Refined and beautiful, Japan’s allure is steeped in tradition and surprises, with hidden gems around every corner.
Fusing ceremony, tradition and modern innovation, Japan’s endless beauty is an artisan’s delight.

Her brilliant red face is memorizing in these colour and patterns, a perfectly proportioned scarlet slash against the white foundation covering her childlike round face. Mysterious brown eyes don’t give much away, the deep pools of dark that it’s almost impossible to distinguish the pupil from her iris. Tomitsuyu has wanted to be a geiko like her Kono name for a guide of all her life, and after thirteen years of training as a maiko, an apprentice geiko, seven days a week, is still unsure whether she will pass the test to become fully qualified in two years’ time. But under the steady hand of Reiko Tomimori, who owns the Tomikiku teahouse she inherited from her grandmother, Tomitsuyu will continue her maiko training in dancing, music, calligraphy and tea ceremonies. The former geiko, and her blue-eyed sister Tomitae, Kyoto’s former capital famous for its five distinct lantern-making methods, what stands them apart for its mass-produced competitors, however, is their distinctive lantern-making method of jibari-shiki (‘pulling style’), which requires considerable craftsmanship and time, a method they learnt as apprentices under their father Mamoru’s eagle eye and unequivocal dedication to perfection.

After the lanterns are crafted, Shun and Ryo work with local artists and calligraphers who decorate the lantern’s frames with a traditional glue. Together they have taken over Kojima Shoten while at the same time launching their own brand, Ko-Chibi, which offers a new style of lanterns suited to modern lifestyles. Their custom hand-made lanterns, available to order in over 100 shapes and sizes, illuminate many of the streets of Kyoto, including guesthouses, restaurants, bars and the Minami-za theatre, famous for its kabuki performances. In a small workshop in a nondescript lane, brothers Shun and Ryo Kojima are continuing the 10th generation of their family lantern-making business, one of just three traditional workshops in Kyoto, with a history dating back 220 years. To train them to be the consummate professional, Shun splits the thick pipes of bamboo into the thin strips that will form the backbone of the lanterns, while Ryo’s steady hand fixes the opaque paper to the lantern’s frames with a traditional glue. Together they have taken over Kojima Shoten while at the same time launching their own brand, Ko-Chibi, which offers a new style of lanterns suited to modern lifestyles.

The art of lantern-making is much older than the lanterns themselves, originating from the Edo period when lanterns were carried in processions to mark the end of winter and the start of spring. Unlike today’s decorative lanterns, which are displayed both indoors and outdoors, Edo-period lanterns were created for use in religious and cultural ceremonies, as well as for domestic purposes. Today, traditional lanterns are still used for Shinto religious ceremonies and for festivals, but they are also becoming popular as decorative elements in modern homes.

Local guide and interpreter Hinae Inaba, who works with Chris Rowthorn Tours (chrisrowthorn.com), is the ultimate companion when visiting the city, offering a unique insight into daily Kyoto life, with her quick thinking and local knowledge helping to negotiate little-known entrances to popular sites such as the Fushimi Inari- Taisha, a shrine in southwest Kyoto. Entering the woods, it’s a steady climb up the northern forested slope of Mount Inari with its 5,000-plus vermilion torii, the entrance to the shrine. After a network of strange little-traveled covered stone steps, shikyudo and shady clearances, it’s a gentle merge into a stream of visitors flowing through the mountain’s arcades of lichen-covered stone foxes, shrines and shady clearances, to the summit of Mount Inari, with its many temples and shrines.

Apart from the myriad temples, shrines and landscaped gardens, Kyoto is also home to hundreds of restaurants and bars, with over 100 Michelin-starred restaurants. Sample the specialties of the region, including temari (hand-rolled mounds of rice), dumplings of rice flour on skewers (mitarashi dango) and kyo-gashi, the pinnacle of multi-course dining which could only be described as food art. For the faint-hearted, Kyo-kaiseki, the pinnacle of multi-course dining which could only be described as food art. For the faint-hearted, Kyo-kaiseki, the pinnacle of multi-course dining which could only be described as food art.
From the carefully served kaiso dishes to the carefully wrapped bento boxes served in the heart of Kyoto at lunchtime, the genuine expression of omotenashi in Japan is felt at every turn. A heartfelt expression of hospitality, it’s a spirit that so aptly underpins many experiences.

The very nature of omotenashi makes it a difficult word to define: with no literal translation in English, it’s an attitude and a spirit that has been woven into Japanese culture for centuries. To be aware of it before a visit deepens an experience, a new appreciation for the bare of the bare, the careful presentation of a card or the taxi driver who steps forward in his white gloves to open the passenger car door.

At the elegant Ritz-Carlton, built on the banks of Kyoto’s Kamo river, the Japanese principle of omotenashi is alive and well. Close to downtown and office belies the discreet beauty hidden inside.

Around 30 minutes from the Ritz-Carlton, at the base of Kyoto’s serene mountains, in the famous Arashiyama Grove, a twisting winding narrow road leads that’s sheltered on either side by towering green bamboo that creates a shaded tunnel-like effect, with the sun streaming through to create natural lighting for bamboo appreciation minus the masses. Head to the area early in the day for guaranteed solitude.

The nearby Tenryū-ji temple is the headquarters of the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism. While it looks simplistic from the outside, the small gate and office belies the discreet beauty hidden inside, with a large car-park and pond mirroring the maple and botanical variety of the Tenryu-ji’s world-class gardens. In autumn the gardens are a riot of colour, while in azalea (cherry blossom) season the show is just as beautiful.

One would be hard-pressed to visit all of Kyoto’s temples and shrines in a lifetime, so to find a handful of quiet ones in between the guidebook must-sees is a necessity in this picture-book town. Above a wealthy residential area in the back streets is Komyo-in, one of the Buddhist sub-temples of Tofuku-ji. Sculptured pines stand proudly in the front garden, while inside the main mate are devoid of visitors. In socks and with hushed voices, the scene is one for quiet contemplation, the peaceful looking out on the carefully raked dry garden with a gentle mist of summer rain. The name “Komyo” consists of two kanji characters meaning “bright” and “light”. Complimented, it shines to the light given off from the mercy of Buddha.

Central to the garden design is the group of three stones that is thought to represent one of the Buddha’s巴 ('bright') and 智 ('Wisdom'). In socks and with hushed voices, the scene is one for quiet contemplation, the peaceful looking out on the carefully raked dry garden with a gentle mist of summer rain. The name “Komyo” consists of two kanji characters meaning “bright” and “light”. Complimented, it shines to the light given off from the mercy of Buddha. There’s quiet beauty everywhere here, even in the naming of the shrine.

Crossing rivers, the trains wind up past mountain ridges punctuated by tunnels cut through the rock, so soothing soundtrack as the Japan this way is a civilised and memorable way to travel. Travelling between cities in Japan is a necessity in this picture-book town.

Passing into Tokyo Station, the rhythm of the city is immediately evident, a phenomenal network of stairs, lifts and below ground moves millions throughout the city’s neighbourhoods every day. Just five minutes by taxi from this enormous transport hub, Palace Hotel Tokyo sits on the banks of one of the Imperial Palace’s numerous moats, its high-rise views looking back across to the tree-shrouded palace gardens. One of Tokyo’s most iconic luxury hotels, its location on exclusive Marunouchi with a handy Otemachi subway entrance directly accessible via the hotel basement makes it the ideal base to uncover all that this fascinating city has to offer.

Steps away is nearby Marunouchi Naka Dori, a tree-lined shopping and dining street very much like New York’s Madison Avenue.

Tokyo has been Japan’s capital since the Meiji restoration of 1868, taking over from Kyoto with a powerful confidence. For first-timers and return visitors alike it’s arguably one of the world’s most pleasurable, playful and alternate hypermodern cities, with good manners at every turn. It would be hard to leave a hard time here. The Palace offers a quiet sanctuary from the buzz, with 250 elegant rooms offering sophisticated design restraint and undeniably proportioned rooms in a city where real estate is at a premium. The independent Japanese-owned hotel

Kyoto’s Kamo River is the tin, and hard-boiled Michelle-starrer Gino Nishi, who chef Nishi prepares haute, the traditional indigenous Japanese experience. Dine at the newest counter to choose a picture-dining tour from steps away from the action as the two chefs prepare a haute cuisine based on local seafood specialties.

“Is socks and and hushed voices, the scene is one for quiet contemplation”
Tokyo feast: Tsukiji market is a hive of activity in the early hours, slowing to a close by 11am, as most of the local seafood are left behind to flutter in the breeze, tied to the main incense burner at the top of the stairs. Here they light and extinguish their incense sticks, before waving their hands to direct the smoke over their body, a gesture that symbols healing.

Good fortune is also on offer at Senso-ji and many Japanese temples with omikuji, a black and white fortune paper traditionally written in prose, based on poems written by a Buddhist monk. Contain your good fortunes retained, while the not-so-good-luck readings

Across the other side of the city, the energy is also high in Asakusa, the bustling centre of Tokyo's tourist districts. The mythical Tsukiji market, close to Ginza, is the world's busiest fish market and is absolutely worth a trip. There's nothing luxurious about the market's gritty working energy, but the authentic, narrow cobblestone pathways between row after row of kitchen and produce. Locals wander the stall lanes to inspect row after row of seafood specialties

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out for its exotic flavors like avocado and honey and strawberry milkshake. Pop into the Minshuku basement food hall in Ginza for more eye-popping displays of packaging, food art and outstanding customer service.

Amezaiku (candy art) is alive and well in Tokyo, particularly in the Ameshin studio in Nihonbashi shopping town in Asakusa. Tokyo Skytree Watch Seimen, Marugame is close to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, which offers panoramic views of the city from its two observation decks. On a clear day, Mount Fuji, Tokyo Skytree and Meiji shrine can all be seen on a large wooden dowel to the steaming kitchen area. Watch through the window as the kitchen hand rolls sheets of dough flat and cuts them into thick white noodles before moving them in an orderly line out the door. For lunch on the go, Marugame Seimen.

For more information, but I can promise you one thing: it’s an airport in Osaka after a ski trip. These little pancakes come to include global art trends with an emphasis on Asian artists. Pause at the Tokyo City View observation area on the 52nd floor for 360 degree views particularly at night or head to the rooftop Sky Deck for the open-air vista. The gleaming, glass-walled ultra-modern National Art Center Tokyo is Japan's largest exhibition space and is dedicated to special exhibitions (it has no permanent collection). For advance planning, tokyoartist.com is an art-the-minute app featuring current and future exhibitions and art events.

Offering an alternative viewing space with live opening hours, the world-class Mori Art Museum in the Mori Tower in modern Roppongi Hills showcases a range of major contemporary exhibitions, ranging from video art to 1990, with architect Kenzo Tange's design making the central building look like a giant skyscraper. The museum is part of Art Triangle Roppongi, which also features the Sumire Museum of Art and the National Art Center Tokyo with a handful of galleries in between. The gleaming, glass-walled ultra-modern National Art Center Tokyo in Japan's largest exhibition space and is dedicated to special exhibitions (it has no permanent collection). For advance planning, tokyoartist.com is an art-the-minute app featuring current and future exhibitions and art events.

This Marugame branch is close to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, which offers panoramic views of the city from its two observation decks. On a clear day, Mount Fuji, Tokyo Skytree and Meiji shrine can all be seen from the observatories. While no longer the tallest building in Tokyo, the landmark grey edifice has attracted volumes of acclaim since its completion in 1993, with architect Kengo Kuma’s design making the central building look like a giant skyscraper. Sunset and evening views over the zero-model city make it a worthwhile destination at night.

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The history of Japanese fashion is no more evident than in the fascinating hub of Tokyo.

Japanese designers have had a profound and singular impact on global fashion. No other country has been as successful in presenting a coherent fashion narrative about its unique style and changing vision, nor in nurturing second and third design generations that work together with a sense of teamwork rarely seen elsewhere.

Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo, of Comme des Garçons, have revolutionised the way we think of fashion, followed by a second generation of designers, such as Junya Watanabe and Jun Takahashi, and a new approach that mixes colour, pattern and traditional tailoring techniques, and has won a legion of new fans through her shows at Paris Fashion Week.

In turn, Japanese designers recycle trends and the mainstream in favour of reining the sculptural and philosophical possibilities of cloth and thread, which recall a concept from the last communist Corélal Boulanger: “A cosmology,” Boulanger said, must be “an architecture for design, a sculptor for shape, a painter for colour, a musician for harmony and philosopher for temperature”.

The beauty of Japanese design is its reimagining of fashion that balances tradition with innovation to celebrate all of the above qualities in a way that is consistent with its country’s origins yet uniquely unique when compared to anywhere else.

The capital of Japanese fashion is certainly Tokyo, which recalls a comment from the late couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga. “A couturier,” Balenciaga said, “is a linguist for temperance”.

Always a leader, never a follower: Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons still paves the way for Japanese fashion designers.

The beauty of Japanese design is its reimagining of fashion that balances tradition with innovation to celebrate all of the above qualities in a way that is consistent with its country’s origins yet uniquely unique when compared to anywhere else.
A typical Japan traveller narrative goes something like this along the “Golden Route”: Tokyo, Hakone, Mount Fuji, Kyoto, Osaka and perhaps Hiroshima, if there’s enough time. Of course, for anyone partial to a little white powder, there’s a whole snow scene in Japan to be explored.

Beyond Tokyo and the Golden Route, a wealth of regional areas offers ways to experience the beauty and luxury of Japan, staying at luxury ryokan and small hotels outside the main cities. Since the new bullet train service from Tokyo to Kanazawa was launched in 2015, the pretty castle town has found new favour. In just two and a half hours, Tokyo is a world away and classical Edo-period Japan comes into play in this UNESCO City of Crafts and Folk Art.

Amid tracts of tall timbers, moss-covered rocks and a dedicated blossom path, one of Japan’s three most famous gardens, Kenroku-en garden, is a living haiku. This is everything a Japanese landscape should be. It’s not hard to imagine the changing colours through the seasons; in the heat of summer it still emits colour and shade. Even the sight of three gardeners sweeping silt from one of the garden’s pebble-lined streams using traditional Japanese bamboo brooms is poetry in motion.

Just a walk from the castle is the Kanazawa 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, a low circular building with glass outer walls and a combination of community areas and public art space. Argentine artist Leandro Eredi’s fascinating Swimming Pool is a permanent installation in one of the central courtyards. An optical illusion creates the effect of seeing people immersed in the water when they’re actually just in the room beneath.

Kanazawa is home to Japan’s second biggest geisha area, after Kyoto. In the Higashi Chaya-gai district, a series of carefully preserved teahouses line the narrow streets. In between the teahouses are cafés, galleries and places to buy the area’s traditional gold leaf and lacquerware craft. The geisha houses have a screening of kimusuko (timber lattice) on the ground floor, with timber and glass on the outside of the first-floor entertaining areas.

For art lovers, journey south-west of Osaka to Naoshima, a small, isolated island offering one of the world’s most remarkable art and architecture experiences. Stay at Benesse House, a museum, restaurant and hotel centre in one, the unique concept a collaboration between billionaire art collector Soichiro Fukutake and Pritzker prize-winning architect Tadao Ando. The 49 luxury rooms are all Western in design, with a Japanese sensibility, and there’s unique artwork in each room, spread across four distinctly different buildings. To savour the one-of-a-kind experience, guests in the museum hotel have special 24-hour access to major works and site-specific installations, bringing new meaning to art after dark.

Scenic ROUTE

Journeying into Japan’s regional areas makes it even easier to appreciate the breathtaking beauty of this country.
Natural BEAUTY

Tapping into natural mineral-rich hot spring waters, Japan’s onsen experience has a curative effect on both body and mind.

S

ing in a private onsen (geothermally heated spring) while looking into the green canopy of maple, red pine and mountain cherry makes it nearly impossible not to relax. The silence is as powerful as the simplicity. Giving yourself up to nature to bathe in the curative waters of an onsen is absolutely unmissable on any visit to Japan.

For thousands of years, the Japanese have sought away hours in the country’s 3,000-plus indoor and outdoor onsen scattered throughout the volcanic belt of the country’s 6,852 islands, often grouped together in key hot spring areas. Onsen revered, the mineral-rich waters are considered to have restorative properties that heal aches and pains, ease and prevent illness and generally maintain a healthy body. According to Japanese tradition (hot spring law), to be officially classified as an onsen, the water temperature must be at least 25 degrees at its point of release. Whether they’re seeking healing, cleansing or general relaxation, millions of Japanese flock to the onsen every day, making a private, luxury onsen experience particularly special.

Tucked away on a winding road at the foot of the hills in the snow town of Yamashiro on Honshu’s west coast, Beniya Mukayu is revered as one of Japan’s best luxury boutique hotel experiences, with all the considerateness of a family-run ryokan, drawing its healing 40-degree waters from the nearby Yamashiro spring. Billed as one of the country’s best healing spas, Yamashiro has a 1,300-year history dating back to 725, when a holy priest named Gyoki reportedly found a crow healing its wounds in the spring water.

The onsen tradition is a fascinating window into old-world Japan, where great pride is taken in the hospitality, dining and beautiful bathing facilities offered. Beniya Mukayu is no exception to this tradition, standing on a hill of the sacred Yakushiyama, with all the tranquil Zen-like simplicity to be expected; in modernist architectural designs perfectly complementing the moss-covered Japanese garden at its center. This is a retreat where less is more and the traditions of Japan are quietly incorporated into all 17 of the Western-style and traditional tatami-mat rooms and suites.

Downstairs from the main lounge are separate men’s and women’s onsen with sauna. While getting naked in front of strangers may be confronting, the onsen is a much more private experience at Beniya Mukayu; however, if the quiet communal area is still too much, each guest room also offers a private outdoor onsen (known as a rotenburo) on the balcony of each room.

Melding the power of the spring waters with Japanese herbs, the onsen also offers Yakushiyama natural body products and further sensuality to the preparation. Compared to a new Japanese public bathhouse, the onsen is a much more private experience at Beniya Mukayu; however, if the quiet communal area is still too much, each guest room also offers a private outdoor onsen (known as a rotenburo) on the balcony of each room.

Finding Beniya Mukayu and other luxury onsen with onsen in Japan at tablehotels.com.
It’s early morning in Japan’s capital and the city is already wide awake. With the kaleidoscope of neon lights well and truly off, the early-morning Qantas flight from Sydney taxis into one of the world’s busiest airports. Welcome to Tokyo, a city that will almost certainly blow your mind, no matter how often you’re lucky enough to visit.

In 2015, Qantas began operating the first-ever direct flight from Sydney to Haneda International Airport, in addition to the Brisbane-Narita route, allowing Australians to arrive at Tokyo’s most central airport. The beauty of the departure time from Sydney is an arrival in Tokyo just after dawn, allowing a full day ahead for exploration, relaxing or making domestic flight or train connections.

The flight is just a little over nine and a half hours, passing in the blink of an eye with the constant stream of entertainment, in-flight dining options and, in Business Class, the enviable flatbed in the refurbished B747, now matching the standard of the A380. Supper is served not long after the seatbelt sign switches off: choose from Neil Perry’s Rockpool-inspired menu, including a generous selection of Japanese dishes such as a black sesame rice parcel for travellers keen to start their culinary journey immediately. Expect outstanding service plus a range of snacks, fruit and chocolates available at any time during the night, with premium beer, champagne and a wine list selected by Rockpool sommeliers. Sake is also available exclusively on flights to Japan.

There’s no doubt that after the premium dining it’s easy to reach into the vivid Kate Spade amenities kit, don the soft black eyemask and settle in for some uninterrupted hours of in-air slumber. The cocoon-like flatbeds, with adjustable entertainment screens and latest movie, music and television options, and the electric privacy screen between seats, maximises the pleasure of the journey.

The return flight to Australia is also perfectly timed, with the Qantas late-evening service from Tokyo providing an early-morning arrival into Sydney. A generous 40 kilograms of checked luggage and two carry-on bags for Business Class means all that Tokyo retail therapy is easy to get home. Now to unpack …

Perfect Timing
Qantas’s convenient daily flights to Japan guarantee a relaxed arrival in Tokyo.

FOR MORE INSPIRATION AND TRAVEL TIPS, VISIT THE JAPAN NATIONAL TOURISM ORGANIZATION SITE AT JNTO.ORG.AU.