

Denjyoyu is both a sixty-year-old neighborhood public bath in Nishigahara, Tokyo and the core of a community where every employee and regular customer feels like a member of a large family. The cozy sento has a live-in system open to anyone regardless of nationality, holds concerts in the baths, and has big plans for more activities. What is at the heart of the Denjyoyu's appeal and hospitality?

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A classical piano concert held in the sento attracted an audience of over a hundred. Pianist: Tadahiro Yonezu | Photographer: Seiya Fujii

# A Sento-Centric Community

DENJYOYU'S live-in system is simple: assist with the daily tasks of opening for business, clean up after closing time, and run errands for the guests staying at rental apartments within the *sento*'s premises. The work is unpaid, but in return lodgers receive free room and board. These lodgers include people who want to live independently from their parents and others who have left their rural hometowns to chase their dreams in Tokyo.

Denjyoyu usually has two to five lodgers at any one time, many of them non-Japanese. Including former lodgers, the *sento* has

hosted a total of about thirty people of different nationalities from various parts of the world, including Asia, Europe and the United States. Some come back to Japan to pay surprise visits to the *sento*. Denjyoyu fosters a constant exchange between people and the long-lasting relationships that arise from it.

Nobuyuki Hara, the fifth-generation owner of Denjyoyu, says: "Since I was raised in a *sento* where it was normal to have employees lodging with the family, I've never felt that this live-in system was anything new. Traditionally, running a *sento* requires clerks, maids and a lot

of manpower. In the old days it was customary for *sento* to have children of farmers from rural regions come to Tokyo and lodge there and work for them until they eventually set out on their own."



Fifth-generation owner Nobuyuki Hara discussing his plans to renovate Denjyoyu



The Hara family posing with some of their lodgers in front of Denjyoyu



In exchange for cleaning the baths and helping out, the lodgers receive room and board



Lodgers and visiting family members eating with the Hara family

When not helping with the *senjo*, the four people currently staying at Denjyoyu work at other jobs or attend school. Hara is used to this large family management style, and has the friendliness typical of native *shitamachi* (old town) Tokyoites. To him, his non-Japanese employees and local regular customers—who come to his *senjo* for the rich groundwater his great-grandfather dug deep to reach, and is heated with white charcoal—are all family members.

Hara and his wife Ikuyo, who have worked in event planning and promotion, have been launching ambitious projects that take advantage of the unique characteristics of *senjo*, such as the good sound quality in the bathing rooms and the special place these public baths have in the hearts of locals. A recent classical concert, by a pianist who raised funds through crowdfunding, attracted an

audience of over a hundred. Future events will include an acoustic guitar concert and a gramophone-broadcasted jazz concert, an idea thought up by a former lodger who is an art museum curator. In two years Hara plans to renovate Denjyoyu, installing a screen for movie events and adding a small bar or café that will serve drinks made with Denjyoyu’s soft and delicious groundwater.

Denjyoyu has deep connections with the wider local community as well. Hara’s father is a volunteer juvenile probation officer, and takes care of children who cannot go to school for various reasons. Children visit him at the *senjo* for advice. Elderly people at the nearby daycare center come by private minivan to take a bath.

“I’d like to make a pleasant and comfortable space for people in the community and make

them happy here,” Hara says. “My grandmother used to tell me that hospitality and kindness are not things to brag about, but something to do behind the scenes. I was taught that kind and hospitable gestures should be made selflessly, without other people noticing. My ideal hospitality is to make my customers notice the good quality of my service when they recall it later.”

Hara says that his great-grandfather knew how precious water is, having experienced major earthquakes and war firsthand. The founder of the public bath dug down to drinkable groundwater because he knew it would save his local community and himself in an emergency.

Over the years the Hara family has shared the quality waters of Denjyoyu as well as establishing a tradition of sharing their altruistic spirit with the local community. ▮