

Japanese Bath Time in the Blue Ridge

Wednesday, December 14, 2005

Seldom has sinking so low elicited such a high.

Down, down I lowered my body as the bath engulfed my knees, waist and shoulders until finally, the 104-degree water tickled my earlobes. Baths, I thought, are bliss.

But this was no ordinary bath. It was the *ofuro* at the Pembroke Springs Retreat in Star Tannery, Va., an inn, as its owners call it, "with the distinct flavor of Japan."

In addition to the two 8-foot-by-8-foot indoor Japanese-style baths, the three-bedroom retreat serves a breakfast seldom seen this side of Tokyo: On my weekend visit, owners Taeko and Walter Floyd dished out an authentic mix of grilled salmon, steamed rice, miso soup, seaweed and vegetables. There are also raw eggs to crack, stir with soy sauce and pour over rice in the hearty Japanese way. (Those who prefer their eggs scrambled or fried may order an American breakfast.) The bath-and-breakfast combo will be familiar to anyone who's stayed at a *ryokan* or *minshukuin* in Japan: Both types of inns pride themselves on a comfortable atmosphere and stick-to-the-ribs food. Pembroke has the Japanese ambiance down cold, albeit with a Virginia twist.

Country-style American furniture adorns the common room, vs. the low table and chairs that compose the Japanese "sitting room" downstairs.

There, while enjoying a cup of green tea, guests can tune in to NHK, Japan's national broadcaster, while gazing out at Great North Mountain, which abuts the Floyds' 175-acre property.

Walter Floyd estimates that half of the retreat's guests are either Japanese or American with an interest in Japan.

The inn's two private, cold spring-fed, gas-heated baths are without question the highlight of the place. Guests should follow Japanese etiquette: Wash first, soak last. Sitting on low stools, bathers lather up and rinse off before entering the tub. The Floyds recommend a maximum of 15 to 20 minutes inside the baths, which offer stunning views of the oak-rich woods outside. I stayed in until I tasted sweat on my upper lip, then staggered back to my room, woozily happy.

I wasn't the only elated one. "I'm in heaven," said Japan native and D.C. resident Noriko Miyagawa, freshly emerged from the tiled tub and about to dive into her salmon and vegetables at breakfast.

Soaking in that bath made me realize how much I miss Japan, where I used to live. That weekend, though, the country seemed a whole lot closer.

Pembroke Springs (888-348-1688, <http://www.pembrokesprings.com>) is in Star Tannery, Va., about 90 miles from Washington, north of Strasburg on the West Virginia line.

-- Robert Schroeder