

# WHERE TO STAY

INSIDER REPORTS ON THE BEST PLACES TO BED DOWN. EDITED BY ISSY VON SIMSON

## THE ROUND-UP: JAPAN

SMART SAMURAI MANSIONS AND  
ZEN TEAHOUSES RECONFIGURE THE  
CLASSIC RYOKAN EXPERIENCE

HOTEL LOG IN ONOMICHI





## HOTEL LOG, ONOMICHI

The outside of this place, whose name is an acronym for Lantern Onomichi Garden, may not grab anyone's attention. Set in the Shinmichi complex, built in 1963 on the slopes of Mount Senkoji overlooking the Seto Sea, the white-and-peach apartment building looks unremarkable. But inside it has been transformed into an arty six-room hotel via the wild but disciplined design of architect Bijoy Jain from Studio Mumbai. For his first project outside India, Jain covered every inch of the bedroom walls, floors and ceilings with gleaming-white *washi* paper; the cocoon effect is deepened by a scarcity of furnishings. Staying in one of these large spartan spaces is rather like sleeping in an art installation. But comfort is key: futons are incredibly soft, and bath tubs can be found in the larger rooms. There is a feeling of being gently swaddled in a delicate paper lantern, but open a window and golden light pours in: the structure is high up, overlooking the pines, palms and roofs of this free-spirited temple town often called Japan's Portland. Head to the lacquered bar for a glass of local Chardonnay or a cocktail while Eighties pop plays on the turntable. The restaurant is heavy on vegetables, so menus tilt towards salads with greens and micro-herbs, and ceramic bowls are filled with *mikan* and *hassaku* citrus fruits that are anything but ordinary. Staying in a ryokan often means accepting *tatemaie* – a structured, sometimes rigid way of thinking. But this contemporary interpretation has resulted in a laidback hangout where social barriers can be broken down and even Japanese guests can bend the rules. ADAM H GRAHAM

**BOOK IT** Doubles from about £320. [l-og.jp](http://l-og.jp)



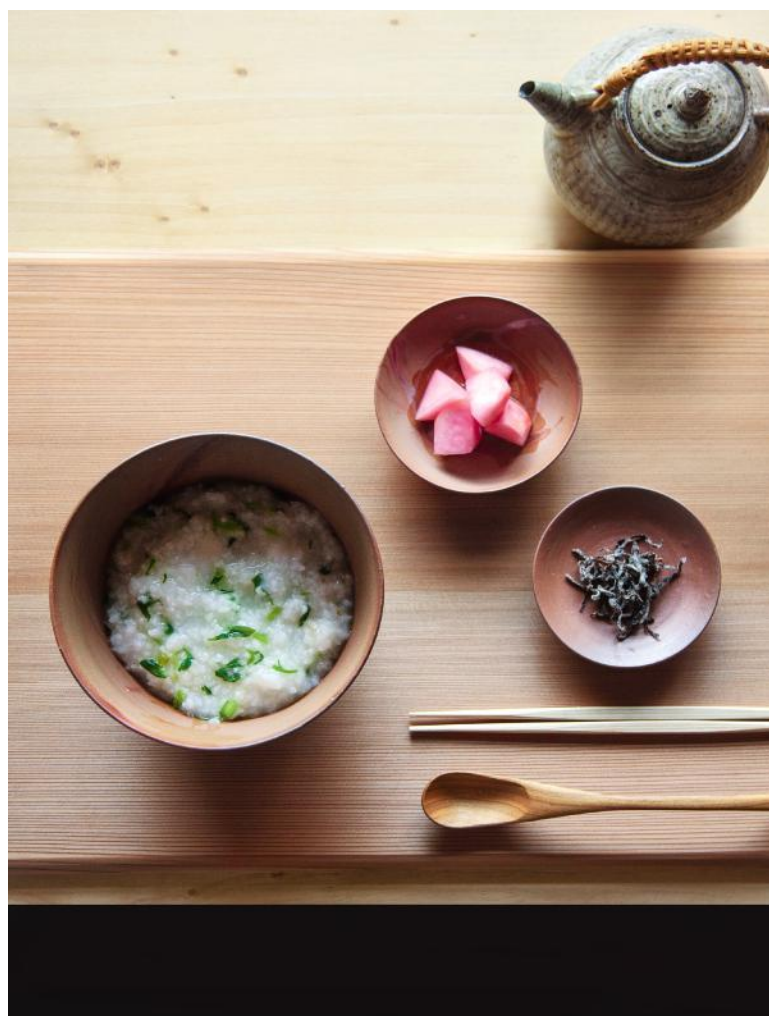
## HOTEL CULTIA DAZAIFU, FUKUOKA

The Tenmangū shrine on Kyushu island may be a destination for Shinto pilgrims, but it is often overlooked by travellers. More's the pity – here's a spot that allows visitors to connect with nature and deepen their understanding of Buddhism in ways that temple-hopping on the beaten paths never could. A 30-minute train ride from Fukuoka, the 3,000-acre complex of 10th- and 16th-century shrines, ponds and cedar forests peppered with 6,000 plum trees is said to house

Tenjin, the patron deity of learning, and it is a place of regular exhibitions, meditation classes and architecture tours. At the end of last year, this four-room hotel opened directly across the street. The tile-roofed structure falls somewhere between a ryokan and a *shukubo*

lodge: a modern sanctuary with traditional touches and guided morning worship. It's the former residence of the Yoshitsugu family, whose paintings and scrolls still decorate doors and walls. Rooms are connected by outdoor stone paths screened off by sheer linen *noren*, some with private gardens of moss, stone lanterns and seasonal flowers such as fringed lilies. Vaulted ceilings, meticulously sanded floors and undecorated wood-panelling create a cabin-like quality. The lack of visual distraction is soothing, although there are distinct notes of modernity in Danish chairs and plenty of charging points. But time moves slowly here. Slide apart the *fusuma* windows to listen to the peals of the Bonsho bell, the oldest in the country. Then book a table at the French-fusion restaurant to settle in with plates of sautéed red gurnard or salted Itoshima pork. It's a decadent alternative stay and a reminder that enlightenment isn't always about going without. AHG

**BOOK IT** Doubles from about £295. [cultia-dazaifu.com](http://cultia-dazaifu.com)



## KISHI-KE, KAMAKURA

Anyone who says that Japan is uptight probably hasn't been to this sunny corner less than an hour from Tokyo. Kamakura, with its 65 Buddhist and 19 Shinto shrines, was the capital from 1185 to 1333. Today it's a breezy surf town with taco stands, smoothie shacks and cosy *izakaya* full of wet-suited beach-goers. In July 2019, it saw the opening of its first modern, and arguably the world's smallest, ryokan – the one-room Kishi-ke, a minimalist inn that can be booked for up to four people, run by spritely young local Nobuyuki Kishi and his product-designer wife Hitomi. The former samurai house was reconstructed by architect Ryohei Tanaka, who worked under Kengo Kuma, and collaborated with landscape architect Akihiko Ono – the pruned pines and citrus trees give the courtyard a painting-like quality. The hotel literature poses the question, 'Are you satisfied with your life?' It's something to mull over while gazing across the road at Sagami Bay, its waters warmed by the Kuroshio current, and Yuigahama Beach, one of many sandy stretches on this part of the coast. The couple apply the principles of *chisoku* to the way they run the house – emphasising fulfilled living in the moment, a practice taught in the Rinzai sect of Japanese Buddhism that includes *zazen* meditation, vegan food and tea ceremonies, all of which are on offer. But what really makes it special is Kishi-ke's connection to the sea: nibble on *shirasu* (white-bait) sashimi, while listening to jazz from the main room's five-seat counter, eyes drawn to the surfers catching the last glinting copper waves of the day. AHG

**BOOK IT** From about £1,220 for two. [kishi-ke.co.jp](http://kishi-ke.co.jp)



## NIPPONIA MINO, GIFU

It's likely nobody except *washi*-paper pilgrims will have heard of Mino. And it might have become abandoned like many small towns, but this untrammelled merchants' settlement less than a four-hour Shinkansen ride from Tokyo has managed to assert itself as a curious spot worthy of a detour. A wave of architects came to admire then restore the Edo-era wooden row houses, which today are filled with cafés and ceramic shops for those in search of a modern take on authentic Japan. The elegant Nipponia Mino, a Twenties Arts-and-Crafts-style estate converted into a hotel last year, strikes a similar note. All the usual classic touches are here in screened tea rooms, private moon-viewing gardens and *tatami* mats. But as the former atelier of prominent papermaker Matsuhisa Seijiro, the property is also a showcase for traditional design. Interiors are lined with woven-thatch wainscoting and *mushiko-mado* latticed windows; a split-level warehouse has an outdoor clay bath while the maisonette is swathed in wallpaper with whimsical waterfall motifs, calligraphy and *washi* inlaid with fragrant cedarwood chips, said to aid sleep. The lobby doubles as a paper shop where visitors can buy various products and books or sign up for courses. The Nipponia group is making tracks by transforming historic buildings in lesser-known areas and championing sustainable renovation techniques. This project demonstrates that harnessing the past is the smartest way of looking to the future. AHG

**BOOK IT** Doubles from about £290. [stay.nipponia.or.jp](http://stay.nipponia.or.jp)



## MAANA KAMO, KYOTO

When childhood friends Hana Tsukamoto and Irene Chang scribbled their business plan on a restaurant napkin in Spain, they probably couldn't have dreamed that three years later they would have made it happen. The thirtysomething designers launched Maana Homes last year, a collection of *machiya* townhouses – two already up and running and four more in the pipeline – that fuse a contemporary look and new-generation craftsmanship with a dose of homeliness. 'We wanted to create something that bridges the gap between Airbnb and luxury hotels,' explains Japan-born Tsukamoto, who studied in the USA and moved back from New York last year. At riverside Maana Kamo, the 100-year-old house has been renovated by architect Shigenori Uoya – he also transformed Sowaka (see page 49) – removing vinyl coverings and tiled ceilings to expose clay walls and beams. In the sleek kitchen, with its wood counter and Jasper Morrison Maruni stools, hip caterers Ototo Jet can provide a stylish *temari* sushi feast. A minimalist living space opens up to reveal the scene-stealer: a large stone bath beneath a moon-like paper lantern. 'It's not an obvious place to put the bath,' says Tsukamoto. 'But I had a very clear vision of this beautiful view straight through the house.' There's a similarly smooth mesh of heritage and modern elements in their first property, Maana Kyoto, in the quiet Tambaguchi neighbourhood, from curved low rattan chairs to bold textile art. Next up is Maana Kiyomizu in 2021 near Kiyomizudera Temple. 'The concept of these homes is to find stillness and silence within,' says Tsukamoto. 'But it's also important to make sure guests are comfortable. It's about finding a balance.' DANIELLE DEMETRIOU

**BOOK IT** Doubles from about £290. [maanahomes.com](http://maanahomes.com)







## TRUNK HOUSE, TOKYO

In 2010, Japan-based food critic Robbie Swinnerton coined the phrase ‘punk *kaiseki*’ in a review of restaurant GiroGiro after its renegade chef broke all the rules of the ceremonial dinner. If GiroGiro is punk *kaiseki*, then Trunk is punk *omotenashi* (hospitality). Not since the Park Hyatt Tokyo appeared in 1994 has the capital seen such a game-changer. Entrepreneur Yoshitaka Nojiri, who also founded Shibuya’s Trunk Hotel in 2017, opened this art-filled property in a cobblestoned back alley of the under-the-radar Kagurazaka neighbourhood. The two-storey, one-bedroom property was once a geisha-training house; now a pair of decorative albino *tanuki* raccoons guard the stone entry (a whimsical piece called *Karma Camellia* by art collective GELCHOP) before you are plunged down the Trunk rabbit hole. Once inside, standout works challenge preconceived ideas about Japan – a stained-glass window depicts a frog smoking a joint and a *shunga* (graphic erotic art) hangs above the three-person *hinoki* soaking tub. The furniture, lamps and beds are museum-quality from Tom Sachs, Herman Miller and Jean Prouvé, adding hits of grown-up elegance. The house is taken for exclusive use only, so there’s no jostling around the fire-pit; there’s a butler and a chef who prepares *wagashi* – ornate snacks such as oysters on the half-shell drenched in yuzu cream – at any time. And don’t miss the secret micro-disco tucked under the stairs, with a bar full of whisky bottles. Beyond the padded door, blinking lights pour from a rainbow-lit glass dancefloor and bounce off a glitter ball. It’s even possible to karaoke to a Sex Pistols song to round out the stay. Anarchy, the Japanese way. **AHG**

**BOOK IT** From about £4,580 per night. [trunk-house.com](http://trunk-house.com)



## WHERE TO STAY

### SOWAKA, KYOTO

For 100 years, this was a high-end tea house – a poetic maze of wooden corridors, sliding screens and haiku-inspiring gardens, filled with dancing geishas. Now it has been reimagined as a ryokan which, like many things in the ancient capital, treads an expertly fine line between old and new. The hotel – whose Sanskrit name means ‘happiness’ – is a clever combination of Sukiya-zukuri architecture and contemporary design in the temple-packed Gion district. Unusually, it offers the hushed reverence of an inn but without the rules: instead of strict in-room mealtimes and futons unrolled nightly, there’s a sleek black-on-black restaurant and cashmere mattresses. It’s easy to miss the low-key entrance: a split curtain reveals a lantern-lit pathway that meanders to a *genkan* stone threshold. Inside a peaceful tableau with a 21st-century edge comes into focus: creaking corridors, circular paper windows and plaster walls alongside Nordic-inspired furniture. Each room is different: one has sliding screens with conch-shaped handles leading to partitioned areas, another includes its own tea-ceremony space. Among the decorative woodwork are more current nods – modernist chairs, cedarwood Bluetooth speakers, a graffiti-like scroll. The main building was renovated by architect Shigenori Uoya, together with 100 artisans. He also added a 12-room annex, where the mood is minimal with textile art and angular windows with rooftop views. Food is taken very seriously here. Against a backdrop of dramatic lacquerware panels, La Bombance, an outpost of the Michelin-starred Tokyo original, serves up a delicate interpretation of local cooking from wagyu beef to ginger hotpot. As in all the very best ryokans – old-school or new-wave – an intuitive convivial spirit lives on. DD

**BOOK IT** Doubles from about £335. [sowaka.com](http://sowaka.com)



#### EXCLUSIVE FIRST REVIEW

### THE MITSUI, KYOTO

For more than two centuries, the gate here – with its curved *kawara* tiles and solid wood frame – marked the entrance of the Kyoto base of the Mitsui family, the powerful clan behind a vast network of corporations. The residence opposite Nijo Castle fell out of their hands in 1945 – but, in a fateful twist, their real-estate company snapped up the land five years ago. Today, the gate once again leads to a Mitsui-owned property. The hotel is keen to make its mark as Japanese-owned, but it was Hong Kong designer André Fu who masterminded the 161 muted bedrooms in shades of light green and pale birch, and created the dramatic lobby with its red-clay sculpture by Yukiya Izumita. The building wraps around a reinterpretation of the family’s original ‘stroll garden’, with flowing water and a *sakura* cherry tree (straw-wrapped for winter). There’s an Italian restaurant but Toki is the highlight – at its *teppan* counter chef Tetsuya Asano rustles up French fine dining with a dash of Japan in dishes such as sweet potato *en croûte* and smoked salmon marinated in white miso. Out in the grounds, a room recreates part of the original house with woodwork, aromatic *tatami* and painted panels, while down in the softly lit basement, the spa has expansive hot-spring baths. There are countless signs of Kyoto-style attention to detail, from parking cones encased in bamboo to insider experiences including afternoon tea at Shimogamo Villa, another Mitsui family jewel. Not to forget that gate – immaculately restored by artisans, and impossible to miss. DD

**BOOK IT** Doubles from about £700. [hotelthemitsui.com](http://hotelthemitsui.com)

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