

A Little Pampering

I was lost in Onsenland. I had left my companion at the entrance to the changing rooms (agreeing to meet up at the rosewater bath 20 minutes later) but quickly became disorientated amid the throng of customers in their garish Hawaiian style pyjamas. By the time I'd made my way past the locker room, sauna, hot and cold baths, treatment rooms with their frightening looking vibrating armchairs, relaxation spaces and finally, to the rosewater bath itself I was seriously late and my companion seriously cross. 'Where on earth have you been?' she demanded, literally shaking with anger. I thought a swift dip in the floral bath might calm her down but the boiling water only seemed to make her even more furious..... And all she had wanted was a little 'pampering'.

To 'pamper' means to make someone extremely comfortable through luxurious treatments or expensive gifts. Think of the purring of a well-stroked cat or the feeling you get after an expert massage or, for that matter, a successful visit to an onsen resort and you will begin to appreciate the meaning. The word is often used reflexively as in:

'I need to pamper myself – I'm going to spend a weekend at a five star hotel.'

'I love a good pampering – chocolates, champagne and then a long soak in a jacuzzi.'

It is a word that is only really used by women and implies that the experience is an unusually pleasant and indulgent one. Men, being men, prefer a more neutral, less flowery expression and would say 'treat (myself)' instead:

'I'm going to treat myself to a new CD player.'

'Pampering' has become big business in the UK with a huge increase in the number of spas (short term residential facilities offering all manner of exotic and rejuvenative cures and treatments). Typically located in country houses or even castles these establishments provide their guests with everything they need to revivify their weary bodies while enjoying the idyllic countryside. Pampering is elevated to an art form here and they have become so popular that an organisation has been formed to regulate and classify them and help visitors to the UK locate the nearest one:

<http://www.spaassociation.org.uk/membership/BISA-members>

Like Japan, Britain has its geothermal baths too; the most famous being in Bath in Somerset. There is now a museum on the original site (a bequest from the Romans) which attracts a million visitors a year as well as a recently and lavishly developed thermal rooftop pool offering superb views of one of England's loveliest cities. The only people not happy about this magnificent new facility are the citizens of Bath who have blamed its construction for a huge rise in their local tax bill (ku tax).

After ten years in Japan and many more visits to onsens I have left that unfortunate experience at Onsenland behind me and have learned how to navigate smoothly through the mazy corridors of various hot spring facilities and have even had a go on one of those scary massage chairs. And I have learned something far more important – when a lady is in need of a good pampering, don't keep her waiting.