



ROMAN BATHING

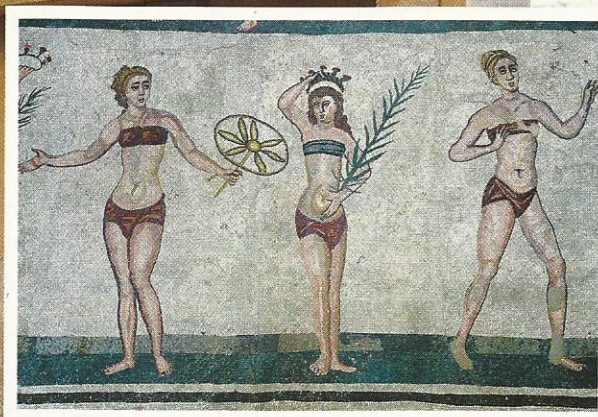
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IF YOU WERE an ancient Roman planning your day, going to the public baths was a certainty. Where else could you chat with friends, have a business meeting, hear the news, listen to poetry, get your exercise, and go to an art gallery? A visit to the baths was like attending a party or going to a café, the library, a concert hall, the fitness center, and more—all rolled into one. Roman people liked their baths so much that their emperors built extravagant bathhouses in order to gain popularity. In A.D. 216, Emperor Caracalla built a spectacular bathhouse that covered five acres in the city of Rome. Nearly a century later, Emperor Diocletian built an even bigger bathhouse, one that could accommodate 3,000 bathers at a time.

These bathhouses were constructed with mosaic floors, huge vaulted ceilings, marble walls, frescoes, and sculpted fountains. People climbed into hot baths, warm baths, cold baths, and hot-dry baths for sweating. In the same building you could find exercise rooms, libraries, restaurants, and art galleries and auditoriums where poetry readings and discussions were held.

If you were rich, your slave would carry your towels and bathing tools and splash you with water. The slaves were people whom the Romans had conquered and were mostly Europeans. If you were not wealthy, you looked after yourself at the bath. A bather might bring sponges, jars of oils, a curved scraping tool

Steam rises off hot mineral water in a preserved Roman bath in Bath, England. Inset is a mosaic of maidens who exercised in a kind of Roman bikini.



called a *strigil*, sandals, and *paterae*, which were dishes used for pouring water over yourself.

In their daily lives, Roman men usually wore a toga and tunic, while women wore an undershirt called a *subcula* and a long, stolelike shift called a *stola*. At the bathhouse, people would enter the changing room, called the *apodyterium*, and leave their clothes on a shelf. Men commonly exercised naked, but women wore briefs and a brassiere, like today's bikini, while exercising.

A BATHHOUSE WITH A LIBRARY! (AND GALLERIES, AND A CONCERT HALL, AND PARTY ROOMS, AND RESTAURANTS...)



AND 3,000 PEOPLE BATHING, AND NO SOAP!



MAKES ME GLAD THIS ISN'T A SCRATCH 'N' SNIFF STORY.

In the *palaestra*, or gymnasium, you might work out with hand weights. Men wrestled, and ball games were popular with both men and women. Balls were of various sizes and were filled with feathers, sand, or air. *Harpastum* was a popular game similar to rugby, and *Trigon* was a ball game played by three people. If you weren't energetic, you could sit in the shade and play board games or gamble with dice.

Even if you didn't sweat by exercising, you could still sweat by sitting in a hot-dry room, like a Finnish sauna. After your sweat, you or your slave would rub your body with oil, then scrape the dirt and grime off your skin with a metal *strigil*.

Washing with soap as we do today simply wasn't done in ancient Roman times, but water did play an important role in Roman society and the bathhouse experience. In fact, each person in ancient Rome used twice as much water as a New Yorker uses today.

Roman plumbing technology was sophisticated and efficient. Water from nearby springs was piped into the bathing pool of the *frigidarium*, or cold bath section of the bathhouse, through aqueducts—a system of channels, bridges, and pipes engineered to move water using the principle of gravity. Pipes were made of lead, wood, and terra cotta; they furnished water for the fountains, the homes of the rich, and the public baths. There was no stopcock, so water flowed endlessly.

SIXTEEN PEOPLE SITTING
AND CHATTING ON TOILETS!!
MIND BOGGLING.



AND IT WAS CONSIDERED
PERFECTLY NORMAL!

At this point, it was necessary to heat the water. Slaves stoked the fires of great furnaces outside the building. Under the bath floor, in an area that was raised two feet off the ground on pillars or brick piers, was the *hypocaust*. The hypocaust was what we would call ductwork today; it was the area beneath the floors and behind walls that trapped the hot air from the furnaces and distributed it to the various rooms in the bathhouse via clay pipes, called flues. In this manner, the rooms received heat through the floors, walls, and ceilings. Suspended over the outdoor furnaces were large, bronze tanks in which water was heated for baths. Hot water ran into the *caldarium*—the hottest of the bathing pools—and the overflow, cooling as it went, was piped to the *tepidarium*, or warm-water pool. Next, the water was used to flush the public toilets into the sewage system.

Patrons could use the public toilets rather than the jar at home. At the bathhouse, patrons had the opportunity to sit side by side on the stone toilet seats and have a conversation with as many as sixteen acquaintances at a time.

However, the most popular and temperate meeting place was the tepidarium, where patrons could relax in the water and discuss politics or even hold a business meeting. The warmth of the water and the moisture of the air contributed to the comfortable and soothing atmosphere of this room.

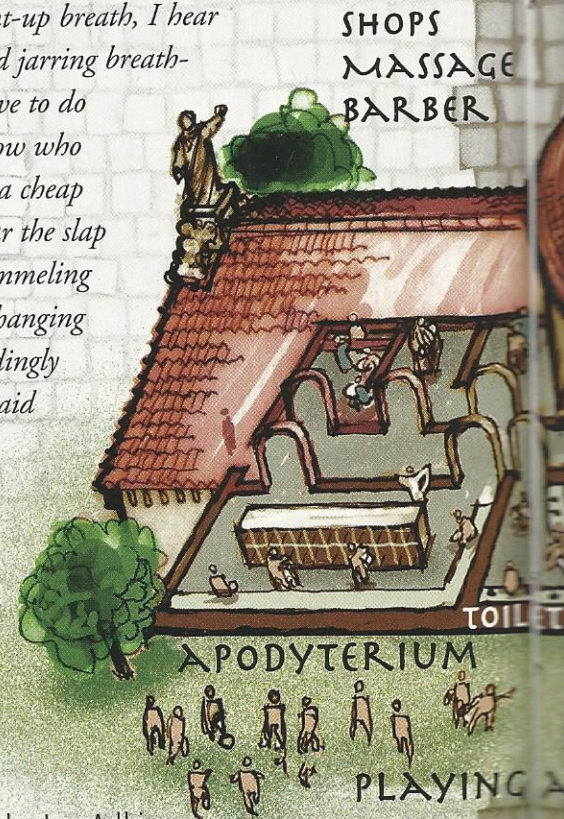
In the caldarium, patrons would wear sandals—even in the water—as the floor was very hot. Here you could chat with your friends to take your mind off the heat or you might fill your paterae with cold water to

pour on yourself in an attempt to cool off and prolong your stay.

A plunge into the cold-water pool of the frigidarium was exhilarating after all that heat. The frigidarium was often partially open to the air. The domed ceiling would have an *oculus*, or opening, at the top, which admitted sunlight and gave the gods a view of what was going on inside the baths.

The sounds of the baths might have been like those at a huge, crowded indoor swimming pool today. This is how Seneca, a first-century Roman philosopher, described the sound:


"I live over a bathing establishment. Picture to yourself now the assortment of voices, the sound of which is enough to sicken one. . . . When the stronger fellows are exercising and swinging heavy leaden weights in their hands, when they are working hard or pretending to be working hard, I hear their groans; and whenever they release their pent-up breath, I hear their hissing and jarring breathing. When I have to do with a lazy fellow who is content with a cheap rubdown, I hear the slap of the hand pummeling his shoulders, changing its sound accordingly as the hand is laid flat or curved."



If now a professional ballplayer comes along and begins to keep score, I am done for. Add to this the arrest of a brawler or a thief, and the fellow who always likes to hear his own voice in the bath, and those who jump into the pool with a mighty splash as they strike the water. In addition to those whose voices are, if nothing else, natural, imagine the hair plucker keeping up a constant chatter in this thin and strident voice, to attract more attention, and never silent except when he is plucking armpits and making the customer yell instead of yelling himself. It disgusts me to enumerate the varied cries of the sausage dealer and confectioner and of all the peddlers of the cook shops, hawking their wares, each with his own peculiar intonation."

People of all classes frequented the baths. Most bathhouses were free of charge to children of a certain age, strangers, and some foreigners. All others paid an admission fee of one *quadrans*, the smallest unit of Roman currency, or the price of a loaf of bread.

Once bathers were clean and refreshed, they'd get dressed and perhaps buy a snack at the restaurant. Other entertainment options were to go to the library and read scrolls or perhaps attend a poetry recital or a concert in one of the lecture halls. Some patrons preferred a stroll in the gardens and gossip with neighbors.

The people of Rome depended on their bathhouses, not merely to keep clean, but for their social and cultural lives as well. Within the bathhouses they found companionship, engaged in lively discussions, enjoyed arts and entertainment, and browsed in the libraries for further education. One could find either serenity or a party at the bathhouse. Truly it was the center of the Roman community. 

FRIGIDARIUM

TEPIDARIUM

CALDARIUM

