

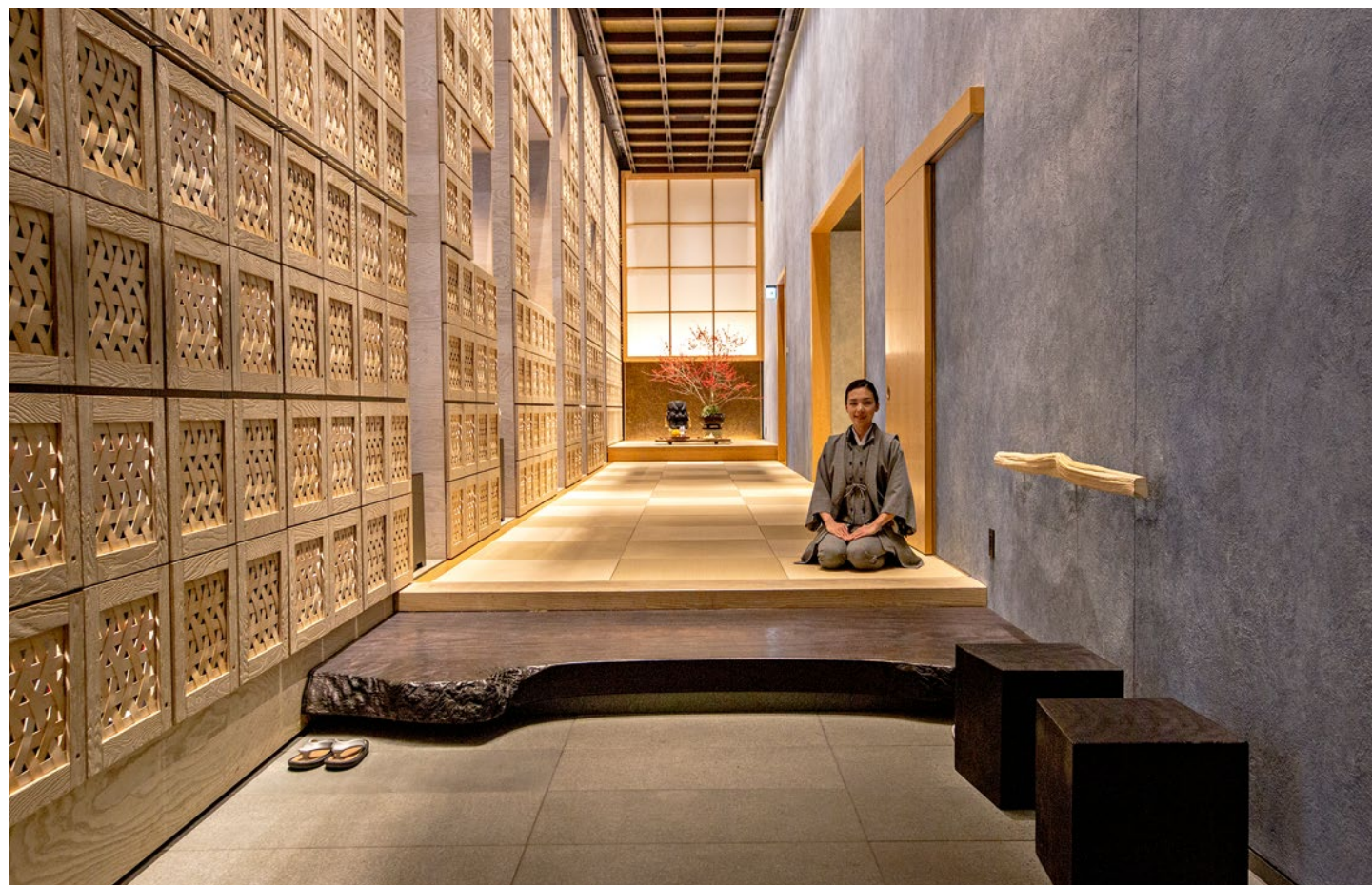
L O S T

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T I M E

EDWINA HART TAKES A TRIP THROUGH
JAPAN TO FIND THE BEST WAYS TO
CONNECT WITH THIS ANCIENT CULTURE

The view of Mount Fuji
from Hoshinoya Fuji.

CONNECT



Australians have long loved Japan as a ski destination, but more recently it's topping the list for those wanting to immerse themselves in its culture, whether that's soaking in an onsen, eating sashimi in a laneway or hiking its many peaks. Here are some of the varied ways you can ensure you come home feeling like you truly connected with this intriguing nation.

TRADITIONAL TAKE

Tokyo is the world's largest city, with a population of more than 37 million residents. There's a frenetic pace to the ultra-modern metropolis famous for its futuristic backdrop of bright lights, sci-fi streetscapes and soaring skyscrapers. But if you look a little deeper, you'll find that Tokyo's past and present perfectly co-exist. In Tokyo's Otemachi financial district, Hoshinoya Tokyo (hoshinoya.com) was the first of its kind when the luxury tower *ryokan* (Japanese inn) opened several years ago. Housed in a 17-storey skyscraper, it's a masterpiece of traditional craftsmanship rendered in a contemporary style. Step through a doorway carved from a single piece of cypress, and when you enter the tatami-softened hallway, you'll feel a world away from the neon-lit signs of Tokyo. Here, age-old traditions are preserved

and guests are given a chance to connect with the rich Japanese culture. For starters, it's customary to slip off your shoes, which are conveniently kept in bamboo-lattice lockers of the *genkan* entrance. *Omotenashi* (Japanese hospitality) is the cornerstone of the ryokan experience. A personalised check-in takes place in the hushed setting of the *ochanoma* – a central communal lounge exclusive to guests staying in one of the six rooms on that floor. Throughout, the decor comprises soft tatami matted floors, shoji screens and ikebana flower arrangements. Guest rooms feature Japanese design elements such as sliding paper screens, bamboo closets and plush futon-style beds. Elegant kimonos are laid out and you are encouraged to wear them around the premises, or even for strolling to the nearby Imperial Palace. After a day of sightseeing, try the popular Japanese pastime of communal bathing in an onsen. Quite remarkably, the hotel's very own rooftop baths are flowing with natural hot spring water piped from 1,500 metres beneath the city while the main lobby on the second floor hosts a traditional tea ceremony led daily by a teamaster. In the evenings, stop by for a sake tasting and watch a classic Grand Kagura performance. The exclusive basement restaurant is guests-only. Award-winning Executive Chef Noriyuki Hamada showcases Nippon cuisine, with an innovative take on Japanese and French cooking.

AT ONE WITH NATURE

The majestic Mount Fuji is Japan's most legendary mountain. The iconic snow-capped volcano has long been admired by artists and honoured as a sacred site since ancient times. Those wanting to get out in nature and breathe in the fresh mountain air should spend some time exploring the scenic foothills and serene lakeside locations around Fujisan (as it's known in Japanese). When it's time to rest, head to Hoshinoya Fuji (hoshinoya.com), Japan's first five-star glamping resort set on a slope overlooking Lake Kawaguchi. The cube-style cabins, half-hidden amongst red pines, are suitably sophisticated. Every detail, from the minimalist design to the expansive glass wall at the end of the cabin, has been considered to accentuate the uninterrupted views of Mount Fuji. Wake up to one of Japan's best views across a colourful sea of cherry, ginkgo and maple trees. Slide out onto the balcony furnished with a sunken sofa and heated blankets in the colder months. This is the ultimate spot for a hearty breakfast, delivered in a wooden tackle box favoured by local fisherman. The resort's glamping masters run a host of outdoor activities including chopping wood, hiking in the forest, kayaking on the glass-like Lake Kawaguchi, roasting marshmallows around a crackling bonfire and cooking your own dinner outdoors with ingredients foraged from the woodlands.



Above: The understated greeting at Hoshinoya Tokyo. Opposite: Minimalist cabins face a lake at Hoshinoya Fuji.

ART ADMIRERS

Naoshima is a tiny, remote island in Japan's Seto Inland Sea that was once home to a quiet fishing community. Nowadays it's the location of the famous Benesse Art Site (benesse-artsite.jp), a project that transformed Naoshima into a destination for world-class art museums and installations. Art-lovers spend their days ferry-hopping between exhibitions and enjoying sunny coastal walks scattered with outdoor installations such as Yayoi Kusama's iconic yellow pumpkin perched on the end of a pier. Benesse House is an architectural work by Pritzker prize-winning architect Tadao Ando within Benesse Art Site. The complex is both a hotel and a modern art museum seamlessly built into the hillside. Since opening in 1992, Ando has designed additional accommodation options and there are now 65 guestrooms across four buildings called Oval, Museum, Park and Beach. Each has a single original artwork. The most covetable stay on Naoshima is at Oval. These six guestrooms, only accessible by a private monorail from the museum, boast floor-to-ceiling windows with sweeping views over the sea. The Terrace Restaurant serves a degustation menu for dinner that's so beautifully presented it's an artwork itself.



Left: Yayoi Kusama's iconic yellow pumpkin on Naoshima. Above: The tranquil riverside setting of Asaba Ryokan.



CULTURE AND CUISINE

Most Tokyoites escape to onsen towns in the countryside to rejuvenate in baths rich in therapeutic minerals. Visiting a typical onsen is a wonderful way to dip your toes into Japanese culture. The small town of Shuzenji is one of the best known onsen resorts on the Izu Peninsula, popular with tourists from all over the country. Asaba Ryokan (asaba-ryokan.com), secreted away along the Katsura River, has a history that dates back more than 500 years to when it was a lodging for the Buddhist monks of the nearby Shuzenji Temple. The 15th-century family-run inn sits on a tranquil lake fringed by lush greenery. Expect timeless Japanese architecture modernised with some mid-century furnishings, such as the Harry Bertoia

chairs in the lakeside lounge. All 17 rooms have tatami mat floors, sliding paper screens and cloud-soft futons prepared by staff each night. Embrace the relaxing routine of ryokan life – savour a cup of matcha, feed the koi in the pond and wrap yourself in the cotton *yukata* (a summery kimono). There are communal bathing areas to enjoy the hot spring water – soak in the pine-scented indoor tubs, or in a peaceful outdoor bath surrounded by a bamboo forest. Asaba Ryokan is part of the Relais & Châteaux collection, so the first-class food is a true highlight of any stay. The kaiseki banquet is an elaborate multi-course dinner served in-room by attentive kimono-clad staff. There's a procession of exquisitely presented small dishes, including fresh sashimi, grilled meats, delicately fried tempura and steaming hotpots.



Kinkaku-ji, otherwise known as the Golden Pavilion, sits over a mirror-like pond.

LIVING LIKE A LOCAL

Kyoto is the embodiment of Old Japan. For more than a thousand years the city was the country's Imperial capital. Kyoto is renowned for its golden temples, Shinto shrines, Zen gardens and teahouses strung along the historic streets of the geisha quarter. For those looking to immerse themselves into local life, Shiki Juraku (shikijuraku.com) is a boutique hotel located along a quiet residential street on the west side of Kyoto Imperial Palace. This is a network of historic *machiya* (traditional wooden townhouses) has been converted into 10 hotel rooms with a communal courtyard, reception, salon and garden. The location, away from the tourist traffic of central Kyoto, offers a true local experience with small neighbourhood bakeries, soba noodle shops and cocktail bars all within walking distance. The bespoke bronze front gate leads to a row of two-level townhouses, each unique in both design and layout. A stay here feels as though you've discovered a home away from home. Rooms have their own genkan entrance, lower-level living area and a carefully curated aesthetic – moody dark timber, shoji screens and a mix of mid-century and vintage furniture. The striking flower arrangements are by the talented Hayato Nishiyama. For a local adventure, catch the bus to admire the windows of his little florist shop, Mitate and spend an afternoon sipping tea at Stardust, the cosy cafe next door.



The transformed townhouses of Kyoto's Shiki Juraku.



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