

See all Travel

◆ Premium

Home > Travel > Destin... > Asia > Japan > Kyoto > Kyoto Articles | Telegraph Travel

A new kind of magic in old Kyoto: an exclusive first look at the dazzling Aman hotel



The arrival of Aman in Kyoto marks the first in a string of high-end openings for the traditional city CREDIT: NACASA & PARTNERS INC./NACASA & PARTNERS INC.

Follow

By **Danielle Demetriou**, DESTINATION EXPERT
25 OCTOBER 2019 • 12:17PM

I have known Sakura-san for approximately 20 minutes when she finds herself lost for words – something I can tell, even in our short acquaintance, is rare. Not long before, she greeted me in Kyoto station with a smile and a spy-like whisper into wires (“she’s arrived!”), before smoothly sweeping me into a waiting car.

Since then, she has chatted about everything from typhoons to parenting tips (plus an abridged story of her life). Now, however, still seated in the back of the car, I ask her to describe our destination – and she is suddenly silent. “You will lose your words too when you arrive,” she says eventually. “The sounds, the breeze, the nature.... it’s too beautiful to describe.”

It’s quite an introduction to Aman Kyoto. The hotel, which opens on November 1 and marks the third Aman in Japan, was always destined to have a sprinkling of magic. Not only is it set in Kyoto, a time capsule packed with traditional culture and more than 2,000 temples and shrines. Even more rarely, the hotel is cocooned within a “secret garden”, surrounded by more than 30 hectares of mountainside forests.



Aman Kyoto is located within a 'secret garden', amid 30 hectares of forest CREDIT: NACASA & PARTNERS INC./NACASA & PARTNERS INC.

• [Trip of a lifetime: everything you need to know about visiting Kyoto](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/japan/kyoto/articles/kyoto-japan-trip-of-a-lifetime/)

[\(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/japan/kyoto/articles/kyoto-japan-trip-of-a-lifetime/\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/japan/kyoto/articles/kyoto-japan-trip-of-a-lifetime/)

— ADVERTISEMENT —



Ad Choices



The cult hotel brand has long been synonymous with contemporary luxury, with minimal retreats for new-generation jetsetters across the globe, from the deserts of Utah to the canals of Venice. It's one of a string of high-end openings on the brink of shaking up Kyoto's hotel scene (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/japan/kyoto/hotels/>), as the nation braces itself for an influx of visitors ahead of the 2020 Olympics. Others range from the Ace Hotel to Park Hyatt.

As the view from my car window shifts from central Kyoto's crowds to residential streets, we eventually pull into a white stone-walled drive. I'm swept up in a flurry of uniformed staff taking bags, smiling, bowing, asking about my journey and whisking me into the Arrival Pavilion. Sunlight filters through the black latticed façade and into a serene interior of light textiles and curved-back chairs, plus flowers arranged in an abstractly folding ceramic vase.

It's classic Kerry Hill. The late Australian architect – who passed away last year – masterminded countless Aman retreats around the world, which all balance a clean-lined modernity with a deep sensitivity to its surroundings.

On the way to my room, we wander along wide paths that hover between forest wilderness and garden cultivation, with towering trees – Japanese maple, cherry, cedar, camellia – rising into the sky, alongside boulders encased in jewel green moss. As we walk, I hear how it was, according to Aman folklore, about 20 years ago that Hill first visited the site with the (since departed) founder Adrian Zecha – and it was love at first sight.



Rooms are scattered across six pavilions across the grounds CREDIT: NACASA & PARTNERS INC.

The original Kyoto owner was hoping to build a museum to showcase his vast collection of obi textiles – but his plans were abandoned after he passed away. When Aman stepped in, the basic garden foundations were already laid, around which the hotel is now structured, a process that took 20 years, mainly due to Kyoto’s strict regulations.

My room is in Hotaru – meaning “firefly” – one of six scattered pavilions which together house 24 rooms and two suites. Inside, it’s spacious and serene, with tatami mat floors, expanses of light wood, a monochrome painted scroll on the wall and a wabi-sabi vase containing snow willow berries – the perfect backdrop to the floor-to-ceiling windows framing a symphony of green.

I soon discover it’s a tricky place for timekeeping. Walking to lunch, I’m constantly distracted – by stray scarlet leaves; even an errant baby snake crossing my path. At one point, I enter a garden and find a plaque dedicated to Hill.



Taka-an serves sublimely delicate dishes at a long wood counter CREDIT: NACASA & PARTNERS INC./NACASA & PARTNERS INC.

- 15 incredible ryokans that will make you want to live in Japan

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/japan/galleries/the-best-ryokans-in-japan/>

Eventually, I make it (late) to Taka-an, a Japanese restaurant, where I'm greeted by bowing kimono clad staff who seat me at a long wood counter, beneath large white lanterns – and a chef silently serves a roll call of sublimely delicate dishes (from grilled Hokkaido seabream to Matsutake mushroom rice).

A quick origami and calligraphy session follows, during which I make several wonky samurai hats from washi paper before awkwardly copying the world's oldest cartoon (a 12th century image of frolicking rabbits and frogs by a monk) with a thick black calligraphy pen – and then it's time to spa.

In classic Japanese style, it starts with a bath. After washing on a wooden stool, I lower myself into the mineral-rich hot spring onsen baths, first indoors, and then outside, surrounded by sculptural boulders. My therapist Koko takes me into a simple treatment room. "Have you heard of shinrin yoku – 'forest bathing' in English?" she asks. "Being in nature makes your body and mind healthy. Here, forest bathing is everywhere."



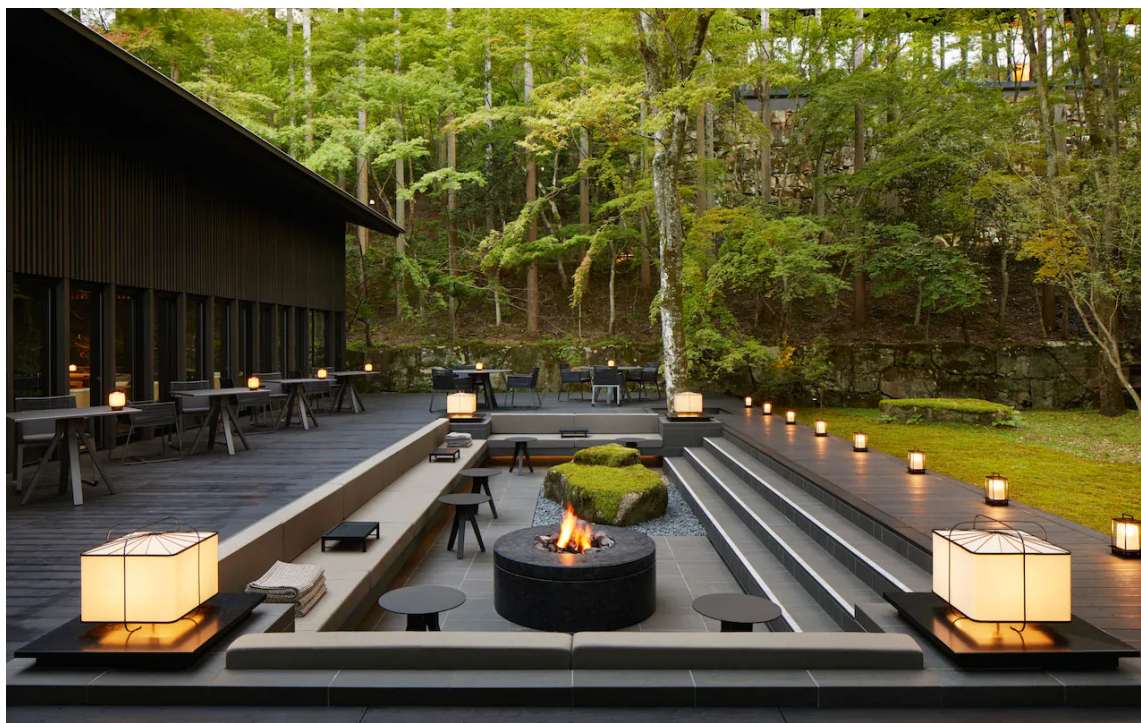
The indoor onsen at Aman Kyoto's traditional spa CREDIT: NACASA & PARTNERS INC./NACASA & PARTNERS INC.

She soaks my feet and guides me through a meditation, as a Buddhist bowl chimes. Along the way, she employs an alchemic mix of ingredients – sweet osmanthus, camellia oil, brown rice husks, a sprinkle of 24-carat gold and a cup of Kyoto sake so pure it's offered to the gods living next door at Kinkakuji temple. Suitably soaked, scrubbed and purified, I'm finally deemed ready for a restorative massage – after which I'm revived with green tea and wagashi sweets.

It's dark when I emerge, the gardens transformed into an otherworldly tableau of shadows and lanterns. I breathe in the cool evening air while slowly ambling back to my room – and then, of course, find myself late for dinner.

I make my way to the Living Pavilion, an intimate space with a round central fireplace, curved chairs and handcrafted wall tiles. I do a double take when I spy on the menu, somewhere between the fish carpaccio and wagyu beef fillet, fish and chips. It's a typically playful touch by chef Kentaro Torii, who fuses home-cooked Kyoto cuisine and Western dishes, often using foraged goods. The fish and chips, incidentally, turns out to be a chunk of coral trout, wrapped in shredded pastry on potato puree with pickled turnip.

Once back in my room, I soak in my hinoki cypress wood bath which is big enough for a family – it has two plugs and takes 30 minutes to fill – before falling into a deep sleep.



The Living Pavilion serves dishes by chef Kentaro Torii, who does a spin on home-cooked Kyoto cuisine CREDIT: NACASA & PARTNERS INC.

• **The best hotels in Kyoto** (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/japan/kyoto/hotels/>).

The next day starts early with an electric bike ride, one of a string of insider experiences offered to guests; others include spending time with a geisha in the invitation-only confines of an ochaya teahouse. Aman guests can meet a geiko (the Kyoto term for geisha) or a maiko (apprentice), playing ozashiki, drinking tea and enjoying a dance performance and dinner in the Kamishichiken district, the oldest of Kyoto's hanamachi, the 'flower towns' of the geiko and maiko.

The early morning scenery is refreshingly low-key compared to the usual tourist trail, as we pass schoolchildren, cycling housewives and local shops. Entering the red gates of an empty Shinto shrine, I copy Sakura-san by tossing a coin at the altar, clapping my hands and bowing in prayer. I then stroke and lift a famous stone, laid protectively on several cushions, which apparently makes wishes come true. Next stop is Ryogen-in temple, home to five small but exquisitely formed Zen gardens with calming lines of raked sand. Again, noone is around aside from the woman who runs the temple, who is trying to catch their escaped kitten before it jumps in the sand, and her monk husband, who gives us a quick raking demo.

Back at the hotel, Sakura-san says she has a surprise. Leading me up a steep path, I see an immaculate breakfast laid out beneath a black bamboo-framed paper umbrella. I tuck into wooden boxes containing Japanese treats, ranging from sweet-miso marinated fish to hot tofu (simmered by the chef before me).



Aman guests can meet a geiko (the Kyoto term for geisha), part of one of a string of insider experiences offered CREDIT: NACASA & PARTNERS INC./NACASA & PARTNERS INC.

There is still one more adventure to come: an exploration of the gardens. Smiling Aoi-san – self-described as “100 per cent Kyoto!” – leads our mission, wandering around with a basket strapped to her back. We stop whenever she spies something – from hot-scented wild sansho peppers, as served with my wagyu the previous night, to xnot be a praying mantis (Sakura-san, a few steps behind, consults “Google sensei” on her iPhone to clarify).

Soon, I spy my second surprise of the day: a grand moss-covered staircase, leading into the forest. Feeling like an extra from a Japanese fairytale, we climb the 43 wide steps, another legacy of the textile museum that was never built. At the top, we sit on straw cushions (whipped out of Aoi-san’s basket). Here, I’m asked to close my eyes and follow a meditation – and I find myself absorbing a soundscape of flowing water, birdsong and rustling treetops.

Eventually, as I slowly open my eyes, the forest once again comes into focus – and, this time, it’s me who is lost for words.

Doubles from £782 a room per night, room only. (amankyoto.com) (<https://www.aman.com/resorts/aman-kyoto>); 00 81 75 496 1333. 1 Okitayama Washimine-Cho, Kita-ku, Kyoto).

Contact us

[About us \(https://corporate.telegraph.co.uk/\)](https://corporate.telegraph.co.uk/)

Rewards

[Archive \(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/archive/\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/archive/)

[Reader Prints \(http://telegraph.newsprints.co.uk/\)](http://telegraph.newsprints.co.uk/)

Branded Content

Syndication and Commissioning

Guidelines

Privacy

Terms and Conditions

[Advertising terms \(http://spark.telegraph.co.uk/toolkit/advertising/terms-and-conditions/\)](http://spark.telegraph.co.uk/toolkit/advertising/terms-and-conditions/)

[Fantasy Sport \(https://fantasyfootball.telegraph.co.uk\)](https://fantasyfootball.telegraph.co.uk)

[UK Voucher Codes \(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/vouchercodes\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/vouchercodes)

Betting

Modern Slavery

© Telegraph Media Group Limited 2019