



TRAVEL TALES

Skylines, Shrines & Culinary Rituals in **JAPAN**

A JOURNEY THROUGH TOKYO, KYOTO & OSAKA IS WRAPPED IN MANY LAYERS – FROM SOARING SKYSCRAPERS, CENTURIES-OLD RITUALS AND A CULINARY CULTURE THAT BORDERS ON ART.

By **Pallavi Pasricha**

With blurry eyes I turn to the window, and my eyes fall upon a perfectly clear view of Mt. Fuji or Fuji San as it's lovingly called by

the Japanese. I squeal with excitement, soaking in the majestic sight from my bed at Four Seasons Hotel Tokyo at Otemachi. Brushed with soft tinges of orange, red and yellow, Tokyo is sprawled out in front of me – it is the start of the autumn season. I recall what I was told by Mazhit Ismailov, Senior Director of PR and Communications during the hotel tour the previous day, "This property is all about the view." I couldn't agree more.

The experience begins the moment the lift opens on the 39th floor – the hotel is located on the top six floors of the sleek Otemachi One Tower, close to the Imperial Palace Garden. A water installation with rock formations sits

against floor-to-ceiling windows, framing the vast Tokyo skyline. That view follows me at the gym, the pool, the restaurants, the bar, and even from the bathtub.

TOKYO:

Living the best of both worlds

For a first-timer, exploring the world's second most populated city can be overwhelming. However, Tokyo has a way of working its magic on you. I heard Mazhit call it "New York on Steroids" and that impression stays with me.

Visiting Sensō-ji, one of Tokyo's most popular Buddhist temples, plugs me into its buzzy side. Red lanterns, huge crowds, colourful souvenir and snack shops line the path leading to the temple, where my fellow travellers linger. I pick up castella, a super soft sweet Japanese sponge cake with custard – it is just as I had imagined it to be.

After a few minutes at the packed main hall of the temple, I head to the landscaped Kiyosumi Japanese garden, designed for a stroll around a large pond. The tranquillity here is a stark contrast to the sensory overload at the temple. That's when I realised that Tokyo has a dual personality – fast paced with packed trains and people rushing, and a quieter side to escape and unwind.

The city abounds with experiences. I spend a fun afternoon at teamLab Planets, a digital and

interactive art museum where I waded through water in one installation, play with colours, and experience infinity in a mirrored room. The futuristic museum is one of the most interesting I have visited.

A visit to Tokyo is incomplete without tasting its food, and my first meal begins with, what else but ramen. Thanks to Instagram reels, I know about iconic ramen chains like Ichiran and Ippudo but have no idea that right below the Tokyo station lie eight famous ramen shops, each one specialising in a different one. On Mazhit's recommendation, I queue up at Hirugao, choosing the spicy creamy smooth chicken ramen with soft-boiled egg and slurp up this flavour bomb in just a few minutes. The Tokyo Ramen Street is a favourite with locals.

The evening is reserved for one of the best bars in Tokyo – Virtu – located at my hotel. Now, when a bar is ranked 45 on The World's 50 Best Bars and 18 on Asia's 50 Best Bars 2025, you expect a lot. After pondering over the signature drinks menu, I settle for Fig Cognac & Spices – as the name suggests, it has a flavour of 'Christmas'. But it's a tad too sweet for my liking. What I really enjoy is Yuzu Nagi, with mezcal, the Signature Highball and Smoked Ume Fashioned. The glittering city lights lend an edge to my potent drink, which is theatrically smoked at my table.

Dining at the hotel's Michelin star restaurant, Est, one evening, I learn that Tokyo has the largest number of Michelin star restaurants in the world (169), beating New York and Paris. The delectable modern French cuisine is accompanied with Japanese wine.

The next day after grabbing the legendary Egg Salad sandwich from the convenience store, 7-Eleven, I boarded the Shinkansen or bullet train to Kyoto for the second leg of the journey. Whizzing past urban homes and lush countryside at more than 300km per hour, I reach in barely a couple of hours.





KYOTO:

Where time slows down

Kyoto feels different from Tokyo. Home to more than 1600 Buddhist temples and 300 Shinto shrines, the former Japanese capital city lives up to its previous name 'Heiankyo' – which means 'Capital of Peace'. I can sense that in the vibe, the gentler pace and even the air.

In a city devoid of skyscrapers, Four Seasons Hotel, Kyoto, too is a low-lying structure with a minimalist design, built around a gorgeous 800-year-old pond garden 'ikeniya'. A nearly century-old pagoda, small temple and the pond

teeming with turtles, ducks, crayfish and others mirror the city. I find it so peaceful to just stand on the stone bridge for a few minutes, taking it all in. The fall colours add to the magic, making it seem as if I am part of a picture-perfect painting.

Dinner is at Sushi Ginza Onodera, the hotel's omakase restaurant, where chefs choose the dishes to serve. It is akin to a performance – the finesse with which they slice the fish, shave the ginger and prepare sushi is mesmerising. Chef Tadashi Matsumoto brings out a massive 200 kg sized pink bluefin tuna, then draws out a sword-like knife to slice it smoothly, as if gliding butter on toast. I cannot take my eyes off. The omakase begins with starters followed by Nigiri. Meant to be eaten in a single bite, I watch the chef meticulously shape the tuna, shrimp, toro, sea urchin and more. This is clearly the best meal of the trip.

Matcha may have become a global trend but I learned about the cultural significance of tea in Japan from my tea master at the hotel's beautiful Tea Ceremony Room - Shakusui-tei. The tea master leads our group inside through a low entrance requiring one to bow and bend to go in.

There is a reason behind this. "Bowling means that everyone is equal inside the tea house. There is no hierarchy or status," she says. Japanese sweets are served as she quietly whisks the matcha and then guides us on how to drink it and offers it respectfully to the person beside us. In just 30 minutes, centuries of culture and rituals unfold.

If Kyoto is a city of temples and shrines, how can I not visit them? I head to Fushimi Inari Taisha, a Shinto shrine famous for its bright vermilion tori gates. To escape the crowds, my guide leads me through a stunning, off the beaten forested path. The crisp cool air on my face, the rustling leaves add to the sense of calm. Soon I reach the impressive tori gates – there are about 10,000, all donated by either companies or individuals. During the descent to the main entry gate, I cross many smaller shrines.

The next day, before leaving for Osaka I visit yet another iconic shrine – the Kiyomizu-dera Temple that's over 1,200 years old and famous for its wooden terrace outside the main shrine area. The slight uphill walk to the temple is worth the effort – the stunning views of the foliage in delicate fall colours make for a fitting farewell to Kyoto.



OSAKA

The buzz is back

The skyscrapers are back in Osaka, also known as 'Japan's Kitchen'. Being a foodie, I cannot wait to dig into its local dishes. Part of a towering building, I get my room at Four Seasons Hotel Osaka on a high floor with the city spread out below me. What's different though is that the room is done up like a modern Ryokan, a traditional Japanese inn. An entire floor is dedicated to this experience. I remove my shoes in one corner as I step on the floor covered with tatami mat. There is a futon style bed, a comfortable mattress and low furniture. Done up in black stone, the bathrooms too have a Japanese style bath. Plugging into this centuries-old experience, I sleep like a baby at night. Breakfast the next day is a traditional Bento Box at Sabo lounge on this floor – accessible only to those staying here.

Although Osaka is famed as a culinary heaven, dining at a restaurant that serves Japanese and French cuisine takes me by surprise. At Sushi L'Abyse Osaka Yannick Alléno restaurant at the hotel, an omakase menu with lobster, wagyu beef, caviar and a variety of sushi and sashimi, ends with French desserts.

Dotonbori, also known as 'Osaka's Times Square' is the entertainment hub of this city with neon signs, clubs, bars and restaurants that are buzzing even in the day. The three local delicacies that must be tried include Takoyaki (octopus dumplings), Okonomiyaki - savoury pancakes and Kushikatsu (deep-fried skewers). I have a variety of Kushikatsu like shrimp, chicken, pork, sausage – they are deliciously crisp and golden brown.

I end the day with a relaxing, much-needed massage at the Four Seasons spa. While my therapist gently kneads out all the knots, I vow to return to Japan. One trip is simply not enough to experience a country with so many layers to uncover.

