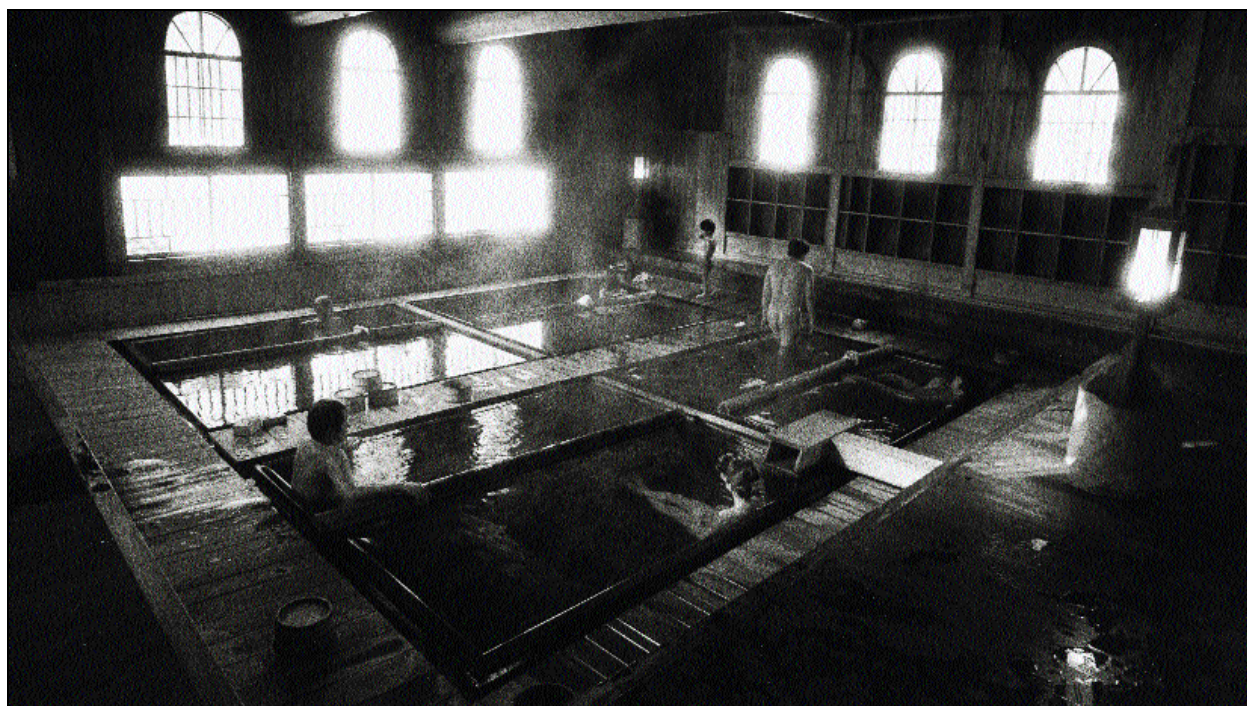


‘Live Long and Drop Dead’

I have a favorite shrine in Japan. Many are grander, but this one speaks to me. Yoshi and I were staying at a remote Gunma Prefecture mountain inn called Chojukan, or “Long Life Ryokan.” Upstream from the inn, on a high and dry knob, stood a little shrine overseen by Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy. Inscribed on a stone monument were the words *Suewa Korori*, meaning “At the Very End, Drop Dead.” At the base of the monument were piles of nearly worthless one-yen pieces, tossed there by those who had come before me. But this prayer was obviously worth more than a single yen. I fished a 100-yen coin from my pocket change. “No,” said Yoshi, “the goddess might think you are trying to bribe her.” So I settled for a 10-yen donation, and I pray to the Goddess Kannon that it was enough.



Los Angeles Times

The Chojukan bathhouse, above, looks old and primitive, and it is, exactly what visitors found here a hundred years ago, two hundred years ago, even longer. And even today, in the 21st century, it offers mixed bathing — men and women together — a Japanese custom that has virtually disappeared in modern decades. On the two occasions when I bathed here, women were present, wrapped in towels until they shed them and slipped stark naked into the crystal clear hot water. The men were not so

modest. They entered the bathhouse with just tiny washcloths draped strategically. I did the same. Then, at my first bath here, I made a fool of myself. The water did not look deep, so I stepped in with one leg, expecting to touch bottom. The bottom wasn't where I thought it was. I tumbled in with a splash. Oh well, it made a good story for Japanese guests to take home with them. *There was this old foreigner at Chojukan, and he fell into the ofuro.* One can imagine the laughter. How quickly dignity is lost.

Jackson Sellers