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Just Back From... Japan



Tokyo may be famous for having the most *Michelin* stars of any city, but the real thrill of dining here to me lies not in securing the right reservation, but in finding sublime food in all sorts of unexpected places and humble settings. On a recent visit to Japan, I slurped ramen with a thick, rich broth at a hole-in-the-wall restaurant with a doorway you had to duck into, ate melt-in-your-mouth *toro* tuna at a nondescript stall at the Tsukiji Fish Market and savored an exquisitely prepared *kaiseki* feast at what looked like a simple inn.

My most memorable meal was in Kyoto at a plain, ten-seat counter where the chef, known as *Taisho* ("the General"), cooked in front of my group, laughing and chatting with regulars, placing dish after dish before us: grilled shishito peppers with garlic sauce, chicken thighs with a fiery spice rub and crackling skin, delicate salmon steaks, crispy potatoes. With each course, he would watch our faces closely to gauge our reaction and light up giddily when we expressed our appreciation with happy gestures. When we requested Sake, he presented a rare bottle that tasted like *Sauterne* (a sweet French wine) and enjoyed a glass with us (he was a bit tipsy by the end of the meal). The whole experience felt like a marvelously relaxed, improvisational dinner party at a private home. I was very conscious that I would never have been able to eat there without the introduction and personal endorsement of my local guide, a trusted regular. So much of Japan's magic comes when others open doors for you and lead you to the secret spots.

I visited Japan to cover two news items that will surely improve journeys for the luxury traveler. All Nippon Airways (ANA), Japan's highest rated carrier, just added new direct flights with lay-flat beds in business class from [New York](#) and [Chicago](#) to Tokyo's Haneda Airport. Haneda is only a 30-minute drive from central Tokyo, an appreciated option over the 90-minute-plus drive from Narita, the alternative. Meanwhile, the **Four Seasons** just opened a gorgeous new property in Kyoto, which is major news in a city that has long had limited Western-style luxury hotel options. (Most of the top accommodations are traditional Japanese *ryokan* buildings.) (fourseasons.com/kyoto)

While I traveled to report on news, I returned inspired and intrigued by the country's fascinating culture—which is complex, rich and perplexing at times. Some destinations encourage us to try on a new habit. Japan goes further in that it demonstrates a gracious way for a whole collective to operate in the world. Everywhere I went, I observed and admired the pursuit of excellence for excellence's sake: a tight social contract predicated on a deep-seated consideration for others; an elevation of the quotidian to an art form.

These qualities all came to bear in the service I received throughout my trip, which was uniformly wonderful. How marvelous it is to be in a city where taxi drivers wear white gloves and jump to open the door for passengers. In Tokyo, I stayed at the **Imperial Hotel**, where I enjoyed some of the best hospitality I have ever experienced (imperialhotel.co.jp/e/tokyo). There seemed to be four or five people helping me at any given time, all of them eager, earnest, polite and impeccably efficient. As I emerged in the lobby to check out, one attendant rushed over to take my bags, while another whisked off to consult with the bell hop to ensure my driver was on his way, a third sped ahead of me to the front desk to get a jump on the check out process, and a manager joined in for good measure. All four of them then escorted me to the car and stood formally, bowing goodbye as I left. I had been tipped off to the service level I could expect when, upon arrival, I received a note in my room next to a fruit plate that read: 'Our staff will be delighted to peel or cut your fruit as you wish. Kindly dial 2 for assistance.' As curious as I was, I didn't have it in me to summon a staff member to slice an Asian pear for me, but I appreciated the gesture nonetheless.

While the Japanese take care of their guests, they also display a routine respect for each other that is tremendously civilized. I didn't realize a big city could be so clean and well functioning. In a week of exploring Tokyo, I saw not *one* piece of litter. (This ethic applies when Japanese are traveling as well: during the World Cup in Brazil, the Japanese would famously stay behind after games to help clean up the stadium.) Trains are precise to the minute. Punctuality is expected. These are wonderful things for a traveler, because everything works smoothly and strangers go out of their way to help you. You feel safe, like you can walk around anywhere. You can drink and eat without concern because standards of cleanliness are so high.

At the root of this Japanese hospitality is the expression *ichi-go ichi-e*, which is the notion of 'once in a lifetime': celebrating and cherishing this particular moment with these people, because it will never come again. It's for this reason that so much attention is paid to a tea

ceremony or a *kaiseki* meal, that the design of each detail is so careful, delicate and lovingly thought through. If there is one thing I would like to take away from a trip full of once-in-a-lifetime moments, it is that notion and approach to life. We could all take a page from that book.

QUOTABLE

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– Eliza Harris on November 11, 2016