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The Gora Kadan concept is to combine nature and nurture.

# THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

Originally built for Emperor Kaninomiya in 1930, Gora Kadan was bought in the 50s by the grandparents of former Milan fashion designer Miwako Fujimoto and nearly 40 years later opened by her as the foremost luxury ryokan in Japan. Mark C O'Flaherty takes comfort in a modern take on a Japanese tradition.

Though often intimidating or even baffling to the first time western visitor, an overnight stay in a ryokan is the best way to bond with traditional Japanese culture in all its imperial, overblown, cherry blossom romantic glory. In a country that continues to lose touch ever more rapidly with the more ceremonial elements of its ancient roots, the ryokan experience harks back to a more genteel, respectful, familial age - which is one of the reasons why you have to leave Tokyo to find one.

Comfort and hospitality is the ethos, and even if you lose track of what slippers you're supposed to be wearing where, can't identify many of the ingredients in your kaiseki banquet, or find the manoeuvres through the rooms with their perennially low ceilings reminiscent of the Krypton Factor, there's no other experience that will bring you so close to the Japan of your imagination.

Not all ryokans are created equally of course - the best are as, if not more, exclusive and expensive as any seven star hotel. By consensus the best in the country is run by Miwako Fujimoto. Fujimoto's Gora Kadan in Kanagawa, in the national park of Hakone, has exquisitely groomed gardens, the most meticulous minimalist tatami, shoji and lacquered interiors designed by architect Kiyoshi Takeyama, and a state of the art western spa.

The building was originally built for Emperor Kaninomiya in 1930. It was sold to Fujimoto's grandparents in the 50s and opened as a ryokan in 1989. In 1992 Gora Kadan joined Relais & Chateaux.

'We're not just offering a place to sleep,' says Fujimoto, who left a fashion career in Milan to open Gora Kadan. 'We are trying to offer precious memories, of Japan and the spirit of our hospitality.'

Gora Kadan's success is in blending the contemporary with the traditional. 'When we opened, the luxury ryokan did not exist in the market,' says. The ryokan represents authentic Japanese culture but it's also about modernity too. It's important to provide modern comforts, like showers and state of the art toilets. Every small design detail is crucial, but we've also paid great attention to the natural environment. We have used natural colours everywhere, mainly wood tones. Our name is also our theme, Kadan means "flower garden", so you can always smell flower incense around the ryokan.'

Fujimoto is acutely aware of cultural differences - her staff speak English, and western style breakfasts are available on request. Few guests, from Hollywood stars to Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, turn down the opportunity to enjoy the glorious main event of the evening: the kaiseki meal - a seemingly endless array of small, exquisitely presented dishes. 'We offer a different menu every month,' she says. 'And the seasonality of the ingredients is as important as the presentation.' From its food to the zen-inspired geometry of its architecture, there are few purer ways to experience the best of Japanese culture, old and new, than at the best ryokans. And Gora Kadan is definitely one of them. ■

[www.gorakadan.com](http://www.gorakadan.com)



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Ginrinso is perched on top of a natural hot spring.

## THE BEST OF THE REST

### Hiiragiya

Kyoto's finest ryokan is in a historic 1818 side-street building - a more evocative structure you'd be hard pushed to find in the Floating World. Past guests have included Charlie Chaplin and Pierre Cardin, while the modern-day Hiiragiya boasts all the high tech facilities of a Four Seasons alongside the tatami mats and rock gardens: flat screen high-definition TV sets are dressed in hand woven

silk kimono-style covers. Staff speak relatively little English, but they are wonderfully friendly and always on hand to help you tie the obi on your robe for your in-room dinner, should you find it unfathomable.

[www.hiiragiya.co.jp](http://www.hiiragiya.co.jp)

### Kaichoro

The newest Japanese-style inn in the country, in the hot spring town of Ikaho Onsen, has a fine pedigree - its owner Tomohide Fukuda is a

17th-generation ryokan owner. Kaichoro is radical - its lighting design wouldn't be amiss in a particularly swish Alan Yau dining room, while its Saryoa restaurant is as architecturally mod and swank as anything that's opened in London over the last two years. This is trad-Japanese filtered through the Salone del Mobile in Milan, with Mid Century Modern elements to some of the wooden furniture.

[www.kaichoro.jp/english](http://www.kaichoro.jp/english)

### The Tawaraya

One of the most celebrated ryokans in the country, certainly in terms of the who's who guest book, which includes Marlon Brando, Alfred Hitchcock, Leonard Bernstein and Richard Avedon, the Tawaraya gets everything right. As Hilton heir Barron Hilton has said: 'Tawaraya is a lesson to hotel men on what service is all about.' There's no restaurant or bar - it's all

about peace and privacy here, and the design is sleek and sensual, with tatami, polished wood and bamboo flooring and rich murals and textiles reminiscent of Rothko colourfield canvases.

**Tel: 075 211 5566**

### Ginrinso Hokkaido

A short drive from Sapporo, in the port city of Otaru, the view over Ishikari Bay is stunning. Ginrinso is atop a natural hot spring

so the spa element is strong - open air onsen bathing is a highlight of any visit. There are some lovely, unusual touches, including plaster friezes on the ceilings and a karaoke bar. Architecturally the setup is as picturesque as you could hope for, with highly ornate temple-style roofs, and of course all the manicured gardens that the owners could fit into the grounds.

[www.luxuryryokan.com](http://www.luxuryryokan.com)

