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The Spaces

A traditional matcha tea ceremony is performed for guests in the lobby of the Hotel the Mitsui in Kyoto, Japan. Photo courtesy Hotel the Mitsui.



Between

With fully reopened borders (and the Year of the Rabbit) ushering in a wave of prosperity and productivity, Japan is once again one of the world's most sought-after travel destinations.

Elizabeth Harvey reports.

A

MELODIC TINKLING of chimes plays over the loudspeaker. “Departing Tokyo Station, direction Shin-Osaka. Next station, Shinagawa!” In perfect sync, the singsong tones filling my car on the Shinkansen conclude, and the train pulls out of the station, slowly at first, but rapidly gathering speed. I wiggle up in my seat to peer out the window at the edges of Tokyo fading away in the lavender light of dusk. A thrill of childish wonder tingles through me, as I feel the mounting velocity pull at my center of gravity. *How fast will we go?*

The Shinkansen moves at nearly 200 miles per hour, making it one of the swiftest trains in the world. The ride is surprisingly smooth. I will arrive in Kyoto in just two hours, after a 14.5-hour flight from New York City. Weary but gratified at having journeyed a great distance, I unpack the still-cold Sapporo I purchased on the platform. Snap. Fizz. I take a sip and marvel at these two metal-encased feats of engineering.

With its fast trains and impeccable bento boxes and cities bursting with flashing lights and color, Japan has become an object of collective obsession in the United States, one born out of the cultural collisions caused by World War II and steadily gathering force in the decades since. The iconography we’ve built up around this island nation is so vivid as to elicit gasps of joy or jealousy whenever travel plans are mentioned—and everyone is going, lately, from my own friends and colleagues to Kim Kardashian and Harry Styles. Three years’ absence, it seems, has only made our obsession stronger.

After a few days of exploring on the other side of the world, I quickly realized that many of the idealized Japanese scenes we most ardently seek are, in fact, quite true to reality—and easily found: An *omakase* dinner that is closer to a religious experience than a culinary one, with hungry, hushed devotees encircling the high priest as he sharpens his knife above a gleaming, fatty salmon. A tiny wooden dive bar, packed



Clockwise from top left: Courtesy Bulgari Hotel Tokyo; by Elizabeth Harvey; by Elizabeth Harvey; courtesy Bulgari Hotel Tokyo; by Elizabeth Harvey



Evening views from the Bulgari Hotel Tokyo. Clockwise from top left: *Machiya* architecture in Kyoto's historic Gion district; a kimono at HOSOO in Kyoto; the pool at the Bulgari Hotel Tokyo; the author in front of Kyoto's Yasaka Pagoda.



A Japan Glossary

Omakase: Tasting-menu-style dining concept, which means "to leave oneself in the hands of the chef"

Karōshi: "Death by overwork"

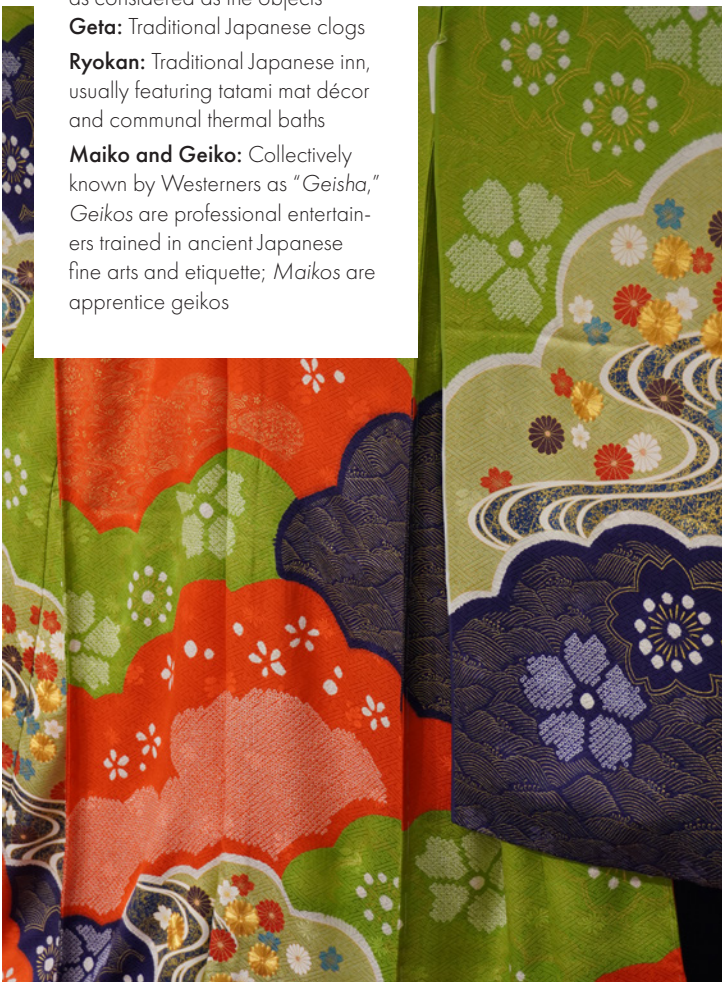
Kintsugi: The art of repairing broken ceramics by filling the cracks with gold leaf

Ikebana: The art of flower-arranging, in which negative space is just as considered as the objects

Geta: Traditional Japanese clogs

Ryokan: Traditional Japanese inn, usually featuring tatami mat décor and communal thermal baths

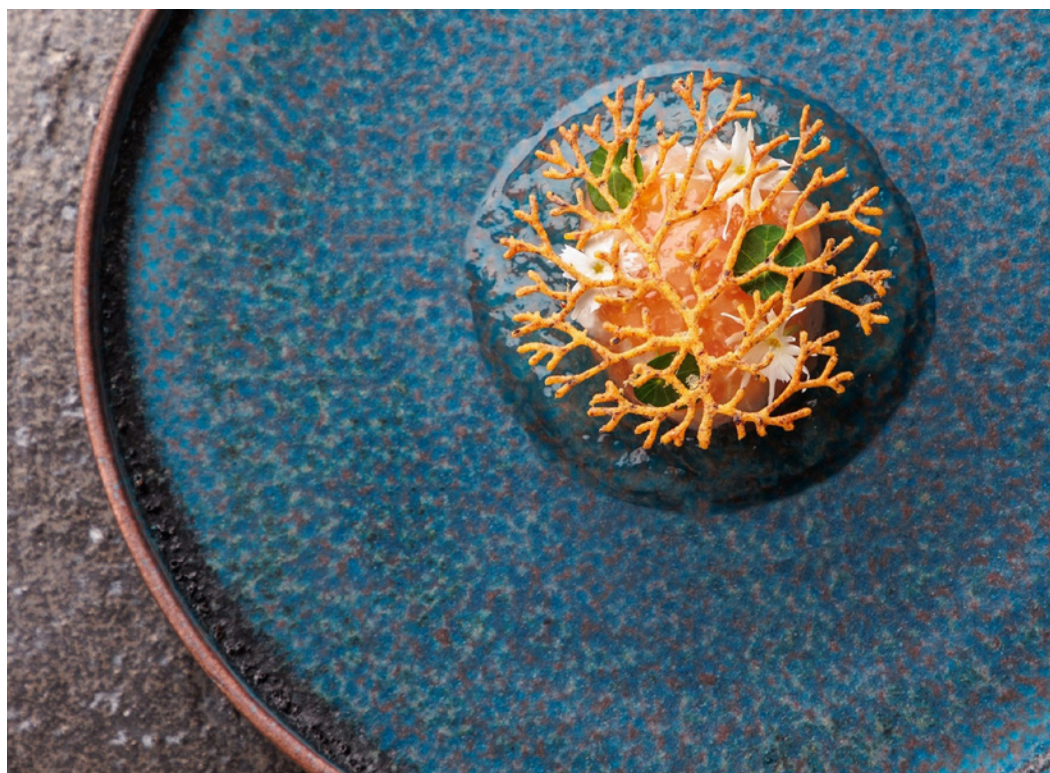
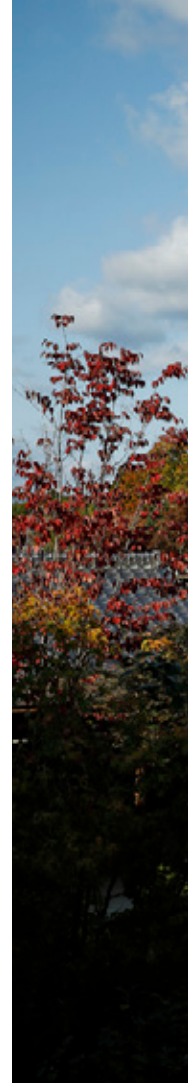
Maiko and Geiko: Collectively known by Westerners as "Geisha," Geikos are professional entertainers trained in ancient Japanese fine arts and etiquette; Maikos are apprentice geikos



with salarymen staving off *karōshi*, which remains spotless and orderly despite the overflow of whiskey. A perfectly coiffed businesswoman in pumps, an elegant maiden perched upon wooden geta, the silks of her kimono shimmering, and a punky teen in fishnets rising above the crowd in five-inch platform boots—all gathered at the same crosswalk, patiently waiting for the light to turn green, and not moving a second sooner.

In collecting these postcard moments, I also quickly realized that what makes Japan so enthralling—what draws us all so fervently to visit—is not only its reverence for specialization and tradition. It's also the strength that's afforded by the Japanese to their social contract. There is a real sense of mutual obligation and accountability that governs the captivating dance of daily life in Japan, which imbues even the smallest mundanities with a greater beauty and dignity than we're accustomed to at home.

But for all the things I did grasp while traveling in Japan—the moments of victory where a box was checked, a photo was snapped, a realization was made—there was so much more that eluded me. For every perfectly packaged experience and expectation that matched reality, there were so many more puzzles and paradoxes—gaps in the narrative, areas of the map that remain unmarked: A Zen monk in traditional robes who reveals himself to be somewhat of an Instagram influencer (@revtakazen) who spends half the year in Portland, Oregon, and speaks flawless English with a hint of Cali-surfer twang. A display of sake at Kyoto's Nishiki Market featuring labels with sweet watercolor bunnies alongside others with inky, snarling skulls. A garish poster of sexualized





Park Hyatt Kyoto. Opposite, from top: A guest room at the Tokyo Edition, Toranomon; a course at Toki, Hotel the Mitsui's Japanese-French restaurant.



**INSIDER KYOTO:
CITY FAVES**

“One of my favorite places to dine with friends is Coppie. The restaurant owners are lovely. Yamahon gallery is a great place to find interior pieces. Komyoin Temple is beautiful and the garden was designed by Shigemori Mirei, who is one of my favorite landscape artists.”

**SARA AIKO,
FOUNDER OF CURATED KYOTO**

manga in a storefront that shares a wall with a centuries-old Buddhist temple, a sacred enclave of incense and flowers within a skyscraper city.

In Japan, the spaces between tend to be the most profound. It's a guiding principle of its ancient arts, from *kintsugi* to *ikebana*, and it's a useful principle for the Japan traveler. A longtime resident of Nara, writer Pico Iyer perhaps best captured the phenomenon: “I've been living in western Japan for more than 32 years and, to my delight, I know far less than when I arrived.” Every visit to Japan begs another. Next stop, Shinagawa.

Whether you're planning a first or fifth visit to Japan—or you're still in dreaming mode—these are the places to have on your radar, with new developments from the post-pandemic tourism boom. Visit indagare.com to get all of Elizabeth's recommendations from her adventure along the Tokaido Corridor.

WHERE TO STAY

Like many other culture capitals, Tokyo and Kyoto are experiencing a hotel renaissance. My first stop in Kyoto was **The Shinmonzen**, a nine-room boutique gem over 10 years

in the making from Paddy McKillen, the owner of Château La Coste in Provence. The Shinmonzen offers an intimate, handcrafted experience akin to staying at the private town house of an impeccably stylish friend—with museum-grade art, sleek nods to ryokan heritage and a restaurant by Jean-Georges Vongerichten, opened this March. In the historic Gion district—the territory of the *maiko* and *geiko*, as well as antiques lovers and shoppers—and discreetly camouflaged among the neighborhood's dark-wood *machiya* architecture, the hotel seamlessly combines past and present, thanks to architect Tadao Ando and interior designer Rémi Tessier. Like sister property Villa La Coste, The Shinmonzen showcases work by Louise Bourgeois, Damien Hirst, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Gerhard Richter and Charlotte Perriand—and a standout is the sequin-and-embroidery mural by Vietnamese artist Tia-Thuy Nguyen in the dining room. The canvas is a sparkling burst of hot pink, orange, yellow and red—an idealized complement to the delicate explosion of flavors one is usually experiencing while contemplating it (I am still dreaming of the melting ribbons of tuna, twirled in a nest like spaghetti, atop wasabi and radish... and the cured egg yolks, wedged between thinly sliced crispy bread and generously heaped with caviar—paired with juicy Hokkaido white wines). Other highlights include the small spa, which

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: COURTESY TOKYO EDITION; COURTESY PARK HYATT KYOTO; PHOTO BY MIYURU WAKABASHI; COURTESY SARA AIKO; COURTESY HOTEL THE ANTSU

Mr. Hakuya Noguchi, a fourth-generation gold leaf artisan, at his home and studio in Kyoto.



specializes in Reiki treatments; the option to choose between a Western-style bed or a traditional Japanese futon on tatami mats; the oversize hinoki cypress soaking tubs; the coffee menu by world-class siphon coffee master Iori Yahashi; and the private balconies suspended over the Shirakawa River, where resident cranes and ducks can be spotted taking a dip.

Next was **Hotel the Mitsui**, a larger but equally soulful and serene property on the western side of the Kamo River, facing the UNESCO site Nijo Castle. Originally the private home of the wealthy Mitsui family, the now 161-room property preserves details that date back as far as the 17th century. Interiors by Hong Kong designer André Fu (behind The Upper House, as well as Villa La Coste) and Japanese architect Akira Kuryu create an atmosphere that is subtle and soothing, with inventive touches like a hallway of wooden arches mimicking Kyoto's famous fire-red Fushimi Inari shrine. The hotel emphasizes Japanese wellness practices, including connecting with the seasons and the senses. There is an airy courtyard garden (ideal for meditation classes) and dedicated spaces for a matcha tea ceremony or a *maiko* performance. Do not miss a meal at Toki, an innovative restaurant by chef Tetsuya Asano (who cut his teeth at the Ritz Paris), or a swim in the heated pools of the subterranean onsen spa, which draw from thermal waters discovered over 3,000 feet below the hotel.

In Tokyo, I paid a visit to the new **Edition**, occupying the 31st to 36th floors of a skyscraper in the up-and-coming Toranomon neighborhood (located between luxe Marunouchi and chic Roppongi). Thanks to the artistry of architect Kengo Kuma—and Ian Schrager's lifelong passion for Japanese aesthetics—the property has an authentic sense of place, helped by spectacular views of Tokyo Tower. Guest rooms are both peaceful and highly functional. The main draw of the hotel is

the dining program, which includes a photogenic Sky Garden, a speakeasy-style cocktail lounge, Gold Bar and The Jade Room restaurant, featuring British-Japanese tasting menus by chef Tom Aikens, of *Michelin*-starred London restaurants Pied à Terre and Muse.

Also generating buzz is the new **Bulgari Tokyo**—opened this April in the Yaesu district (in walking distance of Nihombashi and Ginza), offering 98 rooms and suites, a large spa and an eight-seat sushi restaurant by Japanese chef Kenji Gyoten (who was awarded three *Michelin* stars at Sushi Gyoten in Fukuoka)—and the **Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo** at Otemachi, across from the Imperial Palace, with Jean-Michel Gathy interiors and Est, a French-Japanese open-kitchen restaurant from chef Guillaume Bracaval. It won its first *Michelin* star last year. Also of note: **The Park Hyatt Tokyo**—the setting of Sofia Coppola's cult classic *Lost in Translation*—will close in May 2024 for a full, yearlong renovation, for the hotel's 30th anniversary. I managed a final Suntory toast to Bob and Charlotte at the New York Bar—and, for now, it remains the same haven for a traveler in an unfamiliar city, suspended in the air and suspended in time.

WHERE TO EAT

With 72 recognized micro-seasons and a laundry list of carefully observed mores, dining out in Japan remains one of the most intimidating aspects of traveling there. It's essential to come armed with a list of local recommendations. Two of the best I was given were **Sakuragawa** in Kyoto (a 10-seat, no-frills, classic kaiseki masterpiece) and **The Washin** in Tokyo (an immaculate multicourse tasting experience in a contemporary yet warm atmosphere). But it's just as essential to have an open mind and a willingness to search and stumble. If you summon up the courage to poke your head behind the curtains that hang over the doors of most traditional eateries—which,

Local Libations



From sake to cocktails, here are a few of the top places for a drink.

TOKYO Kamiya Bar, opened in the 1800s, is a local legend said to be the oldest Western-style bar in Tokyo. • **Gen Yamamoto** offers a reservation-only, seasonal, low-ABV cocktail tasting experience by Mr. Yamamoto. **KYOTO** An exploration of “liquid cuisine,” the cocktail experience at **Nokishita 711** (left) includes multiple courses and snacks. • Look for the bumblebee sign, and you're in the right place at **Bee's Knees**, a Prohibition-inspired speakeasy that's among Kyoto's most popular bars. • Fushimi is one of Japan's oldest sake-brewing districts. Enjoy a tasting after exploring the history of sake at **Gekkeikan Okura Sake Museum** (and the brewery, founded in 1637).

FAVORITE FINDS: SHOPPING IN KYOTO

Konjaku Nishimura, a vintage textiles shop in Gion, specializes in silk kimonos (right). • **Sophora** is a beautifully curated blown-glass and ceramics gallery. • **Galerie Tazawa** is an antiques gallery with Japanese and international treasures. • Visit **Tokinoha Ceramic Studio**, a pottery workshop (bottom left) and boutique on the city's eastern side. • A stunning textiles and kimono atelier founded in 1688, **HOSOO** now produces contemporary silk clothing, accessories and home décor (bottom center and right), in addition to traditional pieces. • **Hakuya Noguchi Studio** is the home and gallery of a quirky father-son duo practicing the ancient art of gold-leaf painting and textile weaving.



maddeningly, make it difficult to assess what lies within, without making yourself known—and, once seated, surrender yourself to the experience, you might just be rewarded with the best meal of your life.

Traditional Japanese cuisine is UNESCO-protected, but the influx of international chefs who are heading east is evidence of a growing appetite for invention. In Tokyo's Shibuya, the 2020-launched, Mexican-Japanese-themed **Rubia** just appointed Cesar Ávila Flores, the former sous-chef of Mexico City's Pujol (a World's 50 Best restaurant), to reinvent its tasting menu. Two of Kyoto's hottest tables, **Monk** and **Cenci**, are helmed by Japanese chefs—Yoshihiro Imai and Ken Sakamoto, respectively—but serve Italian-Japanese cuisine, including wood-fired pizza (with such toppings as Kujo negi leeks, chrysanthemum and shiitake mushrooms). Also in Kyoto, the one-*Michelin*-starred **Lurra** brings the international perspective of

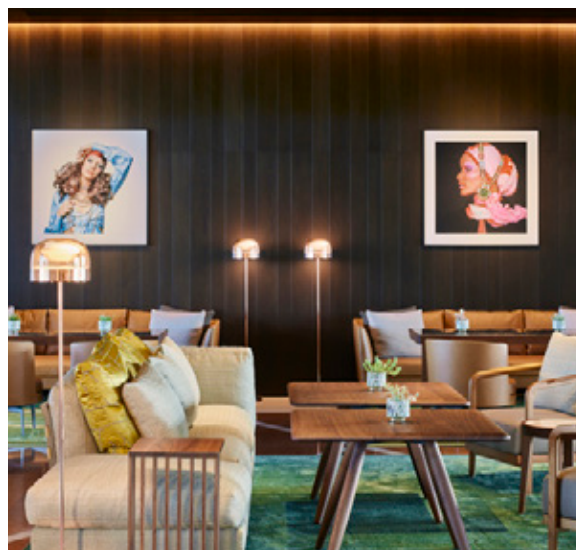
American-Japanese chef (and Noma alum) Jacob Kear to local ingredients that are foraged, fermented and grilled. And at the **Ace Hotel Kyoto**—another Kengo Kuma project, opened in 2020 and ideal for digital nomads seeking a trendy home base—René Redzepi himself just concluded a sold-out, 10-week **Noma** pop-up.

SEE & DO: ARTS & CULTURE

The Fukuda Art Museum recently opened in Kyoto's Arashiyama district, with nearly 2,000 pieces from the Edo period to modernity, and a focus on Kyoto painters. The collection was created by Fukuda Yoshitaka, a self-made entrepreneur, to thank the public for his good fortune. Also in Kyoto, the historic **Kyocera Museum of Art** reopened after a three-year renovation by architects Jun Aoki and Tezso Nishizawa. And in Tokyo, later this fall, the famous teamLab Borderless digital art museum will reopen, in a new building in **Azabudai Hills** in Minato,



The pavilion at Hotel the Mitsui in Kyoto. Clockwise from right: Traditional bean-paste sweets; the bar at the Bulgari Hotel Tokyo; the streets of Gion, in Kyoto.



just minutes from Tokyo Tower (which now offers Japan’s largest “eSports park” for virtual reality games). Azabudai is envisioned by the same group behind cool-kid Roppongi Hills and is expected to officially debut in October. It will also become home to **Aman Residences** and the very first **Janu** property, Aman’s “little sister” brand. New pedestrian areas are being developed all over Tokyo, from the Mizumachi Waterfront to Miyashita Park and the Bonus Track shopping area in trendy Shimokitazawa. And while Kyoto’s traditional crafts are some of the very best treasures to hunt for, Tokyo’s latest retail activations in Ginza—from the new **Muji Hotel** to the Jun Aoki- and Peter Marino-designed **Louis Vuitton** flagship—do warrant a visit for snapping photos, browsing and a quick bite. And, finally, Kengo Kuma’s **Japan National Stadium** is now open for tours through March 2024. ■

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