

Art & Culture

Arty baths

Sento are popular for their health and relaxation benefits, but did you know many of these public baths feature exquisite artwork too? From the 680 sento in Tokyo, **Stephanie Crohin** selects six of the prettiest

BUNKAYOKUSEN

The art Recently restored by architect Kentaro Imai, Bunkayokusen (文化浴泉) is what's known as a designer sento. Concerned about the survival of the sento tradition, Kentaro has become a specialist in renovating public baths, hoping to revive interest – and his efforts are paying off as younger people flock to these more modern baths. Kentaro gives each sento he works on a second life, integrating chic details while preserving the traditional atmosphere – in Bunkayokusen's case, features such as its remarkable wooden ceiling, mosaic wall and mural of Mt Fuji. The mural was painted by Morio Nakajima, one of only three remaining sento mural painters in Japan, who usually focus on images of Mt Fuji because people like to bathe at the 'foot' of the mountain. The murals are called 'penki-e', named after the kind of paint used, and usually feature the mountain painted in blue on one side and red on the other. **The facilities** The men's and women's baths are slightly different, so they swap sides each day. There are three types of baths – massage,

nanobubble and cold water – and a sauna. The nanobubbles are so small that they penetrate deeply into skin pores and clean them out. Calcium and magnesium are removed from the water to make it softer on the skin. The lobby features a massage chair for extra relaxation. 3-6-8 Higashiyama, Meguro (Ikejiri-Ohashi Station). 03 3792 4126. bunkayokusen.grupo.jp. Tue-Sat 3.30pm-1am, Sun 8am-12pm, 3.30pm-1am, closed Mon. ¥460 (extra ¥300 to use the sauna).

KOHMEISEN

The art Another designer sento overhauled by Kentaro Imai, Kohmeisen (光明泉) reopened in 2014 in the heart of Nakameguro's trendy shopping area. Kentaro came up with a design that fits well with the surrounding cityscape – a soft white colour scheme and a mural of Mt Fuji created by graffiti artist Gravity Free. **The facilities** There are three baths – massage, carbonated and cold water – and a sauna. A rotenburo (outside bath) is available on only one side of the sento, so the men's and women's sides are swapped every Friday to allow everyone to experience



The mural was done by the oldest of Japan's three remaining sento artists



rooftop bathing – a rare treat in central Tokyo. The radium-rich water is good for relieving pain and fatigue. 1-6-1 Kamimeguro, Meguro (Nakameguro Station). 03 3463 9793. kohmeisen.com. Daily 3pm-1am. ¥460 (extra ¥200 to use the sauna).

YAMA NO YU ONSEN

The art A retro public bath from the mid-Showa period, Yama no Yu Onsen (山の湯温泉) features a beautiful Mt Fuji painting by 79-year-old Kiyoto

Maruyama, the oldest of Japan's three remaining sento painters. Besides the main mural, there are also many smaller paintings on the bathroom tiles as well as in the steam room. Adding an extra arty touch are the original posters by illustrator and regular customer Miho Tanaka. Undoubtedly one of the most picturesque sento we've been to.

The facilities The round bath in the middle of the room is an unusual feature. It's divided into two parts – one a jet massage bath

BUNKAYOKUSEN: MONAISEN; COURTESY OF KENTARO IMAI; (IMAGES); YAMA NO YU ONSEN: MESSIUE YAMAGATA

and the other an aroma bath that changes its scent every day. The steam sauna room with wormwood aroma is excellent for your skin and can be used at no extra charge. 1-47-12 Kanamecho, Toshima (Kanamecho Station). 03 3957 2679. Tue-Sun 3.30pm-midnight, closed Mon. ¥460.

DAIKOKU-YU

The art Antique pictures and celebrity autographs line the walls from entrance to locker rooms

and the whole place is filled with objects and souvenirs collected by the owner, making Daikoku-yu (大黒湯) feel almost like a museum. Inside the bathroom, a mosaic mural depicts a European landscape, which the owner tells us was 'very trendy and new' when it was first completed 40 years ago. The men's shower wall features a painting of Kyoto's famous Kinkakuji (Temple of the Golden Pavilion), while the women's side is decorated with images of Nikko.



The facilities A comfortable massage bath, cold water bath, steam bath, electric bath and sauna. The men's sauna features a spacious rest room with relaxation chairs. There are also a few fitness machines in the locker room. 3-24-5 Nishihara, Shibuya (Yoyogi-Uehara Station). 03 3485 1701. www.ueharaekimae.com/shop/daikokuyu. Mon-Sat 3.50pm-1.30am, Sun 1pm-1.30am, closed on the 1st and 3rd Wed of every month. ¥460 (extra ¥300 to use the sauna).

KUGAHARA-YU

The art Opened 60 years ago and recently renovated, Kugahara-yu (久が原湯) features a majestic Mt Fuji mosaic on its bathroom walls. The men's and women's sides are decorated with different colour schemes (representing the moon and the sun), but you'll get a chance to experience both as they rotate the changing rooms every two weeks. **The facilities** A spacious bath with massage jets, warm carbonated bath (from where you can watch TV), hot bath, cold bath, outdoor bath with black onsen water, steam sauna (free) and dry sauna. 2-14-15 Kugahara, Ota (Kugahara Station). 03 3754 4452. Daily 3pm-midnight, closed on the 4th,

14th and 24th of each month. ¥460 (extra ¥200 to use the dry sauna).

AIZEN-YU

The art We just love the red carpet in the lobby, the big painting of a cherry blossom tree on a golden background, and the charming antique mirrors at the colourfully retro Aizen-yu (愛染湯). In the bathroom, there's an impressive 40-year-old mosaic featuring angelic, floating nymphs playing flutes and tossing flowers into the air. Sweet dreams guaranteed. **The facilities** Five baths offering different types of massages, a nanobubble bath, ultrasound bath, and sauna available for men. Free wi-fi for 30 minutes per customer. Bath ducks on Sundays. 46-7 Yamatocho, Itabashi (Itabashi-Honcho Station). 03 3962 4576. Sat-Thu 3.30pm-11.45pm, closed Fri.

For more sento images and info by Stephanie, visit [instagram.com/_stephaniemelanie_](https://www.instagram.com/_stephaniemelanie_) or www.tokyosento.com.

