

The chicest place to stay in Kyoto

A 1930s theatre has been reborn as a refined hotel with culture at its heart, finds **Nick Redman**

Night has fallen over Kyoto, showing the former capital in a new light: seven storeys up, in the Old Imperial Bar, I gaze over a sea of crested neighbourhood roofs — textbook ancient Japan — to a dark-forested peak below a crescent moon. The view is the bartender's cue to suggest the signature cocktail, a Mount Hiei. It was named after the mountain, he tells me, hence the hints of matcha (leaf green) and yuzu (lunar yellow). If the scene is special as I sip, the dial turns to "rare" when a geisha enters, tottering on thick cedarwood sandals.

All too often the only sightings of these learned custodians of Japanese art, culture and exquisite hosting are a brief flash as they try to escape persistent tourists in the street desperate to take their photo. Here at the new Imperial Hotel, Kyoto I have the privilege of witnessing a multicoloured, moving work of art, perfection in motion, as her hairpiece jewels jiggle and glint.

Taking a high stool at the bar, she is clearly at home, chatting with staff until her patrons arrive — a party of men and women who have booked time with her, happy to pay for her sociable company and her nuggets of knowledge on the city. Immediately she gets to work in the timeless geisha mode: visibly and audibly metamorphosing into a flawlessly mannered, finely attuned friend.

After a decade of precision planning and tinkering, the Imperial opened in March to the approval of the city's *geiko* (Kyoto geishas) and their *maiko* (apprentices), who appreciate the painstaking project as a gift to the area they work in, Gion. The hotel occupies a compelling, almost chateau-like 1930s landmark, formerly a grand theatre, all sweeping eaves and shiny new copper roof tiles rising above the cat's-cradle alleys of this historic district. Checking in, I sank straight into a realm of the senses, bedazzled from the word go.

Reception staff were backdropped by a fire-orange artwork resembling a Japanese *byōbu* (folding screen), painted with silhouette motifs of wriggly matsu pines. Welcome tea was refreshingly, earthily bitter, poured as I sat on stone-tone upholstery in the lobby. The faintest sniff of resinous wood (cypress?) hung in my room, one of 55 in a property that could doubtless swallow up 150.

The original 1936 theatre, Yasaka Kikan, was built on donations from Kyoto's geiko community. As a Tangible Cultural Property — even after it fell into disuse decades later — it required a renovation observing deep cultural respect for the area and its residents. Accordingly, the new owners reinforced and updated it to withstand earthquakes and what else the 21st century might throw at it, applying the invisible professionalism of black-clad kabuki scene-shifters.

The new "heritage" suites are generous, presenting walls layered with silk and



Springtime in the Higashiyama district of Kyoto

balconies overlooking the Gion Kōbu Kaburenjo theatre, which shares the hotel grounds and grants guests seamless access to seasonal performances by kimono-clad dancers. In a new wing, constructed so perfectly no guest will notice the difference, are for me the best rooms: traditional Kyotan suites. Designer interpretations of the Japanese tatami-matted *ryōkan* vernacular, they immerse you in the city, and feature *sudare* — the blinds seen everywhere, draped over parlour balconies for privacy. For etiquette (and preservation purposes), shoes must be removed before negotiating the suites' tactile floors of dimpled chestnut and cherrywood.

"Traditional Japanese techniques, building methods and materials should not be treated as a relic of the past but as a resource to be handed down to future generations," is the ethos of the architects, co-founders of Tokyo's New Material Research Laboratory, which handled the project so impeccably.

Among the countless highlights are the fretted Japanese cedarwood ceiling and limestone in the main lounge; the welcome panel, crafted from the timber of a naturally felled 1,000-year-old zelkova tree; the thousands of tiles on the façade, delicately prised from the derelict theatre, restored and reapplied; and terracotta panels from the very atelier Frank Lloyd Wright employed to work on the Imperial Hotel, Tokyo in 1923. Track down the planning director, Kei Ayukawa, and he'll show you the (so far, tiny) hotel archive he's assembling, with grainy photos and an original copper roof tile beside one of the reproductions, for comparison.

I wake early, descending to a subterranean spa where a lap pool ripples in what

appears to be a cave, lined with giant boulders quarried on Kitagishima, an island in the Seto Inland Sea. Almost 18m long, as glossy and angular as the black monoliths that materialised in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, it has a slightly portentous air.

It would be tempting to spend one's whole stay holed up in the Imperial, rotating spa facials of rose and cypress with intricate Japanese breakfasts of red snow crab and canola flowers in tiered boxes. But spring in Kyoto is such a sensory season, with all the colours of nature to contemplate, the clear air and currents of polite crowds gliding along tight lanes and broad boulevards.

Temples glitter above the roof tiles. Black kites with their fingertip-like wings wheel over the rapid blue Kamo River, plunging for prey and scraps left at café terraces. Cherry blossom adorns the stark, dark branches of recent winter in the whites and pinks of coconut ice, generating the same unreal, magical light that snow does. Now and then there comes a scent as sweet as vanilla, delivered by drifting devotional incense, or woodsmoke from artisanal kilns.

After dark I return to find no room at Ren, the Imperial's 18-cover restaurant, which I've been told serves an excellent *omakase* experience including crab, duck and wagyu dishes with a French spin by the chef Kojo Imajo (multi-course, decided by the chef; £175pp). So I head back up to the Old Imperial Bar for a last glass of Mount Hiei, craning my neck for another sighting of the glorious geisha from the night before. In vain. If she was here earlier she has clearly vanished. At least, like the Imperial, she has given me a brief, exhilarating glimpse of a spiritual city beyond the selfie-obsessed.



The Yasaka suite at the Imperial Hotel



Geiko and maiko at the Gion Kōbu Kaburenjo theatre



Need to know

Nick Redman was a guest of Imperial Hotel, Kyoto, a member of Leading Hotels of the World, which has room-only doubles from £810 (lhw.com). Fly to Kyoto

More to see and do in Kyoto

Creative cocktails at Bar Kaktel

Here's the kind of intimate, whispery watering hole urban Japan does so well. It's super-secret, up an elevator set in a pillar and down a corridor (DM @barkaktel on Instagram for directions), with room for ten guests max around a tiny, dark-wood bar. Cocktails include a Pitch Black Penicillin based on chilli tequila, Fernet Branca, bamboo charcoal and scotch (from £9; @barkaktel).

Bargain beds at Asai Kyoto Shijo

Shijo Street (Shijo-dori) is the big east-west boulevard lined with department stores, souvenir shops and ramen bars. Towards one end is Gion, the geisha quarter, which makes this nearby bargain boutique hotel an excellent base. Ascetic rooms deliver comfy minimalism with slumberific mattresses and idiot-friendly power showers (room-only doubles from £61; dusit.com).

Visit Bowie's favourite temple

As all self-respecting Bowie cranks will know, the ethereal, plinky track *Moss Garden* from his 1977 album *Heroes* was informed by visiting Saiho-ji, an off-the-beaten-track place of pilgrimage. No walk-ins are permitted, but advance booking can be completed online (£19; saihoji-kokedera.com).

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