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By Nicola Chilton • November 08, 2023

What to Know Before Staying in a Ryokan in Japan

A ryokan is one of the coolest hotel experiences you can have in Japan—here's how to navigate one.



A tea lounge at Hoshinoya Tokyo. Courtesy of the Ryokan Collection

My first experience of a ryokan—a traditional Japanese inn—was about 20 years ago. I had just moved from my home in the United Kingdom and was living and working in northern Japan. My colleagues took me away for a weekend in the mountains, and I spent my time there simultaneously thrilled and bemused. Why were people walking around in their bathrobes all day? Why were meal timings so regimented? Why was my pillow so hard?

As much as I loved the experience, the things that surprised me most about my stay came from my misconception that a ryokan was simply a hotel with traditional Japanese design touches. Which was a mistake: Ryokan are so much more than that. They're immersive cultural experiences that are steeped in centuries-old customs and etiquette. This is why I headed to historical, rural ryokan as often as possible throughout my eight years living in Japan.

Because ryokan have their own distinct set of traditions and code of conduct, it's helpful for a first-time visitor to have a few basic concepts down before booking their stay.

“Ryokans are immersive cultural experiences that are steeped in centuries-old customs and etiquette.”

What is a ryokan?

In the simplest definition, a ryokan is a traditional Japanese inn, but it's more of a destination in its own right. As with some of the world's greatest hotels, the top ryokan draw guests with their design, ambience, food, and history. But there are many ways in which they differ greatly, and it's worth doing your research in advance to avoid uncomfortable surprises.



Naomi Mano, president and CEO of Tokyo-based luxury travel company [Luxurique](#), likens staying in a traditional Japanese ryokan to a bed-and-breakfast, but with an immersive cultural

component that might feel comparable to a castle hotel in other parts of the world. “It’s a similar feel,” she says. “A lot of these ryokan are hundreds of years old and still keep their traditions.”

One key difference she highlights is that ryokan are very food focused. “Ryokan have a history of being places where travelers would eat and then rest for the night, before continuing on their pilgrimage or journey,” she says, adding that she cautions against asking for a discount if you want to skip dinner. “Ryokan are first and foremost places to eat and appreciate the food, and using them as places just to bed down isn’t good etiquette.” It’s also worth noting that not all ryokan will be able to cater to specific dietary requirements.



Azumi Setoda was designed by Kyoto-based architect Shiro Miura. Courtesy of Azumi Setoda

Tatami floors, sliding doors, and futon mattresses

Hatsuko Tsujimura, Japan country manager at [Abercrombie & Kent](#), says that staying at a traditional ryokan is a highlight for many travelers to the country. “The simple, natural decor and quiet atmosphere make for a serene, rejuvenating stay,” she says. Expect elegant minimalist

rooms with *tatami* straw mat flooring, *fusuma* paper screens and sliding doors, and low tables and cushions for sitting on the floor.

If you've opted for a Japanese-style room, you can also expect to be sleeping on a roll-out futon mattress laid out directly on the *tatami*. While duvets are fluffy and cozy, pillows are often stuffed with *sobagara*—dried soba husks—that can feel hard, almost like crunchy beanbags. If you have allergies or need a particular type of pillow, it's worth asking your ryokan or travel provider in advance about alternative arrangements.



Tips and etiquette

Ryokan etiquette can take some getting used to for first-time visitors. In recent years, more modern ryokan have been opening across Japan, combining some of the best-loved traditions with hotel-style services and amenities that feel more familiar to international travelers.

In traditional ryokan, shoes are left at the entrance and are never worn indoors or on *tatami*. You'll notice people wearing *yukata*, kimono-like cotton robes, whether they're eating breakfast, heading to the baths, or—in some *onsen* hot spring resorts—walking around town. Feel free to do the same. Wearing a *yukata* is part of the ryokan experience.

Japanese travelers tend to treat ryokan as a retreat from urban life, considering them places to slow down and re-energize. As such, a mood of calm and serenity pervades the spaces. Whether you're in your room or a communal area, Tsujimura advises speaking softly “to maintain the tranquil atmosphere.”

For many Japanese travelers, the opportunity to take to the waters at a ryokan is a key highlight of a stay. Baths may be communal or private, filled with natural hot spring *onsen* water or enhanced with health-bestowing minerals, and made from cedar wood, natural stone, or tile. It's a unique and deeply relaxing experience, but bathing **comes with its own strict set of rules**.

And while tipping isn't common in Japan, ryokan are an exception. A dedicated *nakai-san* will be taking care of you during your stay, a role somewhat akin to a butler. "They will check you into the room and perhaps lay out your bedding," says Mano. "The *nakai-san* will hand you a folio with paperwork to fill in and within that, there is a small envelope in which you're supposed to leave a tip—anywhere between 3,000 and 5,000 yen (around US\$20 to US\$33) depending on the class of the ryokan."



A dish at Gora Kadan in Japan. Courtesy of the Ryokan Collection

Other things to bear in mind

If you have tattoos, you may encounter issues when it comes to bathing. "Most traditional ryokan still prohibit tattoos in their public, communal baths," says Tsujimura. "This is due to long-

standing stigmas associating tattoos with criminal gangs. However, some progressive ryokans are relaxing these rules.” If you have tattoos, check with your ryokan or your travel provider in advance. If your ryokan has a private bath, it shouldn’t be an issue.

Travelers with limited mobility or back issues may find traditional Japanese room with futons and floor seating a challenge. Many ryokan across Japan now offer the option of futons and Western-style beds and higher tables. The latter offer more comfort if you’re not used to sleeping or dining at ground level.

Seven ryokan—from traditional to modern—to try



This room at Gora Kadan in Japan features its own hot springs soaking tub. Courtesy of Relais & Chateaux

An advertisement for the Alaska Railroad. On the left, the Alaska Railroad logo is displayed in white on a dark blue background, with a yellow button that says "BOOK YOUR TRIP". The main image shows a yellow and blue train engine on a track, with a large glacier and mountains in the background. The text "VISIT SPENCER GLACIER BY TRAIN" is overlaid on the right side of the image in large, bold, white letters with a yellow outline. A small "X" icon is in the top right corner of the ad.

Gora Kadan

- **Location:** Hakone, Kanagawa
- **Loyalty program:** Always Be Expected (Relais & Châteaux)
- **Book now**

Set on the grounds of a former imperial summer villa, the luxurious **Gora Kadan** features striking architecture, gorgeous gardens, and 41 Japanese and Western-style rooms, some with their own private outdoor baths. *From \$1,268*

Hoshinoya Tokyo

- **Location:** Otemachi, Tokyo
- **Book now**

It may look like a sleek, urban hotel from its exterior. But inside, **Hoshinoya Tokyo** offers a **modern take on a ryokan**, balancing 84 contemporary rooms with tatami floors, ikebana flower arrangements, and an extraordinary open-roofed outdoor bath. *From \$281*

We Stayed at Hoshinoya Tokyo, a Luxury Ryokan—Here's What it Was Like



Yoshida-Sanso

- **Location:** Sakyo-ku, Kyoto
- [Book now](#)

Housed in an imperial residence dating back to the 1930s, [Yoshida-Sanso](#) blends classical Japanese architecture with art deco touches and views of Kyoto's eastern mountains across four rooms and a separate stand-alone guesthouse. *From \$820*

Kayotei

- **Location:** Yamanaka, Ishikawa
- **Loyalty program:** The Ryokan Collection Loyalty Program
- [Book now](#)

The *kaiseki* cuisine at the warm and welcoming 10-room [Kayotei](#) is one of many things that draw repeat visitors, and it's prepared according to the season with ingredients from local farmers and producers. But the onsen waters are as much of a draw, best enjoyed in one of the outdoor *rotenburo* baths. *From \$382*



Houshi

- **Location:** Komatsu, Ishikawa
- [Book now](#)

The first guests at [Houshi](#) arrived an astonishing 1,300 years ago to take the healing onsen waters. You can follow in their footsteps today, sleeping in spacious tatami-floored suites and grazing on seafood-centric *kaiseki* dinners. *From \$187*



Some of Kayotei's rooms feature private onsen. Courtesy of Kayotei Ryokan

Notoya

- **Location:** Ginzan Onsen, Yamagata
- **Book now**

Ginzan Onsen, at its most magical in winter when covered in snow, is one of the loveliest places in Japan to experience a traditional ryokan. **Notoya** is among the village's oldest inns, and it's an ideal place to soak up the traditions and customs, as well as the therapeutic waters. *From \$170*

Azumi Setoda

- **Location:** Onomichi-shi, Hiroshima
- **Book now**

You'll find comfy beds, cypress bathtubs, and shoji screens at **Azumi Setoda**, a 22-room 140-year-old family estate, the first property in the Azumi brand by the founder of Aman Resorts, Adrian

Zecha. Hyper-local cuisine made with French techniques is on the menu, and you can pop into Yubune, the community bath house, right across the street. *From \$450*

Nicola Chilton

Writer Nicola Chilton tells the stories of people, places, and unexpected adventures from her home base in Dubai.



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