

Japanese lessons



A recent trip to Japan afforded the opportunity to stay as a guest in Japanese ryokan hotels.

These hotels provide the guest with a very different hotel experience – one that has been enjoyed by travellers for several centuries.

On arrival, guests enter a large lobby where luggage and wet clothing is taken away, outdoor shoes are removed and replaced with slippers. After check-in, guests are escorted to their rooms.

The entrance door to the bedroom opens onto a small hall where 'common area' slippers are removed and replaced with a 'bedroom pair'. Sliding doors lead to the guest's lounge – a space that may only have a low table and always-on tea maker as furniture.

All cupboards are hidden behind sliding doors, as is the small private bathroom, which usually contains a plunge bath, wall-hung shower, basin and toilet. European visitors will be intrigued by the heated toilet seats that are common in Japan and some other Asian countries.

There is yet another pair of slippers for exclusive use in the bathroom.

Rectangular tatami mats, twice as long as they are wide and usually laid in a 'T' shape, cover the floor. These mats are traditionally made of rice straw with a covering of woven soft rush straw. Cotton yakatas, a casual form of kimono to be worn by the guest indoors and traditionally after bathing, are usually found in one of the cupboards.

Most ryokan bundle the price of dinner and breakfast with the room rate. Meals are generally served in a communal room with the times of sittings predefined but most will also serve meals in guests' rooms. Guests often go to the restaurant dressed in their yakata and slippers. They sit at low tables and, when individual courses are served, staff will kneel prior to placing the dishes on the table.

The ryokans we stayed at offered food and service of the very highest standard. Our kaiseki dinners typically included all or most of the following.

- Sakizuke: an appetizer similar to the French amuse-bouche
- Hassun: the second course, which sets the seasonal theme; typically one kind of sushi and several smaller side dishes
- Mukozuke: a sliced dish of seasonal sashimi
- Takiawase: vegetables served with meat, fish or tofu; the ingredients are simmered separately
- Futamono: a 'lidded dish', typically soup.
- Yakimono: broiled seasonal fish
- Su-zakana: a small dish used to clean the palate, such as vegetables in vinegar
- Naka-choko: a palate-cleanser such as a light acidic soup
- Shiizakana: a substantial dish, such as a hot pot
- Gohan: a rice dish made with seasonal ingredients
- Ko no mono: seasonal pickled vegetables
- Tome-wan: a miso-based or vegetable soup served with rice
- Mizumono: a seasonal dessert - fruit, confection, ice cream or cake.

For each dish to be enjoyed at the proper temperature, we were continually reminded to be punctual for meals.

While guests are at breakfast or dinner, hotel staff transform the bedroom into or from a lounge and vice versa. The futons and pillows are stored away or laid out on the tatami mats and the table positioned for day or night-time use.

Lessons learned

What can a non-Japanese hotel operator learn and apply from such an experience? I believe it is the importance of the basics of hospitality.

Because hotel management focus on all aspects (the physical ambience, the touch and feel of surfaces, the very personal levels of service that are achieved one-on-one between each member of the service delivery team and guests, the return from eating to a serviced room, etc.), guests feel at home and are able relax and recharge.

There is also something to learn for hotels whose offer includes breakfast and dinner - an offer that explicitly looks after all the guests' needs and does not assume that others can feed and entertain guests better than they can. Done well, and perhaps it only applies when it can be done well, a full-board offer can create a positive guest experience in a way that cannot be achieved with a room-only or a bed-and-breakfast offer.

Most importantly is the positive impact that a smiling ever-helpful group of hotel staff offering traditional high levels of service will have on the guest. A happy workforce focused on delivering each and every element of the guest experience will lead to a happy guest – and we should not forget this.

Perhaps as hotel brands evolve, some of these elements of traditional service so widely in evidence in Japan can be better incorporated into 21st century hotels elsewhere in the world.

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