the healing powers of the onsen, *kamiyu*, which means "divine bath."

Over the last year or so, two new trends have emerged that combine the Japanese love of the bath with the current boom in all things "detox." One is a "germanium bath," which, as the name suggests, involves soaking in hot water infused with germanium; the other is a form of dry bathing called *ganban-yoku* (stone-slab bath). Promoters of these bath styles promise a whole host of health and beauty benefits, though it should be noted that, as yet, there is no hard science to back up all the claims.

We do know, however, that the detoxifying — or "detoxing" — process rids the body of substances that interfere with health and beauty. The body expels toxins naturally through sweat, urine and other excretions. But the argument these days is that we're not sweating as much as we once were. Since many of us do sedentary jobs, most likely in front of a computer in temperature-controlled offices, we don't have as much opportunity to sweat. It's no wonder that these baths are so popular, since they offer an easy, relaxing way to induce sweat and rid the body of toxins and other nasties.

Germanium baths

Germanium baths are popping up all over Japan, found everywhere from onsen, saunas, spas and massage and chiropractic clinics to nail salons, gyms and even Internet cafes. Germanium, not to be confused with the vivid red or pink flower geranium, is a chemical element in the periodic table with the symbol Ge. It's a lustrous, hard, silver-white,



HOT STUFF — The detox craze has spilled into the bathtime, with myriad home-bath products and public facilities. right top: COURTESY OF SHIBUYA LASSO; right bottom: COURTESY OF HAYASHI KENSENTSU KOGYO

metalloid that is chemically similar to tin. Germanium is an important semiconductor material used in transistors. However its benefits seem to extend well beyond the electronics industry.

For a germanium bath, you soak your hands and feet in a hot germanium solution for about 20 minutes while you work up a sweat. The procedure is believed to enhance circulation and drive out toxins, improving skin and a number of physical conditions such as chronic digestive disorders and circulatory problems. Interestingly, germanium can be found in extremely high levels in the water of Lourdes in France, where people today continue to travel seeking healing.

Organic germanium taken internally has gained recognition as a potent healing substance, primarily through the work of Dr. Kazuhiko Asai. Asai published a book, "Miracle Cure: Organic Germanium" in 1980, in which he condensed more than 20 years of experience, interspersed with experimental data on germanium. Asai found that an intake of 100-300 mg per day of organic germanium lessened the symptoms of many illnesses and further research since then has shown that germanium increases tissue oxygenation and enhances the immune system.

Germanium baths in Tokyo start at about ¥2,000 per 20-minute session. For a take-home germanium experience, there is a dizzying array of germanium products that line the shelves of department stores in Tokyo, such as Loft and Tokyu Hands. These include germanium salts that melt in the bath, giant reusable capsules filled with germanium that you throw in the bath and are designed

to warm up the body and encourage sweating, bath-fizzers, germanium bracelets and organic germanium ceramic bath balls.

Ganban-yoku

Ganban-yoku is seriously hot at the moment in Japan thanks to intense media attention and its purported health and beauty benefits. Ganban-yoku is not technically a bath because there's no water involved. Imagine a cross between a sauna and baking on a warm beach. You lie on a heated stone slab while infrared rays emanate from the stone, warming you up until you start sweating.

Some of the alleged benefits of ganban-yoku include enhanced circulation, glowing skin, weight loss and detoxification. Proponents of ganban-yoku swear that it stimulates metabolism and cellular regeneration, and it's believed to help you sweat out all those toxins and impurities that have accumulated over the years. It's also supposed to relieve stiff shoulders, back pain and other circulatory problems.

The air temperature of a ganban-yoku room is around 40 degrees Celsius and the humidity hovers at about 60 percent. While wearing cotton pajamas, you bake yourself front and back for about 5 minutes on your stomach, then about 10 minutes on your back. You repeat this cycle three times and you're encouraged to drink lots of water and rest in between. It's a truly unique sensation and, unlike a sauna, the heat is tolerable; it's actually quite comfortable and deeply relaxing.

A major selling point of ganban-yoku is that it allows you to work up a sweat without having to exercise



Soothe yourself

Germanium bath:

Mellow Beauté 4/5F Katsuritei Bldg 2-3-9 Azabu-Juban, Minato-ku (nearest station: Azabu-Juban), tel. (03) 5484-6028; www.mellowbeaute.com ¥2,000 per 20-minute session.

Ganban-yoku:

Silina Salon Nakameguro 2F

Sunlight Bldg 1-27-12 Aobadai, Meguro-ku (Naka-meguro), (03) 5768-1039; ¥3,800 per 90-minute session

Refoot Salon

3-11-9 3F Nishihara, Shibuya-ku (Yoyogi-Uehara), (03) 5454-5482; www.refoot.jp ¥3,900 per 90-minute session.

or endure extreme heat. You are encouraged not to take a shower straight afterward, as it's a different type of perspiration to your usual exercise or sauna sweat: It isn't as sticky. Dr. Tsuneaki Gomi, a Japanese physician, perspiration specialist and head of the Gomi clinic, has found that during ganban-yoku, sweat is actually released from your sebaceous glands and not your usual sweat-producing glands.

According to Hayashi Kensentsu Kogyo, a Hokkaido-based construction company that designs and builds stone-slab baths throughout Japan, there are about 700 places in Japan offering ganban-yoku. Black silica from Hokkaido and another stone from the southern island of Kyushu called *tenshō seki* seem to be the stones of choice, although there are a number of other stones used that are said to have therapeutic

properties. Black silica is believed to emit negative ions along with infrared rays.

Many people are drawn to ganban-yoku and germanium baths for their reported detoxifying, slimming and beautifying effects. An online survey on the subject of detoxification conducted by C-News in association with the Nikkei Sangyo newspaper in 2005 found that germanium and stone-slab baths were the preferred way to detoxify for women, whereas male respondents said they would opt for supplements. Not surprisingly, many of the dedicated ganban-yoku facilities are for women only, and they are often packed on weekday evenings.

Naturally, while the purported beauty benefits of both of these baths are appealing, they are also deeply relaxing. And that, surely, is therapeutic enough.