Refined and beautiful, Japan’s allure is steeped in tradition and surprises, with hidden gems around every corner.

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Japan
Endless Discovery.
She’s clearly a local in Gion-machi, greeting and acknowledging local shopkeepers and neighbours, but causing her eyes to dance as fascinated passers-by stare shrewdly at her silk robes and red parasol, beaming only as she looks directly into the approved camera lens to consume her professional.

Much like the sun and beauty of Tomitsuyu and her blue-shadowed gaze, Tomonika’s charming good looks are steeped in tradition, the former capital famous for its fine gold district, cobblestone streets, temples, shrines, carefully preserved buildings and a mere 17 UNESCO World Heritage sites.

By day, the city is an endless treasure trove of history, Enespected architecture and opportunities to uncover the artisan traditions that have held the city strong for thousands of years. At night, the unmarked restaurants, tiny bars and teahouses come to life with lanterns, illuminating the narrow streets.

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 210 years. To train as a master, Ryo’s steady hand forms the opaque paper to the lantern’s frames with a traditional glue. Together they have taken over Kojima Motoshi while at the same time launching their own brand, KoChube, which offers a new style of lanterns suited to modern lifestyles.

Their custom handmade lanterns, available in over 100 shapes and sizes, illuminate many of the streets of Kyoto, including guesthouses, restaurants, bars and the Minamiza theatre, famous for its kabuki performances. What sets them apart from their mass-produced competition, however, is their distinctive lantern-making method, jibari-shiki (“affixing 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 delicate paper with unique imagery and write by hand; each design unique to their customer’s request and painted directly on to the lantern using brush and ink.

KoKo quietly boasts a roster of artisans like Shun and Ryo who have stood the test of time, long after the capital was relocated to Tokyo (in the 12th century). Entering the woods, it’s a steady climb up the northern forested slope of Mount Hiei with not even a local in sight. After a network of strange hidden-covered stone stairs, shrines and shady oakwoods, it’s a gentle merge into a stream of visitors flowing through the mountain’s 5,000-plus arches of vermilion torii (doors) which require considerable craftsmanship and time; a method they learnt as apprentices under their father Mamoru’s eagle eye and unquenchable dedication to perfection.

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A winding walkway of bamboo ... the sky and the landscape is a soothing backdrop. The serene atmosphere is perfect for a kaiseki meal. From the moment you enter the restaurant, the ambiance is designed to transport you to a world of tranquility. The seating is intimate and private, allowing for a focused dining experience. The chefs, both male and female, prepare the dishes with utmost care and precision, ensuring that every bite is a masterpiece. The cuisine is a blend of traditional and modern techniques, with the use of local and seasonal ingredients. The kaiseki meal is a multi-course affair, each course designed to complement the one before and after it, creating a harmonious dining experience. The dishes are beautifully presented, and the flavors are delicate and nuanced. This restaurant is a must-visit for anyone looking for a true kaiseki experience in Kyoto.
The markets are a short walk from Tsukiji Station. The all-white Alpine-inspired design and the flock of white robe cranes suspended from the roof is balanced perfectly, with the signature Japanese side-triggy point massage treatments, the ideal antidote to retail fatigue.

Any one with a hankering for tempura should book ahead for Palace Hotel Tokyo’s intimate Tatsumi six-seat tempura restaurant, where the chef cooks a range of vegetables and seafood fresh from Tsukiji market, presented on traditional ceramics and served with a delicate seasonal range of salt pairings to enhance the natural flavours of the day’s offerings.

“Anyone with a hankering for tempura should book ahead for Palace Hotel Tokyo’s intimate Tatsumi six-seat tempura restaurant”

The mythical Tsukiji market, close to the Ginza area, 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 main income 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 symbolises healing.

Good fortune is also on offer at Senso-ji, and many Japanese temples with origami, a black and white fortune paper traditionally written in prose, based on poems written by a Buddhist monk. Custom sees good fortune retained, while the not-so-good-luck readings are left behind to flutter in the breeze, tied to the main incense burner of the day’s offerings. Incense is burned in Chinese temples with good fortune retained, while the not-so-good-luck readings are left behind to flutter in the breeze, tied to the main incense burner of the day’s offerings.

In a city where eating is almost a spectator sport, there’s no shortage of places to snack, lunch or dine. After a day on the streets of Tokyo, it’s hard to resist some quiet time back in your room, soaking in the open-style bathtub looking out to the Tokyo skyline. Tokyo skyline.

Tokyo’s best chefs and restaurants. The surrounding street markets and stores’ food basements. Tokyu Food Show and Isetan Hong Kong and filling bamboo baskets with fresh produce. The legendary Kyubey in Ginza district (one of Kyubey’s seven Tokyo and Osaka restaurants. Watch the dénoue of sushi come after at the counter as your personal chef prepares an unforgottably pristine plate of roof. A handful of commercial cooking supplies. It’s a good place to pick up authentic Japanese kitchenware. A handful of key stores stand out, including: Fussati for porcelain, teapots and cutting boards; and Kama-Asia, showcasing handcrafted porcelain and gem-like crane-shaped gravers.

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Hotel Tokyo, Marunouchi.

range of major contemporary exhibitions, ranging from video art to Mori Art Museum in the Mori Tower in modern Roppongi Hills showcases a it a worthwhile destination at night. Sunset and evening views over the neon-studded city make 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 on a large wooden dowel to the steaming kitchen area. This Marugame branch is close to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, who 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 Kenzo Tange’s design being the central pillar. The building’s glass façade provides a clear view to the city. Several observations decks offer panoramic views of the city, including the Sky Deck, which is located on the 52nd floor.

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Neil Perry AM shares Creative Director, Food, Restauranteur and Qantas

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SPECIAL FEATURE.

Restauranteur and Qantas

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Taste of Tokyo

Restauranteur and Qantas

Creative Director, Food, Beverage and Service

Neil Perry AM shares his culinary inspiration.

I have been and there are 50,000 restaurants in Tokyo. It’s hard to keep track of them all, but I try. I have found that there is something special about the way the Japanese combine different ingredients to create new dishes. What I love about Japanese cooking is how it is constantly evolving, with new techniques and ingredients being incorporated into traditional dishes. This makes Japanese cuisine a never-ending source of inspiration for me.

The level of quality and detail in the food is second to none and the presentation is always meticulous. It’s not just about the taste, it’s about the experience as well. The whole experience of dining in Japan is something that I always look forward to.

In Tokyo, I love the bustling energy of the city and the way that it never sleeps. There is always something happening, whether it’s a traditional tea ceremony or a modern art exhibition. The city is constantly changing and it’s a real privilege to be able to witness it firsthand.

For lunch on the go, Marugame Seimen udon noodle restaurant is unbeatable (there are 65 in Tokyo in total but the Shinjuku branch is tucked away in a quiet street). Watch as Tokyo’s Edo period

Hand rolls sheets of dough flat and cuts them into thick white noodles, a breezy range of 125 stores and restaurants with the light-filled Kiriko Lounge on the sixth floor. Stop to take in the overhead lighting while sipping coffee and looking down on Ginza’s Sukiyabashi crossing. Tokyo Plaza also features a Handi Expo Culture Mall showcasing Japanese treasures such as plastic food, wooden phone covers and the ubiquitous range of Japanese stationery. The art of Tokyo shopping is no more apparent than here at the plaza.

Seven subway stops away from Ginza is Shinjuku, home to the world’s busiest train station. Enter from the underground network to a plethora of high-rise buildings, video screens, neon lights, shopping centres, restaurants, cafes, departments stores and footpaths packed with shoppers and commuters. It’s the ultimate Tokyo “here I am” moment. Pause a few minutes and drink in the sight of pedestrians cross from every corner when the traffic lights turn red. For an inner-city oasis, look for Shinjuku Gyo-en National Garden, a park that is home to more than 1,500 trees in blossom from the end of March to early April.

Harajuku is a mecca for Tokyo’s under-30 fashion collective, with everything from small designer brands to Japanese streetwear. There are plenty of Tokyo shops in the surrounding areas, including the new White Anchor Chattanooga store, on Cat Street, the successful US export Lake’s Lobster, which serves 30 deep-fried oysters and lobster, and the famous Tokyo-based lobster rolls. Countless designers, global trends and fashion subcultures get their start in this small neighbourhood of Tokyo.

A counterpoint to the pop-culture manic experience of Harajuku, the tree-lined Omotesando street offers a more refined shopping pace with a steady stream of well-dressed locals enjoying the stylish, French patisseries, contemporary architecture, luxury international brands and Tokyo’s reverberating perfusion of visual merchandising. Window shopping never looked so good.
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 cohesive 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 generation, including Tao Kurihara, Akira Naka, and Hiroaki Ohya.

Watanabe and Takahashi, has resulted in a design continuum and a canon unique in the world. A key concept in Japanese design is sabi-sabi, sabi meaning “without decoration” and sabi meaning “atmospheric and old”. This translates to garments that find beauty in imperfection and an aesthetic that meditates on the wonder of flaws and chaos disrupting the natural order. Takahashi explores sustainable with extraordinary outerwear referencing traditional Japanese textiles and the beauty of nature, which can involve anything from a windmill on the neck to faces masked with flowers. As Watanabe has said, “I have never thought about whether or not I am successful … I am not interested in the mainstream.” Instead, he creates mimetic garments that are perishing, fascinating and seductive in equal measure. Suki designer Chitose Abe takes a more feminine, but no less conceptual, approach that mixes couture, pattern and traditional tailoring techniques, and has won a legion of new fans through her shows at Paris Fashion Week.

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The beauty of Japanese design is its reimagining of what it could be, using concepts such as asymmetry and minimalism to produce radical silhouettes, frayed and distorted using concepts such as asymmetry and minimalism reconstructed their own vision of what it could be. It paled in shock value compared to Kawakubo’s 1997 collection Body Meets Dress, which also involved creating clothes with padding with padding in the wrong places to create hunchbacks, swollen hips and other growths on the body. This was part of questioning conventional beauty, and Kawakubo’s work is consistent with its country of origin yet utterly unique when compared to anywhere else.

The capital of Japanese fashion is certainly Tokyo, where Miyake references the traditional art of origami – the art of folding paper – which recalls a comment from the late couturier Yves Saint Laurent that “we are living in a world of fashion, not of clothing”. One of the most famous Tokyo houses, Issey Miyake stores, including Issey Miyake Men and Pleats Please, is a six-storey building filled with futuristic, cutting-edge designs in a city that has a plethora of fashion districts that are as diverse as they are plentiful.

Yohji Yamamoto and Issey Miyake both have flagship stores in Tokyo, where Miyake references the traditional art of origami with his Pleats Please line, which uses new fabric technology to create garments that are washable, wrinkle-free and elegant. His APOC range of Commes des Garçons, Kawakubo is often referred to as the world’s most influential living fashion designer. She made her debut in Paris in 1981, then followed in 1982 with a collection aptly named Destroy, as she would go on to subvert all fashion conventions by consistently challenging established notions of beauty. Destroy, for example, featured tattered, asymmetrical and holey garments in an entirely new aesthetic, still seen by hand using haute couture techniques.

Kawakubo was soon so famous that her black-lab fans were dubbed “the cows” by the Japanese press, but the designer told the New York Times in 2003 that she “never intended to start a revolution”. She only wanted to show “what I thought was strong and beautiful. It just so happened that my notion was different from everybody else’s”. While Destroy was confronting to many, it was hailed as a new “aesthetic of poverty”.

Images: Chris Court Getty Images Words: Georgina Safe

Tokyo HOT SPOTS

ISETAN (SHINJUKU)

A luxury fashion mecca stocking the world’s top brands with a separate food hall. Browse theross section for six suites and other traditional accessories.

COMME DES GARÇONS (AOYAMA)

This six-storey green glass Herzog & De Meuron building in Omotesando street houses the flagship for Rei Kawakubo’s dark, asymmetrical designs, and stocks almost every brand within the Comme des Garçons stable.

ISSEY MIYAKE (AOYAMA)

The Tokyo flagship carries the full line, and a short walk away you’ll find other Issey Miyake stores, including Issey Miyake Men and Pleats Please.

PRADA (AOYAMA)

This six-storey green glass Herzog & De Meuron commercial is an architectural marvel and one of the most distinctive buildings in Tokyo. The larger Prada stores in Japan centre every line presented by the Italian luxury label.

MEH MU (AOYAMA)

This revolutionary store was also designed by Herzog & De Meuron and sits opposite the Prada flagship.

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

Rei Kawakubo did not train as a fashion designer. Instead, she studied art and literature at Keio University in Tokyo, which is perhaps why she questions the very codes fashion has been defined by. As the creative director of Comme des Garçons, Kawakubo is often referred to as the world’s most influential living fashion designer. She made her debut in Paris in 1981, then followed in 1982 with a collection aptly named Destroy, as she would go on to subvert all fashion conventions by consistently challenging established notions of beauty. Destroy, for example, featured tattered, asymmetrical and holey garments in an entirely new aesthetic, still seen by hand using haute couture techniques.

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"My approach is simple,” she once told The New York Times. “It is nothing other than what I am thinking at the time I make each piece of clothing, whether I think it is strong and beautiful. The result is something that other people decide.”
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. Argentinian artist Leandro Erlich’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 cafes, galleries and places to buy the area’s traditional gold-leaf and lacquerware craft. 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 the billionaire art collector Soichiro Fukutake and the 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.

With over 300 ski resorts in Japan, there’s no shortage of places to ski and board.

HOKKAIDO
The Hokkaido powder belt is home to several ski areas, including Akan Lake and Rausu Lake. But a luxury stay at one of the best options are within the Niseko area, outside of Sapporo.

SHIGA KOGEN IN NAGANO
With 19 ski areas and 52 lifts, Nagano, north-west of Tokyo, is Japan’s largest ski destination. Head to the furthest point and least-visited, Okushiga Kogen, for unspoilt natural scenery with some of Japan’s best powder snow – and snow monkeys. Hire a local guide for an even deeper exploration of the area.

ZAO IN TOHOKU
The northern end of the main island of Japan, Tohoku has a number of resorts, including Zao Onsen, which is accessible via bullet train from Tokyo. Zao Onsen has 26 runs, 37 lifts and is renowned for its, tree-lined giant trees known as “snow monsters”.

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Natural BEAUTY

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

Set in a private cave (geothermically heated spring) while looking into the lace green canopy of 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 in the curative waters of an onsen is absolutely immemorable on any visit to Japan.

For thousands of years, the Japanese have exploited hot springs in the country’s 6,852 islands, often grouped together in key hot spring areas. Openly 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 scholars, hot spring laws (onsen sho) were officially classified as an onsen, the water temperature must be at least 25 degrees at its point of release. Whether they’re involving healing, dressing or general relaxation, all kinds of Japanese onsen to the cure experience every day, making a private, luxury onsen experience particularly special.

Tucked away on a winding road at the foot of the hills in the coast, Beniya Mukayu is rated as one of Japan’s best luxury boutique hotel experiences, with all the components of a family-run ryokan, drawing its healing 40-degree waters from the nearby Yamashiro spring. Billed as one of the country’s best hot spring areas, Yamasiro 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 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 post-modern architectural design perfectly complementing the moss-covered Japanese garden at its centre. 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 rooms and suites.

Downtowns from the main lounge are separate men’s and women’s onsen with a sauna. While getting naked in front of strangers may be confronting, the onsen ritual of bathing on the wooden stool, rinsing and preparing for the hot spring waters is worth the journey, with every step as liberating as the next. The pubic area is still too much, each guest room also offers a private outdoor onsen (known as a mizuya) on the balcony of each room.

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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.

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