

East meets West At Pembroke Springs Retreat in rural Virginia, soak up Japanese culture by taking a dip in a traditional onsen.

By Laura Wexler



You might wonder how a bed-and-breakfast featuring traditional Japanese baths and a traditional Japanese breakfast— complete with raw egg, seaweed and grilled salmon— came to be situated off a winding country road in the hills outside Strasburg, Va. I certainly did. But, as with most things, once you hear the story, it makes perfect sense.

In 1972, an American State Department worker named Walter Floyd got posted to Tokyo and met a woman named Taeko. They married, had a daughter and lived in Japan for about 10 years on and off before returning stateside and locating in McLean, Va. When Walter retired from the government in 1995, he and Taeko moved to a 175-acre piece of land he'd bought in the 1960s for hunting, which the family had used as a weekend place for years. "I always knew we'd have a retirement home here, but I had to make it palatable for Taeko," says Walter. "We knew we had springs on the property, and we knew we had the view. And Taeko

loves to cook and entertain. So we said, 'Let's build an inn.'"

A rustic wood frame structure nestled into the wooded hillside, the inn looks more like a sprawling family home than a hotel. And that's the right first impression, because like many bed-and-breakfasts, it's truly a reflection of the owners themselves. The Floyds have turned Pembroke Springs into an East meets West theme everywhere you look.

After stepping onto a porch complete with "The Waltons," my husband, Mike, and I enter our shoes and into Japanese house slippers in Japanese). Walter and Taeko's daughter, Lisa, four guest rooms decorated in traditional country poster beds, calico quilts— with Japanese Added in a 2007 renovation, it's the guest room most Japanese, with its shoji screens and hori-area with a low table that usually features a built-in heater (but not in this case because of fire code).



rockers and lazing dogs ala the front door and step out of (which are pronounced suripas offers us tea then leads us past style— oak furniture, four-accents, to the Sunrise Room. at Pembroke Springs that feels kotatsu— a recessed sitting

"There is one Japanese carpenter in the area," Lisa tells us. "He worked with our construction guy to do the shoji screens and the seating area." Since it is just Mike and me, we'll sleep in the low king-size bed, but Lisa said the room can sleep a family of five when futons are laid on the tatami mats that cover a portion of the floor. "We get a lot of Japanese families booking this room."

These families come to the inn not just because of the rustic [beauty](#) of the property, which features hiking trails, tennis courts and a fully stocked fishing pond, or because the Floyds speak Japanese and serve Japanese food— or even because the inn gets Japan TV on the satellite. They come for something that viscerally connects them to their own volcanic country: onsen, which are spring-fed hot baths. "In Japan, the baths are a ritual, a tradition," says Walter. "It's a good family activity— everyone gets in together. It's also something



businessmen do to bond after meetings. The Japanese really love their baths.”

Mike had spent two years in Japan when he was in the Navy, and he often talks about his weekly visits to the onsen near the base where he was stationed in Masawa. He’d go after dinner, shower, hop from tub to tub—each with water at a different temperature— and leave an hour or so later, relaxed and ready for bed. He’d been looking forward to the baths for weeks, so as soon as we set down our luggage, we change into yukata, traditional, kimono-like robes provided for each guest. On our way to the baths, which are on the lower level of the inn, Taeko adjusts Mike’s robe— he had put the right side over the left, which is only done on bodies headed for the grave.

When the inn is full, guests book use of the two baths in one-hour time slots. But since there is only one other couple at the inn, we are free to walk in, hang the sign on the door that says, in kanji (one of three Japanese alphabets), “I’m in here,” and close the door. We hang our robes and leave our slippers in a small anteroom before we step into the white-tiled bath room. Immediately my eyes travel to the opposite wall, where two sliding glass doors offer a stunning view of Great North Mountain, which is part of the Allegheny chain. With the fresh air coming through the screens, it feels like we’re outdoors.



Lisa had explained that before getting into the bath a guest must take a shower, which is considered as much a part of the ritual as the bath itself. Each of the ofuros (bath rooms) features two open showers with stools, adjustable shower heads and a bowl to fill with water. “It’s traditional to sit while showering,” Lisa says. The rule is to clean well before taking a bath so the water stays pure— no bathing suits, no shampoo or [soap](#) allowed. “A lot of Japanese think the way Americans take baths— sitting in the dirty water— is gross,” Lisa adds.

After the shower, Mike plunges into the bath but I dip my foot in tentatively. Lisa had told me that the spring water comes out of the ground at 54 degrees and gets heated to 104 degrees— the maximum the Virginia health department allows— so I fear the water may be too intense for me. But it isn’t. It is hot enough to make me feel relaxed and warmed to the bone, but not dizzy or scalded. The nice thing is that, unlike a Jacuzzi, the water in these baths doesn’t contain chemicals— instead, the spring water that comes up from underground gets filtered through limestone channels along the way. All of the water in the inn is spring water, and it definitely tastes better than run-of-the-mill tap water— it has a sweet aftertaste.

“There are seven springs on the property,” Walter says. “There used to be a way station for the stagecoach near our driveway where visitors would stop for water in the years after the Civil War. Then a hotel sprouted up. The hotel is gone now, but people still come to the spring to get water.”

“The water is definitely hotter in Japan,” Mike says while he splashes around. Maybe so, but 20 minutes later, I’m starting to sweat, so I get out, put on my robe and slippers and pad back to our room. On the way back, I pass Taeko, who is in the kitchen chopping vegetables for dinner.



At 7 p.m., Mike and I head to the inn’s great room for dinner, which is served on Wednesdays and Thursdays— the other nights, most guests drive 20 minutes into Strasburg or 30 minutes into Winchester to eat. When Lisa brings out our first course— crab shumai (dumplings) served with a tempura of pumpkin flower and eggplant, both grown on the property— I am so glad we’ve decided to eat in. The next course is a clear soup with tofu, greens, moku mushrooms and quail eggs, gathered from the quail that live on the property. Then it is chicken katsu— a breaded chicken cutlet topped with “bulldog” sauce— a peppery slaw and rice topped with furikake seasoning, which has a slight mint flavor.

Taeko is a self-taught cook and her home-cooked Japanese meal contributes even more to the feeling of being in

an actual Japanese home, as opposed to a Disney/Epcot version of Japan. Everything is plated beautifully— a simple, pleasing mix of colors and shapes that reminds me of the Japanese values of balance and harmony.

The next morning, we are treated to an even more delectable spread at breakfast, when we meet the other couple staying at the inn, Mike and Shino. This Mike is also an ex-Navy man who was stationed in Japan; he met Shino at the visitor's center at Mount Fuji. They live near Williamsburg and are on their fourth trip to the inn— Shino loves the baths (she took one before breakfast) and Mike, while a fan of the baths, is more enthusiastic about the raw eggs served at breakfast. By the time we join them, he is on his third.

Lisa brings my Mike and me a bowl of rice and an egg. Then she takes my egg, cracks it and pours it over the rice, adds a few drops of miso then stirs everything with chopsticks before showing me how to use a piece of toasted nori seaweed to corral and pick up some of the raw egg and rice mixture.

I'm as conditioned as most Americans not to eat raw eggs, but everyone assures me it is safe, since the eggs were gathered just that morning. Not wanting to be a wimp, I do as I am told and take a bite. Sandwiched between the salty and chewy seaweed, the egg-coated rice tastes buttery. It is not a bad taste, but it's a little rich for me. I take a few more bites then move on to the other colorful plates of food placed before me on the table. There is kapocha— Japanese pumpkin that Taeko has cooked with sake. There is a lovely piece of grilled salmon, a scoop of black seaweed called hijiki, an egg and seaweed omelet called tamago, and an assortment of eggplant, green beans and miso soup. Last is an array of fresh fruit.

The look on Mike's face is one of pure delight— he'd waxed poetic almost as often about the breakfasts in Japan as he had about the baths. I'm delighted, too. What a great thing it is to experience the real Japan in the Virginia hills.

PEMBROKE SPRINGS RETREAT

Getting there: Pembroke Springs is 2 1/2 hours from Baltimore by car. 6238 Wardensville Grade Star Tannery, Va. 22654, 540-877-2600, 888-348-1688, e-mail: Lisa03@pembrokesprings.com, pembrokesprings.com

Stay: The inn is open Wednesdays through Sundays. Rates run from \$155 to \$205 and include a Japanese or American breakfast and use of the onsen. Dinner is served Wednesdays and Thursdays, by reservation only, and costs \$25 per person. BYOB.

Play: Strasburg, 20 minutes away, boasts the largest antique mall in Virginia, along with several Civil War sites. Winchester, about a 30-minute drive away, features Civil War sites, the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley and a pedestrian mall lined with bakeries, cafés and local stores.