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## STARS AND STRIPES.

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## Relaxing in Korea's hot springs is a contemplative, personal affair

By [Jeremy Kirk](#), Seoul bureau chief  
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The thick, humid air just rolls out of Korean hot springs, an inviting warmth that leads to a traditional bathing activity.

The natural hot waters of the earth have been tapped for years from deep inside Korea's rocky base. They are incredibly popular, marked by a steaming-pot symbol on hotel marquees.

The hot, fresh waters are believed to aid health, and explanations vary. The minerals are good for the skin, some say, while others swear by the deep-down heat that helps arthritis. But the most powerful effect is on the muscles, with the hot steam clearing the head and soothing the soul.

Most hot springs — called *oonchon* in Korean — are south of Seoul, but an hour and a half drive can put you in the center. Hot springs are inside hotels, and not many are outside.

Most places drive pipes down to the naturally warm water, although you can find places that have pools both inside



*Andy Dunaway / S&S*  
**At Onyang Grand Hotel, Seung Young-tea visits the outdoor hot spring pools featuring natural rock waterfalls.**



*Andy Dunaway / S&S*  
**Spavis hot springs in South Korea offers two skin therapy pools. One is filled with crushed grapes; the other is a lemon pool.**

and out. Often, the outside pools will mimic some natural rock formation while sparing your feet with a smooth pool base.

Some facilities in Asan have constructed themselves among the water-minded tourists.

Spavis, in Asan, is a monstrous water recreation facility, and among its features are hot spring pools, whirlpools and a gigantic water-aerobics swimming pool.

Tourists from China and Hong Kong crowded the facility during a visit this summer in addition to Koreans and some Western tourists. The water is drawn from 13 holes drilled 1,500 to 1,800 feet underground into the earth's hot liquid belly.

The hot spring spa has individual whirlpools that can be rented by the hour and sit about six people. But two outside pools are the most intriguing.

One was a dark purple, a murky, bubbling cauldron that at first looks strange. It's filled with crushed grapes — thousands of fresh ones added everyday — and the idea is a sort of skin therapy.

The pool next to it was bright yellow. The first impression for this one isn't the greatest either, but then the vibrant smell of lemon wafts from it, and it seems much more inviting. This also is a skin therapy pool, with the naturally acidic lemon cleansing skin pores.

Other hot springs have even made beverages into a bathing experience. Often, there is a green tea pool, with a massive, industrial-sized tea bag to steep the water. Throughout Asia and increasingly in the United States, green tea is prized not for its woody taste but its antioxidant properties.

Spavis also has the more traditional Korean style hot springs. One pool is very hot, probably hotter than most Western tastes, and a cool pool. Bathers bounce from pool to pool, soaking in the warm one and then cooling down.

This is done, of course, in the nude.

For Westerners, or at least Americans, this is a twist that most aren't used to. But Korean spa etiquette is probably much more sanitary than say, the hot tub at the Holiday Inn.

Bathers are expected to take a full shower before doing any dipping. Hot spring facilities provide a shower area, not entirely different from a high school gym shower. Soap, shampoo and razors are usually available, sometimes for a small fee, and there are open bay showers with individual mirrors.

Don't skip the showers, as it would be a rude, cultural faux pas.

For those afraid of the *puris naturalibus* plunge, fear not: No one cares. Hot springs are a contemplative, personal affair, and most bathers are more absorbed in their own thoughts than your butt.

Hot springs also usually have a sauna, but beware. They are often incredibly hot, and can snatch the breath from your lungs when you enter. Don't stay in one too long, and if you're in there alone, feel free to open the door if you need a breather.

Massages are available at many places, and the masseuse will beat your muscles until they are butter. For women, Korean *ajummas* — the term for an older Korean woman — will scrub the dead skin cells from your body.

The roads around Asan are marked with brown, tourist signs in English and Korean that point to different hot springs, but they only really get you to the general area. If you follow the signs, they won't really lead you anywhere. Keep an eye out for the steaming pot, as they mark a hot springs facility.

If you go to a hot spring in a hotel, someone there will likely speak enough English to show you around. Don't feel intimidated. They like your money and will do their best to help you.

Entry fees are typically less than \$5, although a massage may set you back \$20 or more. Just make sure the price is clear before you get one.

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