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Aman

KYOTO

For its third opening in Japan, Aman has brought to life a forest hideaway in Kyoto, dreamt up by the late, great architect Kerry Hill.

Words: Ianthe Butt • Photography: Courtesy of Aman

Good things come to those who wait, and Aman's latest opening – a series of low-slung black-stained timber pavilions, sprinkled through cedar-filled woodland where weathered stone paths weave under avenues of yama momiji maples and through mossy gardens fringed by a tinkling stream – is no exception. It's as though a hotel has sprung up in a magical forest.

While the brand's third Japanese property follows in the footsteps of Aman Tokyo (2014) and Amanemu in rural Ise-Shima (2016), its Kyoto outpost was dreamt up some thirty years ago by the late, great architect and long-term Aman collaborator Kerry Hill. The land, a leafy valley not far from the city's revered Kinkaku-ji temple (Golden Pavilion) in the foothills of the Hidari Daimonji mountain, was previously owned by one of Japan's foremost obi sash collectors, who planned to build a textile museum on the 32-hectare plot. While the museum never came to fruition, Hill saw the potential to create a retreat in the secluded estate.

After years of planning, Aman Kyoto opened last November. Hill's vision – architecture, interiors and lighting design executed by his eponymous practice Kerry Hill Architects (KHA) after his passing in 2018, with Aman curating art



The Living Pavilion is centred around a distinctive fireplace with a carved black granite base and black steel hood

pieces and collaborating on fabrics – cleverly manages to weave in the never-realised museum. The differing level platforms laid out by the original owner inform the location of the hotel’s pavilions – which house 26 guestrooms, a spa and two restaurants – with the aesthetic following that of the nation’s time-honoured inns. “The pavilions’ discreet design was inspired by the traditional Japanese ryokan,” say KHA. “Carefully integrated into the existing forest and kept residential in scale, the buildings have steel frames, zinc-clad roofs and use timber extensively.” Latticed façades also allow light to filter in and make a visual connection with the landscape.

Original pathways made with stone from the historic Tamba area – now the northern and central parts of Kyoto and Hyogo prefectures – have been retained and left uneven rather than being smoothed down. This remains a tangible example of Hill’s wider wish that guests would pause and slow down during a stay. Resembling a higgledy-piggledy stone jigsaw puzzle knitted

together by seams of glistening green moss, these pathways look like nature’s own take on the Japanese art form kintsugi, in which broken ceramics are mended with gilded lacquer to create something even more beautiful.

This mindful, slow-paced approach to design is evident throughout; guestrooms, split across six pavilions – the majority at 60m², other than a pair of presidential suites each offering two en-suite bedrooms, a living room, dining area and kitchen – feature low platform-style beds oriented towards floor-to-ceiling windows that frame treetop foliage and turtle doves shuffling through the undergrowth.

In keeping with Aman’s typical shibui ethos – a Japanese aesthetic whereby beauty is found in the simple and subtle – neutral, natural hues and clean lines are ever-present. Blonde Kyoto-sourced tamo ash cabinet doors slide to reveal storage space and drawers filled with Sghr (Sugahara) sake cups and Cutipol gold-dipped cutlery, as well as olive kimono-style and obi-belt cotton pyjama sets to be worn





Taka-an pays culinary homage to artist and polymath Honami Koetsu, who helped shape the culture and creative life of Kyoto's Takagamine district

after dips in the bathroom's rectangular ofuro tubs crafted from hinoki cypress wood. Separate toilet and shower cubicles feature a high-tech Toto washlet and Vola fixtures respectively.

Art and artefacts selected by Aman's Art Curator Ratina Moegiono, such as a hanging scroll by Sakai Yuji and an unglazed carbon vase by Terada Teppei, are displayed in a tokonoma – an alcove used to showcase items of artistic merit – and throw delicate shadows onto buttermilk-hued walls and smooth tatami flooring. Cool grey sofas, custom-designed by KHA and made by Cassina IXC are topped with silvery cushions by Kyoto-based textile company Hosoo – known for its three-dimensional weaving techniques – and help ramp up the homely factor, while a Nespresso coffee machine, Braun kettle and Bose speaker keep things contemporary.

At the property's heart is the Living Pavilion restaurant, where chef Kentaro Torii serves Obanzai-style cuisine – think truffle-topped traditional mushroom and rice, or black bean matcha parfait. The cossetting space is decorated

with ceramic raku tiles by Shigeo Yoshimura, cylindrical Echizen paper and bamboo lanterns, all centred around a distinctive fireplace with a carved black granite base and black steel hood, which appears to flow from the ceiling like a supersized wax drip. Hakkasu orange juice is served in parakeet green glasses by Sghr, while bespoke carved ash tables are set with black and gold tableware by Bali's Gaya Ceramic. This black and metallic colour palette is a recurring one, seen again in onyx coloured Hosoo cushions, which shimmer like opulent microchips when the light hits. "The theme of rich accents nods to the nearby Golden Pavilion, and the jet-black hues to the region's traditional ceramic style – unglazed black clay," explain KHA. A combination of beige leather banquettes and ash wood tables-for-two also look out onto a sunken outdoor seated area and a moss-covered Kerry Hill garden, named in the Australian architect's honour.

Outside, landscape gardener Aki Shimoda wanted to preserve the estate's existing forest



and restore parts to create an Edo era-style garden. "Gardens are considered spiritual places in Japan, so the aim was to make visitors feel connected to the surrounding nature," says Shimoda. During the build, to avoid damage from machinery, moss on the original stone pathways was temporarily transplanted elsewhere and then painstakingly replanted after construction finished. As you walk, the canopies of mature maple trees appear to float like clouds between two green layers – evergreens such as Japanese cedars above, and indigenous Japanese andromeda and camellia below. "The composition is simple, but the impression is striking," adds Shimoda. A marriage of slender trickling river and rainwater, which collects in caves and water tunnels, creates a pleasing soundtrack and self-irrigates the gardens too. Stone stairways and trails lead guests to upper-level pavilions then wind higher up to a sunken pond and wilder forest, ideal for al fresco shinrin-yoku (forest bathing) strolls.

In the ground-level spa pavilion, walls and

sloped ceilings lined with sen timber boards create introspective spaces, while green tea – known for its grounding effects – is charred in a cha-koro incense burner. Beauty treatments, which harness the power of local ingredients, are also on offer in three rooms, but the pièce de résistance is the onsen – indoor and outdoor bathing pools fed by water from naturally occurring underground hot springs – where guests trade white Ploh robes for restorative in-the-buff soaks.

Aman's efficient team can arrange similarly centring experiences in and around Kyoto, from monk-led Zen meditation to ikebana flower arranging classes and tailor-made trips to a plethora of exquisite gardens and temples. The fact that returning to this go-slow forest retreat feels as special as the city's finest historical and horticultural havens remains a lasting testament to Kerry Hill's peaceful, nature-filled vision.



EXPRESS CHECK-OUT
Owner / Developer: Wellspring Investment Holdings
Operator: Aman
Architecture and Interior Design: Kerry Hill Architects (KHA)
Landscaping: Akihiro Shimoda
Main Contractor: Shimizu Corporation
Project Manager: Atsushi Tanigaki
Art Consultant: Ratina Moegiono
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