



Ryokans of Japan

Nick Coates, Audley's Asia Programme Manager, tells of his passion for Japan's traditional inns.

My favourite places to stay in Japan have no restaurants, no lobby, no bellmen and no fitness or business centres.

You are hardly aware of any modern convenience as you step in to the ryokans of yesteryear, traditional Japanese houses, where you are attended to by staff whose overriding mission is to care for you and seemingly you alone. This is hospitality the Japanese way, tended to with dignity and warmth. There are no rough edges or displays of grandeur, only silence, tranquillity and total peace.

I recently had the opportunity to step in to the serenity of two such historic ryokan. These inns are not

'contracted' by the larger tour operators, either here or in Japan, the prospect of such mass tourism fills the discerning owners with horror. This is the traditional Japan of old, business being conducted between trusted colleagues, regular guests and a handful of new friends.

The Tawaraya in Kyoto was first established by the Okazaki family in the first decade of 18th Century, it was originally intended to be an overnight base for textile merchants. Since then it has been managed by the same family, with the present owner, Mrs Okazaki Satow, the 11th generation keeper of what is now one of the most prestigious ryokan anywhere in Japan. Guests sleep on futon bedding spread on Tatami mat, thick springy floor matting, and are served by smiling maidservants in neat kimonos, who flutter down corridors in a Japanese wonderland of sliding doors and private gardens. Although the Tawaraya has (somewhat apologetically) televisions in every room, it was the visitors book alone that was my entertainment for the first evening. More recent guests include Arthur Miller, Robert

Travel File

Discover the enchanting world of classical Japan through its most traditional and exclusive accommodation, the ryokan. The guideline price for the tour is £2,900 per person on a twin share basis.



ABOVE: (TOP) A ROOM AT TAWARAYA RYOKAN, KYOTO, (BOTTOM LEFT) A BUDDHIST MONK, KYOTO, (BOTTOM RIGHT) WAKANA RYOKAN, TOKYO

Oppenheimer, Marlon Brando, Jean Paul Sartre, Walter Cronkite, Alfred Hitchcock, Peter Ustinov, Barbara Streisand and Rudolph Nureyev.

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Although possibly the finest example, the Tawaraya is one ryokan among many in Kyoto, the ancient capital. Several days dedicated searching revealed a selected handful of enchanting properties that Audley can now use. Some are historic and others fine examples of a modern interpretation of these traditional inns, such as the Hatanaka which Audley featured recently on the BBC 'Holiday' programme. However in Tokyo, Japan's brash new face, my search was altogether tougher. Small traditional inns? Nothing, said the

brochures and my travel industry friends and colleagues.

Right in the centre of the neon city, in the unvisited but beautiful district of Kagurazaka, down little side streets where progress had been left behind, all dotted with traditional restaurants, I found the Wakana ryokan. Basic, but spotlessly clean, behind an enchanting entrance are only five rooms, each with low tables on the tatami with sunken pits to dangle your feet (perfect for the visitor not used to sitting cross-legged on the floor). Known locally as a writer's retreat since the Meiji period, the inn is the base of Yoji Yamada, author of the famous 'Tora-San' stories, the world's longest running movie series. However, he is one of the few writers to still work at the Wakana. "They all prefer modern hotels and word processors now" says the owner, Mrs Wada. Which is one of the reasons she is willing to open her doors to welcome Audley guests.

Ryokans are accommodation for accommodation's sake. Sheer indulgence, no trip to Japan would be complete without a stay in a ryokan.



BATHROOM AT TAWARAYA RYOKAN, KYOTO

15-day itinerary

- Day 1:** Fly to Tokyo. Overnight on the aircraft.
- Day 2:** Arrive in Tokyo and transfer to the Wakana Ryokan.
- Day 3:** Enjoy a full day city tour of Tokyo. Wakana Ryokan.
- Day 4:** Take a full day tour to Nikko. Wakana Ryokan.
- Day 5:** A full day at leisure to explore Tokyo. Wakana Ryokan.
- Day 6:** Take a coach to Mt Fuji and a cruise on the lake in Hakone. Kowaki-en Hotel Hakone.
- Day 7:** After a morning enjoying the hot spring facilities at your hotel take a bullet train to Takayama, via Nagoya. Nagase Ryokan.
- Day 8:** A full day to explore the old town. Nagase Ryokan.
- Day 9:** Take the train onward to Kyoto and have the remainder of the day at leisure. Tawaraya Ryokan.
- Day 10:** A full day city tour of Kyoto. Tawaraya Ryokan.
- Day 11:** The morning at leisure before taking an excursion to Nara. Tawaraya Ryokan.
- Day 12:** A full day at leisure in Kyoto. Tawaraya Ryokan.
- Day 13:** Take the bullet train to Hiroshima and have the day to explore the peace park and museum, before the short crossing to Miyajima Island. Kamefuku Hotel.
- Day 14:** A morning at leisure before crossing back to the mainland and catching the train back to Osaka. ANA Hotel.
- Day 15:** Fly back to the UK.

To discuss this itinerary and other options please call our Japan specialists on 01869 276 217.