

TRAVEL

Behind closed doors in Japan

You can make a knife with a samurai sword-maker and have tea with a monk – if you're with the right people. Lisa Grainger explores Japan



Serene scene: the Silver Pavilion and gardens in Kyoto

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SALVA LÓPEZ

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Saturday September 08 2018, 12.01 am BST, The Times

As we approach a discreet entrance on a cobbled street, my translator suddenly stops. “I’m sorry,” she says, “but I have guided people for more than 20 years, and I’ve never been allowed inside before. This is something I want to remember.”

For hundreds of years, Kyoto's historic Ichiriki teahouse, immortalised by Arthur Golden in his book *Memoirs of a Geisha*, has been off-limits to everyone but Japan's elite. That I'm permitted into its ancient lamplit spaces is thanks to the skills of one woman: Naomi Mano.

The 46-year-old, fabulously groomed founder of the concierge company Luxurique not only creates individual packages for travellers, but has also been commissioned by the Japanese government to create VIP packages for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. In this conventional society, still governed by strict rules and hierarchy, access to rarefied experiences depends on who you know, and Mano's credentials couldn't be more impeccable. Her aristocratic mother is a descendant of a 17th-century shogun from the Shimazu sect and her father, the former president of Nissan in Hawaii, introduced the emperor to his future wife (on a tennis court). Whether you want to meet a sumo wrestler or an artist, a Shinto priest or a whisky-maker, Mano has a contact, or knows someone who does.

It was a colleague of her father's who had agreed to take me into the Ichiriki teahouse - a sort of Japanese version of the Garrick Club, without the tweed. Here, for two hours, the two of us sat companionably: me wide-eyed at the time warp I was experiencing, and him relishing the three beautiful geishas before him, pouring him sake and singing and dancing in the lamplight, as their ancestors did for his father and grandfather.



Young women wearing traditional dress

At midnight, as he accompanied me home through cobbled streets hung with red tasselled lamps, I asked why a 21st-century woman might want to be a geisha. "The same reason as women want to be celebrities the world over," he laughed. "Love, power, money, fame. There might be fewer now than there were in their heyday, in the 1930s, but they're still revered.

Girls would still love to be one; men still dream of being with one.” And wives? “Mmmm. They put up with them.” As if to prove the universal desirability of the white-faced women, he pointed to a street sign. “No eating on the street,” it said. “No loitering. No touching geisha.”

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My other experiences on a journey into the hidden heart of Japan were more hands-on - from whisking matcha tea with monks to having an eight-course lunch cooked just for me by the leading chef Motoi Kurisu. The most tranquil, perhaps, was my journey - the first by a western journalist - aboard Guntu, the country's first small luxury cruiser.

Launched in October by a shipping magnate to take guests around the Seto Inland Sea, an island-sprinkled inlet off the coast, Guntu has interiors that look more like a contemporary ryokan, or inn, than a ship. Designed by the architect Yasushi Horibe, who creates buildings that “frame” nature, its double decks house 19 exquisitely curated wooden, light-filled cabins, each with a living room and balcony, floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors and, best of all in the suites, an outdoor bathtub. Paying minute attention to detail is part of the Japanese DNA, and on Guntu every inch has been carefully considered, from the minimalist furniture and sculptural ikebana flower arrangements to the Nikon binoculars and iPads in every cabin.



All aboard: the 19-cabin luxury cruiser Guntu tours the Seto Inland Sea

When it comes to what you do when, though, there are few rules; guests (every one, on my trip, pristinely dressed Japanese) can do pretty much what they want, when they want. Over three days, I not only ate sushi made with fish caught a couple of hours earlier by fishermen I met, and kobe beef so tender I could cut it with a chopstick, but also explored island shrines in a smart wooden tender, tasted fine whiskies curated by the sommelier and soaked in a large wooden hot tub bobbing with fresh lemons (a first), watching enormous ships and forested islands pass by.

Mostly, though, I sat on the handsome wooden deck, soaking in the simple wabi-sabi feeling of the boat. This intrinsically Japanese aesthetic conflates simple shapes and natural, time-worn materials in a way designed to highlight the fragile beauty of nature - and therefore, the thought goes, life. The more I recognised the aesthetic, the more I appreciated it, particularly in my next stopoff, the ultra-urban Aman Tokyo. It was here too that I felt the thrilling clash of western and eastern cultures that defines modern Japan: the sight, beside an indoor rock garden in a soaring white-glass atrium, of two pinstripe-suited men bowing to each other, like ancient shoguns; a group of twentysomething women, head to toe in Chanel and Dior, slurping noodles from porcelain bowls; a Mercedes sportscar disgorging a woman wearing a kimono, white socks and flip-flops. I also got to experience one of the country's most revered arts. Calligraphy is so highly respected that, in many homes, it is the only art on display. The hotel arranged for me to spend two blissful hours at the Carré Moji gallery trying (and failing) to emulate the skills of Kei Shimizu, one of Japan's foremost calligraphers.



The minimalist deck of Guntu

After the urban thrills of the Aman Tokyo, with its elegant bento-box breakfasts and its stone hot tubs with views over the neon-lit city, staying in two machiya, or historical homes, in Kyoto couldn't have been more different. More than 90 per cent of Japan's population of 127 million live in cities, so many of the ancient buildings have made way for high-rises. The Hosoo Residence and Shimaya Stays house are rare exceptions.

Set in a residential alley close to the Imperial Palace and a short drive from the pretty Silver Pavilion, the century-old Hosoo Residence is owned by an aristocratic family who have made silk obi belts for emperors since 1688. Their eye for detail was more than evident throughout the house, from its striped concrete and terracotta walls and its bespoke kitchen with high-tech gizmos to its architectural bathroom and sculpted black terrazzo bathtub. It was from these pristine surroundings, and the equally characterful, but less designer Shimaya Stays, that my petite, Chanel-clad guide, Kayo Mameta, drove me to experience a variety of ancient crafts. One day she took me to the industrial workshop of one of Japan's most esteemed samurai sword-makers where, in a furnace heated to 1,000C, I made my own knife. She showed me round the 119-year-old

private Tairyu Sanso garden and villa, with its collection of silk wall-hangings. I screenprinted fabric and bought an antique kimono, made sushi and learnt how to burn incense at the charming Hoshinoya Kyoto hotel. And finally, after a week of cultural immersion, I decompressed for 24 hours in the country's first glamping hotel.

While the Japanese set aside a great deal of spare time to appreciate nature, they aren't fans of insects, dirt or shared bathrooms at campsites. Which is why the hotel group Hoshinoya created a retreat near Mount Fuji, with 40 futuristic square concrete pods in which guests can collapse, having spent days log-chopping, fish-smoking and sitting by a bonfire sipping cornflower tea (more delicious than it sounds).



The Hoshinoya glamping retreat near Mount Fuji

The polished glampsite was a pretty perfect place to end my journey. Not only because its terraces gave me time to sit and watch leaves fall and butterflies flit, but also because its staff gave me yet another reason to adore the Japanese. The country might be one of the most technically advanced on Earth, and its cities among the most crowded, but its ancient traditions of omotenashi, or hospitality, are so strong that when I left I felt distinctly more cosseted and Zen-like than when I'd arrived.

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Oddly for me, I bought very little on this trip. I came back instead with the ultimate souvenirs: a head full of quintessential Japanese experiences, and a contact like no other in Naomi Mano.

Luxurique (luxurique.com) can organise a ten-day bespoke trip, with three nights full-board on Guntu, two nights at the Aman Tokyo, one night at the Hosoo Residence and three nights at Shimaya Stays (room only), bullet trains between Hiroshima, Kyoto and Tokyo, activities and a guide from £12,000 per person. Return flights from London Heathrow to Hiroshima via Tokyo Haneda with All Nippon Airways (ana.co.jp, 0808 2346842) cost £3,511 in business class and £1,611 in premium economy

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