

Soaking in Tokyo's Rich Sento Culture

Amid blazing summer days, the capital's public baths offer both a unique cultural experience and a chance to reset.

For centuries, *sento*—public bathhouses—played a vital role in neighborhoods across Tokyo, providing a space for a scrub and soak before bathing at home became the norm. Today, *sento* are still valued as an affordable opportunity to refresh both body and mind.

Although public baths have existed in Japan for over 1,000 years, *sento* first became widespread in the capital during the Edo period (1603–1868). At the time, it was forbidden for private homes to heat bath water, to protect the densely packed city from fires.

An architectural style often used for Tokyo's *sento* is *miyazukuri*, a style similar to that of Japan's shrines and temples. This is said to be because carpenters who specialized in those types of structures helped rebuild the capital's bathhouses after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923.

Sento bear some similarities to *onsen*, hot springs historically valued for their health benefits; however,

there are also key differences. While to be officially recognized as *onsen* a facility must use water that is at least 25°C at the source or which contains certain designated minerals, *sento* are free to fill their baths from the public water supply, and thus are more likely to be found in local neighborhoods.

In Tokyo, *sento* use peaked in the 1960s but began declining as more homes and apartments became equipped with baths. As such, the number of *sento* has gradually declined since then, and roughly 430 remain as of December 2024.

In the modern day, *sento* have gained a new raison d'être as a place to relax amid bustling city life. They may also help urbanites make it through Tokyo's steamy summer months, as research has found that hot baths can help the body acclimatize to heat. In particular, carbonated baths are said to be effective in helping people get used to heat.

Tokyo's Charming Sento

In Tokyo, visitors can enjoy a wide variety of *sento*: some retro, some modern, and some with additional facilities alongside their baths. The following are a few examples.

1. Myohoyu

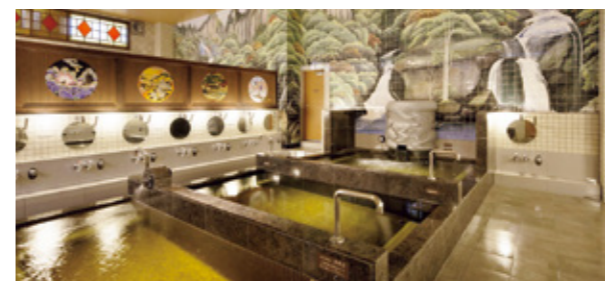
Established in the 1920s, Myohoyu is located by Shiinamachi Station. Among its various baths, Myohoyu was the first *sento* in Japan to introduce a "silky, soft-water carbonated bath."



Myohoyu's "silky, soft-water carbonated bath." Photo: courtesy of Myohoyu

2. Hasunuma Onsen

Located near Kamata Station, Hasunuma Onsen first opened its doors in 1944, and boasts a retro design based on Japan's Taisho era (1912–1926).



The retro interior is based on Dogo Onsen, one of Japan's three oldest hot springs. Photo: courtesy of Hasunuma Onsen

3. Nakanobu-onsen Matsunoyu

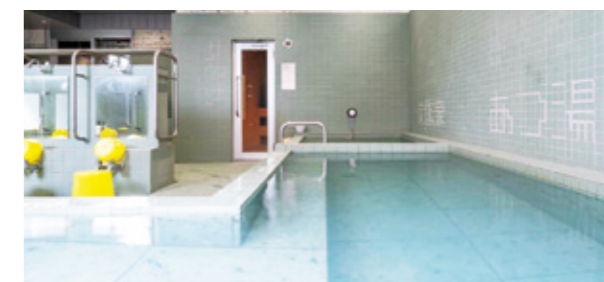
Established in 1948, Matsunoyu is close to Nakanobu Station. The facility boasts a traditional, Tokyo-style *sento* design complete with a painting of Mt. Fuji and open-air baths with natural hot spring water.



Nakanobu-onsen Matsunoyu boasts a traditional *sento* atmosphere with a painting of Mt. Fuji. Photo: courtesy of Nakanobu-onsen Matsunoyu

4. Komaeyu

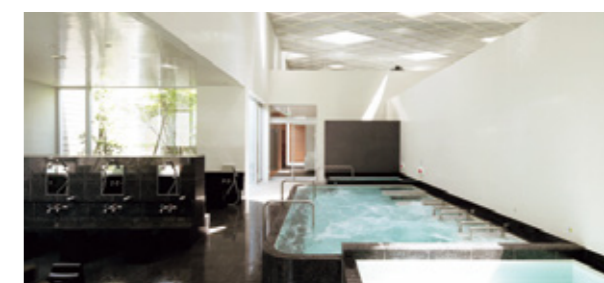
Located by Komae Station, Komaeyu was established in 1955 and renovated in 2023 under the direction of architect Jo Nagasaka, Schemata Architects. The *sento* offers a light, retro-modern atmosphere alongside its high-concentration carbonated spring water and other baths.



The bath at Komaeyu. Photo: courtesy of Komaeyu

5. Hisamatsuyu

Near Sakuradai Station, Hisamatsuyu has been in operation since 1956. Its elegant interior and exterior follow a design concept of "a *sento* amid light, wind, and forest" and its bath area even features projection mapping.



The baths at Hisamatsuyu. Photo: courtesy of Hisamatsuyu

A Cultural Experience

Not all countries have a public bathing culture, so some visitors may initially feel hesitant to enter a *sento*. Although a handful of hot spring resorts do allow swimwear in the bath, visitors should not expect the same at a *sento*.

Sento may be more accessible than *onsen* for some: While most *onsen* will not allow guests with tattoos to enter the baths, *sento* are generally more tolerant. They welcome international visitors in the same way as locals, without special treatment nor particular warnings.

Going forward, *sento* will continue to play a role in Tokyo neighborhoods, helping residents and visitors alike relax and refresh themselves.



The *sento* Kodakara-yu exhibited at the Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum, exemplifies the *miyazukuri* style. *This is a reconstructed building and is not open for bathing. Photo: courtesy of the Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum