

**DELUXE BATHING**  
A DIAMOND SPAS' HAMMERED  
STEEL SOAKING TUB SET ON A  
BED OF RIVER STONES.



# TO SPA *or not* TO SPA

## *How to have your ultimate bath experience...guilt free.*

BY KAJA GAM, PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DIAMOND SPAS

**A**fter the kitchen, the most coveted space in the American household is the bathroom. And the market is awash in products offering a multitude of options to convert the traditional master bath to the new home spa.

But many of us are increasingly concerned with conserving resources—water and the energy needed to heat it. If such concerns have kept you from upgrading your master bath, the time to savor a guilt-free and ultimate bath experience is now.

In this article we'll look at four factors in creating a green luxury spa bath: space use, water consumption, heating costs, and health benefits and risks.

### **BATHROOM SPACE**

Japan, Turkey, Russia, and Scandinavia—all these cultures have one thing in common: bathing is an essential part of family life and society, as much about social interaction as personal cleansing. In the U.S. most bathrooms aren't designed to accommodate such functions without a change to the space layout. However, if you want a home spa, the change is worth it.

Even if it means giving up a portion of your bedroom, do not hesitate to increase the size of your bath. A good layout will reorganize the space and make use of the combined footprint of master bedroom, closets, and bath without the need for an expansion.

At the center of your home spa should be a deep whirlpool tub or a freestanding Japanese soaking tub. Separate the toilet from the bathing area, and if possible keep the sink and vanity area separated as well. Make the tub the focus, and keep the other functions by themselves.

With the tub separated from the shower you can use materials other than tile and stone, such as wood on the walls and floors. Mesquite, a native Texas wood cut and shaped into tile patterns ([www.annsachs.com](http://www.annsachs.com)), is one beautiful option. Add luxurious materials and well placed, dimmable lighting, and you're well on your way.

The modern spa tubs are deep—20 inches or more—and come with a heating element that allows you to maintain the temperature without draining cold water in order to add more hot. The most affordable tubs are still acrylic ([www.Maxx.com](http://www.Maxx.com)), but if you want something out of the ordinary, steel and copper as well as carved stone and concrete have found a treasured place in the home spa. Diamond Spas ([www.diamondspas.com](http://www.diamondspas.com)) uses up to 95 percent recycled metals in its standard and custom lines of copper and steel hammered soaking tubs. Carved stone tubs are another option, but if you go to that kind of expense, purchase a stone tub made from materials that are gathered rather than mined. Terrazzo tubs are popular in Indonesia, Bali, and other East Asian countries and are featured as a luxury item in spa hotels all over the region.

You are best off placing soaking tubs and whirlpools on a drained floor. The beautiful freestanding tubs you see sitting on a base of river stones have drained floors.

Another alternative is the European-style bathroom with a central room drain. Then you don't have to worry about spills.

The central floor drain also acts as a space saver, and can be configured into a bath complex where a separate shower stall otherwise would not be possible. You can add a curtain or a half wall in glass to protect from shower splatter.

### **WATER CONSUMPTION & HEATING COSTS**

Water-conservation fixtures have come a long way from the first water savers you could install yourself. Advances in spray, pressure, and water-propelling technology have given us luxury bath products that use less water but still give the feeling of a full flow. So today you can have a shower system with all the amenities relatively guilt-free...if you follow a few rules.

If you are installing body sprays and more than one shower head, you should have as many individual controls as possible. You can then enjoy an old-fashioned quick shower, only turning on one fixture, or treat yourself to a full-out Six Flags experience when you want to.

Make sure your water heater is large enough to fill about two thirds of your tub with warm water and accommodate a 10-minute shower. Whirlpool tubs vary in size, holding 25 to 150 gallons of water, and a 10-minute shower at full blast and with all valves open uses from 2.5 to 5 gallons per minute (GPM). Adding a flow-through on-demand water heater for the bath could eliminate costly upgrades to a traditional water heating system. You will also preserve energy otherwise used to keep the water temperature up at all times using a tank that is sized for intermittent peak performance.

The ultimate green shower is a shower-steam combination. Steam baths are not actually releasing steam but rather a fine mist of hot water with the temperature controlled by a thermostat, and the mist uses much less water than showers. The mist can be distributed via body sprays or a single mister that fills the shower stall, functioning like a Russian or Turkish steam bath. Steam opens and cleans the skin's pores. The time you keep your shower on is shorter, and you save water.

The best shower-steamroom combination enclosure is, at minimum, three by four feet, with a built-in seat. You want enough space for elbow room and all the paraphernalia. There should be one or two shower heads with turn-off valves, so you can turn the water on and off while lathering up without changing the temperature or pressure settings; you also need a diverter and a handheld shower for leg shaving. There is a lot of calibration involved, so consult with a design specialist and a plumber to make it all work together.

Instead of having the enclosure built, you can buy a prefabricated unit. Prefab units are not necessarily less luxurious, but are self-contained and will save you on labor costs and time ([www.frigodesign.com](http://www.frigodesign.com), [www.clarkeproducts.com](http://www.clarkeproducts.com), [www.interbath.com](http://www.interbath.com)).

Still feeling guilty? Install a diverting drain from your tub and shower to collect grey-water. With proper filtration and a holding tank, you can use the water for gardening in the dry summer months.

Finally, the best way to heat your spa is with radiant floor heat, either installed as an electric pad under your flooring or with PEX tubing tied into your home heating system. If radiant heat is too costly or not feasible, consider installing a wood floor. Wood is warm, and teak and Ipe slatted floor panels are naturally mold and rot resistant. Also take a look at Lacava's Tatami Shower draining system ([www.lacava.com](http://www.lacava.com)).

### **HEALTH BENEFITS**

Stagnant water in old-style whirlpools and hot tubs has been a major deterrent for many in upgrading their bathrooms. But that technology has been replaced with air-pressure circulation systems or individual jet pumps. They are hygienic, maintenance is easier, and bath oils are finally acceptable. Take a look at models by Sanijet, MTI, and Bain Ultra.

But what about the water itself? Very often our municipal water has been "enhanced" with fluoride and chlorine, which have been shown to have negative health effects. Plus, our drinking water gets stripped of essential metals in the process of getting rid of the harmful ones. If you have well water, it is somewhat easier—you can attach a whole-house filtration system and customize what you want your filtration to do, following the results of a water analysis.

The Japanese, who have achieved the height of sophistication as far as bathing is concerned, have introduced a number of products, such as water-softening vitamin E supplements attached directly to your showerhead. Sonaki and Hyperionic are two brands. Hyperionic nozzles also provide a fine spray that have more water molecules interact with the air, thus adding negative ions to the water—another health benefit.

Chromatherapy and aromatherapy are other additions to the healing aspects of spa design. Chromatherapy is based on the fact that colors have different vibrating wavelengths, so by infusing the water with different colors—usually done with LED lights—you can help relax or tone your system and organs. Aromatherapy is based on the science of herbal and mineral diffusions that are taken up by your body's mucous membranes in minute amounts through your skin, lungs, and digestive system. The diffusions help balance and boost your immune and nervous system. These are subtle effects along the lines of homeopathy, but you might be surprised at how well they can invigorate you.

In our region a standard bathroom renovation can run anywhere from \$15,000 to \$45,000. Add a few extra features and you are up to \$55,000, and you can easily hit the \$100,000 mark. So it is worth taking a look at how you can get the green spa you want for the money you are willing to spend without compromising on comfort.

If you like to soak every night as a family, steam shower first then dip in the tub—and do it with a clear, green conscience. ■

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