



# Timeless hospitality

Benjamin Freeland discovers the true essence of Japan's traditional inns.

*The practice of serving tea to guests as a gesture of hospitality is deeply rooted in the Japanese culture.*





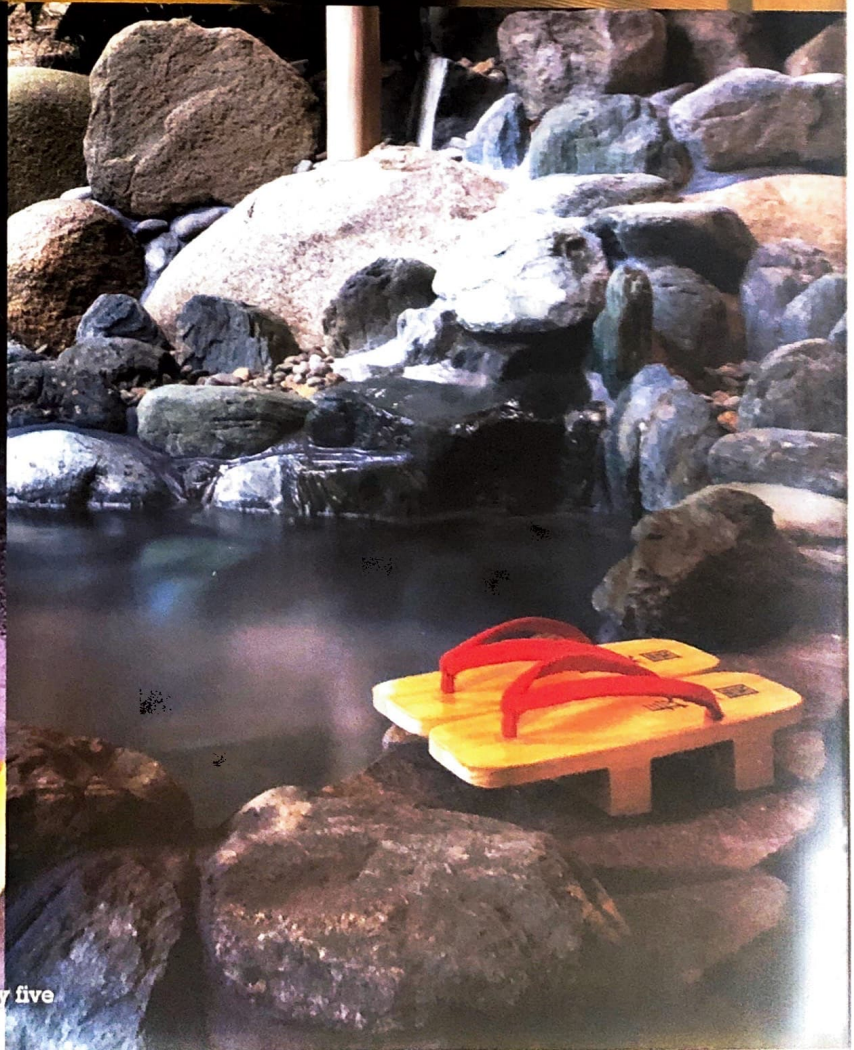
*Above: A beautifully landscaped garden at the old Tamatsukuri Onsen in Matsue City, Shimane Prefecture. Opposite page, clockwise from top: A room with a view on one of the gardens of Kansuiro Ryokan; a private outdoor bath at Tamatsukuri Onsen; a traditional meal served at Gora Kada in the Hakone Onsen area.*

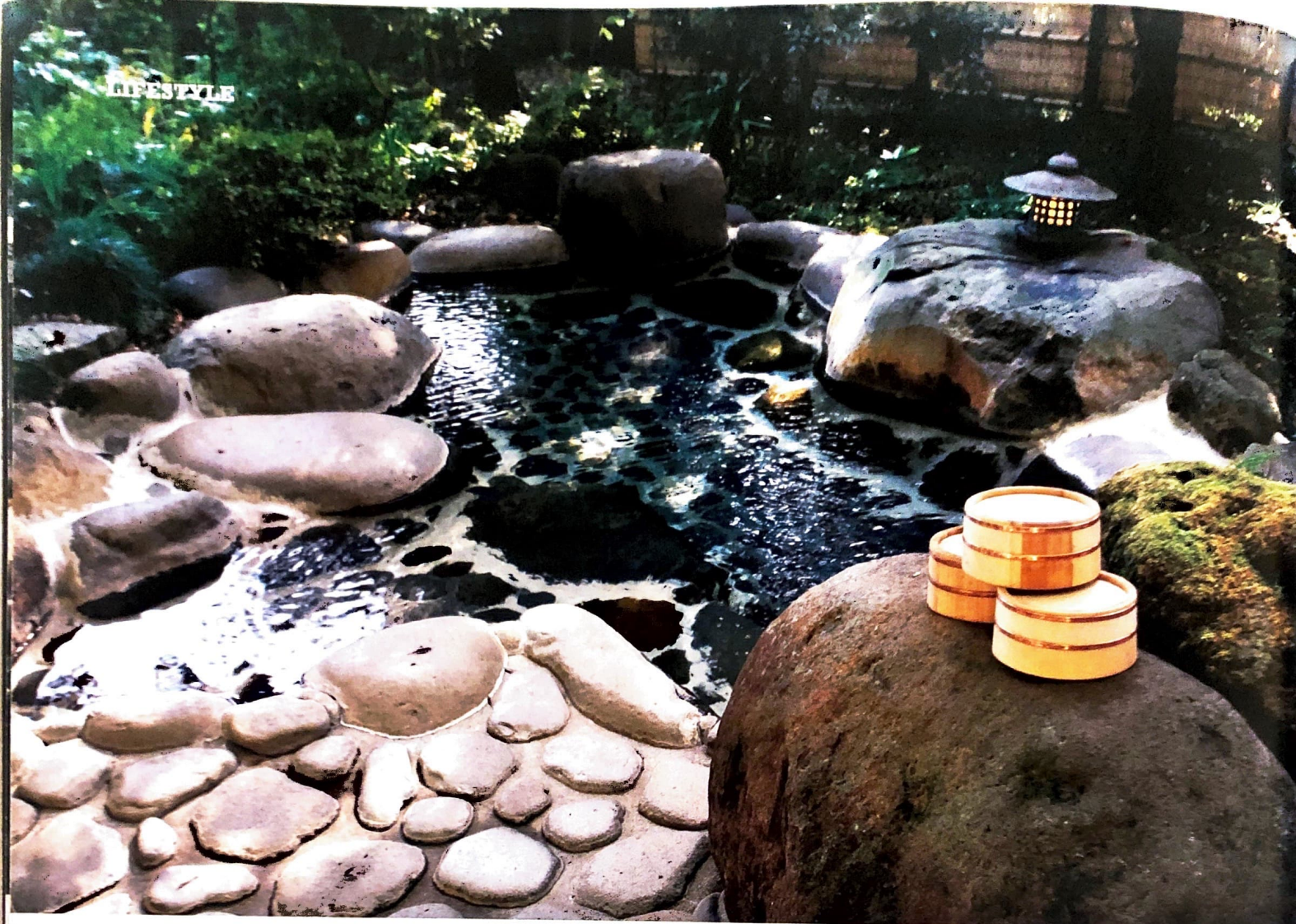
Luxury lodgings the world over can essentially be divided into two categories. The first seeks to offer a universally recognisable product with a global standard of service with little – if any – relation to the geographic location of the hotel in question. The second category seeks to exemplify the most feted geographic and cultural features of their locations, as exemplified by Canada's grand old railway hotels, the holiday cottages of the Scottish Highlands and Japan's contribution to the world of fine lodging, the iconic *ryokan*. While Japan boasts innumerable world-class western-style hotels, it is often said that no trip to the country is complete without a stay at a traditional *ryokan* or, for a truly complete experience, a sampling of various *ryokan* in various regions. The popular Japanese proverb: "Go ni itte wa, go ni shitagae," which translates to: "When in a village, do as the villagers do", applies nowhere better than to the *ryokan*. While foreign guests can expect to be welcomed with the warmest of hospitality, the expectation that guests eat, sleep and act Japanese is an unspoken rule in a culture where unspoken rules abound.

*Ryokan* (literally translates as "travel lodge") are products of the early Edo-period (1600-1868), catering at that time to travellers along the country's pre-modern highway network and, most importantly, to the feudal lords who were required by law to split their time between their rural domains and the capital of Edo (modern-day Tokyo). As a result of this heritage, *ryokan*

are most numerous in small centres that served as checkpoints on the old road network, many of which, like Hakone and Nikko, are among the country's most popular domestic tourist destinations. Today, there are some 55,000 *ryokan* in Japan covering the medium- and high-range budget spectrums (rooms range from ¥6,000 to ¥80,000). Virtually all *ryokan* feature traditional Japanese-style rooms with *tatami* flooring, *futon* bedding and *yukata* robes for guests. Japanese-style breakfasts and dinners are generally served in the guestrooms. A great many offer *onsen* (hot spring) baths, which are generally gender-segregated, although private baths are often available. Beyond these basic lines, however, *ryokan* tend to be thoroughly distinctive, with amenities, food and focal points varying considerably from region to region, reflecting local culture, history and geography, all beckoning with the promise of a unique local experience.

While *ryokan* tend to be thin on the ground in Japan's major metropolitan centres, Kyoto, the country's ancient imperial capital and cultural heart, is a notable exception to this rule. The traditional aesthetic of this city of gardens, temples and genteel manners defines the luxury *ryokan* experience in the city and nowhere more splendidly than at Kyoto's most celebrated inn, the Hiiragiya. Built in the heart of the old capital in 1818 and serving as a *ryokan* since 1861, the Hiiragiya has since been patronised by countless notable guests ranging from Charlie Chaplin to





Top: An inviting outdoor hot spring bath awaits guests at Arai Ryokan. Above: A kimono-clad Japanese woman crosses over the wooden bridge at Arai Ryokan.

members of the Japanese royal family. In classic Kyoto fashion, the Hiiragiya embodies simple, understated beauty featuring wood, bamboo, rice paper and stone. Immaculate design provides a view of the establishment's beautifully manicured gardens from virtually every room. In the sublime eastern borough of Higashiyama – the site of many of Kyoto's most famous tourist attractions – is the Yachiyo Ryokan. This century-old ryokan is set along the footpath to Nanzenji Temple. While similarly renowned for its classic Kyoto design, the Yachiyo's main calling card is its exquisite gardens, designed by legendary turn-of-the-

century landscape gardener Jihei Ogawa – the master gardener credited for inventing the now prevalent *chisen-sansui* (land and water) style of Japanese garden. Guests here can enjoy sumptuous Kyoto *kaiseki* (multi-course) dining while overlooking a breathtaking view of the master's handiwork.

While aesthetics may define the charm of Kyoto's upper-echelon lodgings, the ryokan that proliferate in Japan's rural mountainous settings tend to draw crowds on the basis of their location and the prospect of a soothing bath in a hot spring, with the most successful ones succeeding in combining these two elements. The very best also combine the above with a certain historical verve. One such establishment is the Arai Ryokan – the pride and joy of Shuzenji Town in Izu Peninsula since its construction in 1872. A certified National Property since 1998, the Arai has long served as a haven for artistic figures, notably author Akutagawa Ryunosuke and painter Yokoyama Taikan (some of whose works are on display at the establishment) and remains enormously popular, thanks to its sumptuous open-air hot spring baths from which guests can savour the stunning views of the surrounding forests and the adjacent Katsura River. Another enticing option is Hakone's 400-year-old Kansui Ryokan, also a certified National Property and quite possibly the oldest continually operating ryokan in Japan. A long time favourite of shoguns, poets, prime ministers and



*Above: A genuine runner-drawn rickshaw sits outside the entrance of the Sadachiyo Ryokan.*

sumo wrestlers, the Kansuiro, in addition to its obvious historical appeal, offers hot springs rich in minerals conducive to healthy skin, which also help alleviate neuralgia or rheumatic ailments, plus fine cuisine all in an extraordinary setting with a spectacular view of Mount Fuji and Lake Ashi.

While ryokan are generally imagined to be exclusive and have somewhat austere settings, this is by no means the rule. To the north of Tokyo in the mountainous refuge of Nikko, home of the magnificent Toshogu Shrine and several other UNESCO World Heritage sites, is the lengthily-named Honke Bankyu Bankyu Ryokan. Built in 1666 and currently managed by a 25th generation

descendent of the famous Taira family – a samurai clan who fled Kyoto following a military defeat in 1183 – the Bankyu combines luxury lodgings with a rustic medieval atmosphere, welcoming guests with the sound of a gong and treating them to regional delicacies such as wild boar, pheasant and river fish, cooked in a traditional sunken hearth (*irori*). Built atop the 820-year-old Yunishigawa Onsen, the Bankyu also features outdoor baths overlooking Nikko's breathtaking forest scenery. Where the Bankyu offers warrioressque hospitality, the Sadachiyo Ryokan – one of Tokyo's few longstanding ryokan – dishes up Edo-style glitter and garishness. Located in Asakusa in the heart of old Edo, the 61-year-old Sadachiyo, while a relative newcomer among ryokan, is built along classic Edo-period lines, and even features a genuine runner-drawn rickshaw for tours of the surrounding area. In a manner befitting a neighbourhood once synonymous with traditional arts and entertainment, the Sadachiyo features an extensive array of culture courses for guests including traditional music, dance and storytelling performances provided with background information (albeit in Japanese), as well as grand banquet dinner spreads akin to those that Edo's wealthy merchants once enjoyed.

A true Japanese icon, the country's countless ryokan are a living, breathing cultural heritage, a holdover from an era of travel by foot and horse-drawn carriage. While many of Japan's ancient traditions appear threatened by the tide of westernisation, this one appears to be as vital as ever. Moreover, with the Japanese government's recent campaign to bolster the country's tourist sector (both foreign and domestic) under the slogan: "Kanko rikkoku" ("Country based on tourism"), the future of Japan's bastions of old-style hospitality looks very bright indeed. With its juxtaposition of genteel hospitality and adherence to form and custom, ryokan are an embodiment of Japanese society and perfect places to acquaint oneself with the minutiae of the country's rich traditional culture. ■

#### **Arai Ryokan/Izu-Shuzenji Onsen**

970 Shuzenji, Izu City  
Shizuoka Pref.  
Tel: (81) 558 72 2007  
Fax: (81) 558 72 5119  
[www.arairyokan.net/english](http://www.arairyokan.net/english)

#### **Yachiyo Ryokan**

34 Nanzenji Fukuji-cho  
Sakyo-ku, Kyoto City  
Kyoto Pref.  
Tel: (81) 75 771 4148  
Fax: (81) 75 771 4140  
[www.ryokan-yachiyo.com/top/english/top.html](http://www.ryokan-yachiyo.com/top/english/top.html)

#### **Hiiragiya Ryokan**

Fuyacho Anekoji-agaru  
Nakahakusancho, Nakagyo-ku,  
Kyoto City, Kyoto Pref. 604-8094  
Tel: (81) 75 221 1136  
Fax: (81) 75 221 1139  
[www.hiiragiya.co.jp/en](http://www.hiiragiya.co.jp/en)

#### **Sadachiyo Ryokan**

2-20-1 Asakusa, Taito-ku  
Tokyo 111-0032  
Tel: (81) 03 3842 6431  
Fax: (81) 3842 6433  
[www.sadachiyo.co.jp/e/eindex.html](http://www.sadachiyo.co.jp/e/eindex.html)

#### **Kansuiro Ryokan**

88 Tonosawa, Hakone-machi  
Ashigara-Shimogun  
Kanagawa Pref. 250-0315  
Tel: (81) 460 85 5511  
Fax: (81) 460 85 5856  
[www.kansuiro.co.jp/eng](http://www.kansuiro.co.jp/eng)

#### **Honke Bankyu Bankyu Ryokan**

749 Yunishigawa Onsen  
Nikko City, Tochigi Pref. 321-2601  
Tel: (81) 288 98 0011  
Fax: (81) 288 98 0666  
[www.bankyu.co.jp/en](http://www.bankyu.co.jp/en)