



Courtesy Ace Hotel Kyoto

KYOTO

Ace Hotel Kyoto: First In

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The urban brand's first Asian property has opened amid the coronavirus pandemic.



From the moment I step out of the taxi in front of the Ace Hotel Kyoto, it's clear that every aspect of the hotel opening has been adjusted for the coronavirus outbreak. A trio of staffers in white T-shirts accessorized with white latex gloves and white face masks instantly descends and guides me—without contact—toward the entrance. Here, I'm politely asked to clean my hands, offered a face mask from a black-and-white striped box, and have my temperature recorded by a camera-like device. It's only then that I'm declared fever-free, and with a quiet exhale of relief, am finally permitted to enter the lobby.

In the not-so-distant past, this welcome ritual may have raised a few eyebrows upon arrival at a hotel. But as I cross the threshold of the shiny new **Ace Hotel** Kyoto and enter its airy industrial lobby, I feel a mix of relief, resignation, and reassurance. In short? It already feels normal.

Kyoto, a city famed for its temples and tea ceremony, may seem unexpected for the hipster hotel brand's first Asia outpost. But beneath the ancient capital's historic patina (and beyond its throbbing tourist-y locales) is an Ace tribe-in-the-making: a low-key but thriving contemporary creative community, from new generation kimono textile designers and paper artists to modern potters and architects.



The first Asian outpost from the Ace brand was designed by architect Kengo Kuma.

Courtesy Ace Hotel Kyoto

The opening of Ace Hotel Kyoto, following months of coronavirus delays, has a timely feel: Not only is its arrival likely to give Kyoto a much-needed bolster as it struggles with smaller tourist crowds, it's also a litmus test for hotel openings in an uncertain COVID-19 climate. "Opening a hotel during these times requires us to let go of 'business as usual' and approach it as an opportunity to think creatively," says Kelly Sawdon, Ace's chief brand officer, one of numerous Ace staff unable to get to Kyoto for the opening.

I spy signs of this creativity in a raft of anti-coronavirus initiatives during my stay—many perhaps destined to become the new normal in hospitality: from sanitized and sealed guest rooms and contactless menus to downsized social gatherings and strictly controlled entry points.

The hotel is in the new Shin-Puh-Kan complex on Karasuma Street, a wide downtown thoroughfare surrounded by networks of Kyoto's signature grid lanes. The area is lined with boutiques and cafes next to centuries-old miso stores, with mountain views in the distance. The Ace spans a 1926 structure once home to Kyoto Central Telephone Office, and is unusually large for Kyoto, with 213 rooms and three restaurants.



Rooms at the Ace Hotel Kyoto feature turntables and local art.

Courtesy Ace Hotel Kyoto

The architectural gem—all brickwork, lofty ceilings, arced windows—was renovated by the firm of Japan's famed **Kengo Kuma**, who also added a new building, while L.A.'s Commune Design choreographed the interiors (it's also home to a small, chic collection of boutiques and an art-filled courtyard garden). In the lobby, the voice of 1960s soul singer Bettye Swann fills the industrial space, as young staff in striped jackets mill around inside a shiny pink copper front desk as round as a donut—with communication taking place through the protective clear screen between our faces.

Signs of the times are present: alongside George Nakashima rugs are social distancing stickers on the concrete floor, while elevator passenger numbers are limited to four.

The guest rooms share a similarly smooth mesh of Ace's American hipster DNA and **Japan's** artisan culture, as I discover after breaking the "sanitized" sticker sealing the door of my sixth floor room. My neat and compact room is like most others in the new building; the 27 guest rooms in the historic building have a loftier, lighter architectural feel, a perfect match with the bright Yunoki artworks on the walls.

The restaurants, quite wisely, stick to what Ace is best at: food that channels L.A. or New York, which will no doubt appeal to domestic crowds hungry for a more global menu. Mr. Maurice's Italian, by **Philadelphia** chef Marc Vetri, has playful no-frills Italian, sakura pizza, rooftop cocktails; Piopiko is all about tacos (unusual in Kyoto) by Wes Avila of L.A.'s **Guerilla Tacos**, in a lush party setting with a copper DJ booth and karaoke room. The third still unnamed restaurant, in a dramatic space with oversized lanterns and art deco touches, opens later this year with Portland chef Naomi Pomeroy doing avocado and crab cocktail, seared duck breast, and smoked wagyu pastrami eggs Benedict. Dining later at Mr. Maurice's Italian, I'm greeted by staff—eyes smiling above their firmly fixed face masks—who guide me among the nuanced silkscreen partitions of artist Kori Girard to my table (the tables next to mine are also left empty as coronavirus measures).

And then, another new **anti-coronavirus** tactic rolled out across all its restaurants appears: I'm presented with a QR code which I scan with my phone to access a contactless menu. I find it easy and convenient, but have visions of my parents' generation fumbling with phone scanners: fortunately paper menus are available on request.

Removing our face masks to tuck into beet plin with tarragon and swordfish meatballs on polenta, general manager Nico Black admits that opening in a pandemic has its own unique challenges, Zoom tasting sessions with chefs among them. "This is the first time for any hotel to go through such a situation so we're just following government advice and doing our best with what we know," he says. "There's no book on how to do this."

The biggest impact—endless delays aside—is perhaps something of a tactical rethink: although the hotel was initially hoping for 70 percent overseas guests, it's now firmly focused on the local community. (American travelers currently face travel restrictions into Japan.)

"The Kyoto community is incredibly important to us in any case," says Black. "It's the foundation to everything that we do."

The community I spy during my visit, scattered in the lobby, restaurants, and rooftop bar, is a stylish crowd that is perhaps a textbook example of new wave creative Kyoto. I cross paths with the directors of a Kyoto photography festival while a baseball cap-clad interior designer greets me with a COVID-19-friendly elbow bump.



Common spaces include three restaurants serving tacos, Italian and comfort food.

Courtesy Ace Hotel Kyoto

With big parties and social gatherings strictly off limits, it's clear that Ace faces a dramatic recalibration of its normal approach to community engagement—as Maggie James, Ace Kyoto's charismatic events manager, explains over drinks after a tacos feast in the buzzy Piopiko Lounge.

Highlighting a series of more subtle but still playful initiatives, she tells me about the rose project—already wildly popular on Japanese social media—which involves the Ace team dressing top-to-toe in red before cycling across the city delivering spirit-lifting bunches of roses from a local farm to friends.

“It's not easy organizing events in a pandemic,” says James. “We can't really plan anything at the moment. But we're taking things day by day.”

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