

EXPERIENCE

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50 YEARS OF LEARJET HISTORY + NETJETS' NEXT BIG MOVE
JAPAN'S RYOKANS + THOROUGHbred AUCTIONS + SICILIAN VILLAS

EARTH, FIRE AND WATER

A journey to some of Japan's most luxurious hot-spring inns unlocks an experience of beauty and comfort unlike anywhere else.

BY IAN McVEIGH

At Asaba Ryokan there is an antique Noh stage. It was transported 125 miles

piece by piece from Tokyo a hundred years ago, and reassembled in the deep grotto behind the inn, where it now rests at the edge of a koi pond.

On two evenings a year, coinciding with the full moon, masked actors will cross the pond by wooden boat to bring the theater to life with warbled chants and the staccato intonations of drum and flute. A small group of Japan's elite will sip Champagne and watch the lantern-lit performance from across the water.

But today the covered wooden stage is still as a painting as I push aside silent screens to take it in from the windows of my suite at the 10th-generation family-run *ryokan* – or hot-spring inn. This morning's performance is a bobbing wooden boat with a red dragonfly perched on its hull. The soundtrack is the rustle of wind in the stage's rice-paper bunting and the surface-piercing plunks of massive koi.

To the Japanese, the ryokan symbolizes a place to reconnect with the natural world beyond their buzzing concrete cities. It's a reprieve from the demands of a results-driven, work-obsessed society. It's quite literally a way to strip down to one's purest state and to recharge in the healing waters.

Guests come in spring to view the pink clouds of cherry blossoms; in summer to feel the cool of fresh greens; in autumn to take in the blazing orange of the Japanese maple and in winter to see the scene again under a blanket of snow.

On such occasions they will both lament and rejoice in the passage of time. They'll take a moment to worship the ephemeral. There is only one goal before them: to relax.

My suite at Asaba is called Moegi, a single word which describes the young yellow-green of spring before the deeper hue of summer. It is the finest in the 19-room, Relais & Châteaux ryokan, with its three sprawling tatami rooms and circular cedar soaking tub overlooking a bamboo grove.

This is the center of the ryokan experience. In Moegi my wife Esme and I will be served a welcome drink of whipped matcha and pastel sweet cakes, before taking our meals sitting on the tatami floor at a stout lacquer table. After dinner, our kimono-clad room attendant – a waitress, >



BATHING BEAUTY
A suite with a private hot-spring bath at Gora Kadan ryokan.



TRADITIONAL TASTES
(Clockwise from left) Asaba's salon maintains the minimalist aesthetic of the historic ryokan, but with a fresh, modern look; a *kaiseki* service of local specialties at Tobira Onsen; *geta* are placed at the entrance for guests to wear on walks outside the inn.



MOONLIGHT PROMENADE
Gora Kadan's geometric central walkway was designed to simultaneously contrast with and fuse into its natural environment.

“The feel of the hot water, the smell of the incense, the taste of the food. It’s the essence of Japanese culture.”

housekeeper and concierge rolled into one – will remove plush futons, buckwheat pillows and down duvets from a discreet cabinet to make up our beds.

Here, we are also issued the uniform of our stay: *yukata*, a cotton kimono bound at the waist and adorned with abstract seasonal motifs. Summer means tiny forget-me-not flowers for Esme; stripes, like rippled water, for me.

Underneath, we’ll be naked.

Nudity is perhaps the most exhilarating – and consequently the most daunting – aspect of this experience. One may already know the feeling of shedding clothes to spa in a German *therme* or a Turkish *hammam*, but in this rule-oriented society, the act of bathing naked comes with its share of observations.

Upon departing Tokyo, we had our Japanese interpreter, Mayumi, run (yet again) through the steps involved in communal bathing. “Don’t worry,” she reassured us, laughing. “Most important is to enjoy.”

The ryokan concept originated in the Edo period (1603–1868), to cater to travelers along Japan’s busy highways. The inns have since evolved into full-service – yet mostly independent, family-run – resorts of 10 to 20 rooms.

The pride of every ryokan is its baths. Artistically landscaped, carefully manicured outdoor areas complete with moss-covered rocks, little pagodas, waterfalls or wooden bridges form a picture of the season on which to gaze while sitting in a pool flowing with therapeutic natural *onsen* (hot spring) water.

The pools are segregated by gender; their entrances distinguished by blue (male) or red (female) curtains. I take off my slippers at the entrance to the dressing room, and place them neatly facing outward at the door. From my room, I’ve brought a small and a large towel. The smaller one, a modesty towel, is used as coverage on the walk between water features; the larger for drying afterwards.

In the dressing room, I place my *yukata* and large towel into an empty basket, and head into the baths. Before entering the pool, it’s mandatory to sit at a washing station and thoroughly cleanse the body. Once all excess soap has been removed, it’s time to bathe.

Since it is one of Japan’s most exclusive properties, the sight of another guest at Asaba is rare, so I sit alone and soak, enjoying the warm rock basin against my back and the distant song of frogs, massaging my feet soothingly on the pool’s pebbled bottom.

Flushed from our baths, Esme and I meet back in the room just prior to suppertime. We put on fresh *yukata*, perfumed with a light fragrance, reminiscent of how the ancient Japanese scented their clothes over incense burners.

Our attendant knocks and enters on her knees, sliding the door closed behind her. She presents us with the evening’s *kaiseki* menu, handwritten in Japanese calligraphy on thick cream paper flecked with gold. It’s accompanied by a drinks list containing an impressive selection of sake, shochu and French wines.

Kaiseki is a seasonal, local specialty-oriented, chef-selected menu of up to a dozen courses. Serving plates and bowls are specially chosen from a collection of no-two-alike ceramics and sleek lacquerware. Each dish is garnished with sprigs of seasonal flowers and leaves. It begins with an aperitif of local sake, follows with services of soup, sashimi, broiled fish, vegetables, meat, rice, house specialties and pickled produce, and ends... several hours later.

Our attendant produces the dishes one by one, proffering the next and

removing the previous in a series of graceful, efficient movements – the result of rigorous training in the art of service. Her presence is felt not a moment longer than necessary.

Afterwards we head downstairs to bathe again. The tubs have reversed for the genders so it’s our chance to relax anew in view of a different magical scene.

We return to find the dinner table cleared and plush futons set welcomingly on the *tatami*, a softly glowing lantern placed between them.

Under the Asaba family, who has run the inn for the past 500 years, tradition permeates every aspect of the business. But Hidekazu and Sawa, the chic young couple now at its helm, have also infused it with their worldly taste.

Their legacy renovation is a semi-open-air salon overlooking the koi pond on the west side, where guests can linger over a morning coffee or a pre-dinner drink. Daniel Buren paintings, Harry Bertoia chairs and crisp, all-white textured walls show how change is coming even to this bastion of traditional Japanese society.

We witness that evolution again later that day when we travel to Tobira Onsen Myojinkan, an 82-year-old ryokan 155 miles (250 kilometers) northwest in a dense forest of Nagano prefecture.

Aside from the traditional *kaiseki* meal, the inn serves alternate menus of modern Japanese and French cuisine, each offered in a different restaurant ambiance. We select the French, following our bathing ritual. Chef Masahiro Tanabe is certified in the Kushi Macrobiotics method. His molecular gastronomy surprises and delights throughout the eight-course meal, including a shrimp tartare topped with beet-juice caviar; a salmon filet coated white charcoal ash; and a cocotte of bamboo shoots, canola and foie gras. Midway through, he offers up a palate-cleansing compote of Tobira onsen water, watercress and grapefruit – their bitter and peppery notes playing perfectly off one another – before a finale of duck in rich framboise sauce with red daikon salad.

Chef Tanabe runs an organic farm nearby, from which the inn sources as much of their produce as possible – an initiative which has earned the inn membership in the prestigious Denmark-based Green Key program.

While at dinner, fourth-generation ryokan owner Tadamasu Saito pays us a visit. We share a laugh about our earlier shyness surrounding au naturel bathing and he provides some insight. For 1,500 years, the communal baths have been a place for open conversation – even networking. “We can speak honestly when we’re naked,” he says.

The final day takes us to our last stop: Gora Kadan, another of the country’s most luxurious ryokan, located high in the mountains 56 miles (90 kilometers) southeast of Tokyo.

The Japanese royal family who summered here in the early 1900s would scarcely recognize the place. Thirty years ago it was taken over by Miwako Fujimoto, the granddaughter of the former owner. Fujimoto felt deeply for the family business and left a career as an Italian interpreter in the fashion industry to prevent its sale.

Once in charge, she opted to move away from historic ryokan architecture and instead took a minimalist approach. The inn’s showpiece is the central walkway connecting the lobby and outdoor terrace. Entering this tunnel of towering wooden frames, in which the connecting glass window panels can be sealed off or thrown open, depending on the weather, is like stepping into a Zen temple.

In spite of its modern aesthetic, traditional details are rigorously upheld, from the water sprinkled daily on the footpath stones to cool them, to details like the wooden bridge ornaments placed outside guest rooms to indicate occupancy.

At Gora Kadan, two staff members are devoted solely to the daily pairing of floral arrangements in every room. Never flower bunches – considered ostentatious – but a single bloom conveying the season. Today, they celebrate *fuji* (wisteria): The draping purple flower cluster in our room, still covered in dew droplets, imbues a sense of coolness in spite of the summer heat. ➤



It's about the five senses, Fujimoto explains. "The feel of the hot water, the smell of the incense, the taste of the food," she says. "It's the essence of the Japanese culture. When our guests leave, they feel as though they've been to a different world."

Fujimoto is involved in every aspect of the operation, from marketing to designing the traditional clothing worn by staff – uniforms created to discreetly convey their role. She has also proved progressive in catering to foreign visitors. And while she alludes to the idea that not all international guests can fully appreciate every nuance of ryokan service, she is uncompromising in offering it. "Here you will find the dignity of Japan," she says simply.

Before dinner, Esme and I take a glass of Champagne on the terrace overlooking the mountains. Cut into the treeline at the top of the tallest peak is the character *dai* (meaning "big"). It's the launch point of the local fireworks festival. At the height of summer, this terrace will fill with young and old to mark the season with their oohs and ahhs as the *hanabi* – literally "fire flowers" – light up the valley.

We feel the rising coolness of the impending dusk and have even donned the *haori*, a padded coat that fits snugly over the yukata. All is silent, but for the occasional electric surge of cicadas, those wild winged insects who emerge to mate and die in the span of three weeks. Their call signals not just the waning summer, but also the brevity of this moment. In the presence of such a being on our last ryokan day, suddenly our projects, presentations and impending business travels lose all significance.

Another epic meal, another pillowy-soft sleep and it's time to head back to reality. But not before visiting the gift shop, a feature of all ryokan, where a selection of the finest local comestibles and beautiful objects curated by the owner can be purchased as souvenirs.

The regional specialty is Japanese plum, and we pick it up in all its incarnations: a bottle of plum wine, a jar of pickled plums, a package of rice crackers flavored with sour plum juice and sea salt. Esme selects a gift for our daughter: a tiny clear glass vase in which to place a single flower. We pause before the yukata, and our eyes meet in understanding. We'll buy two as a reminder of what it means to feel perfectly relaxed. Of what it means to both relish the season and feel it slipping away. As a uniform of leisure we cannot wait to wear again. ■

WATER WAYS

The indoor communal bath at Gora Kadan; (below) a private bath at Tobira Onsen Myojinkan.

JAPAN

STAY

Visit Asaba, Tobira Onsen Myojinkan and Gora Kadan individually or together as part of one itinerary. relaischateaux.com

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