



ACCESS ALL AREAS

Enter the hidden world of a revered sushi chef, be welcomed at a one-of-a-kind ryokan and learn the secrets of the forest on an intimate tour of the Japan most people never experience.

Story by Alexandra Carlton



It's 2.30pm on a Friday when I duck down a side street in Tokyo's fashionable Minami-Aoyama district to a narrow doorway marked with a black-and-cream oblong of kanji lettering, the unremarkable entrance to one-Michelin star Sushi Ryūjirō (pictured on previous page; ggrc700.gorp.jp). Reserving one of the 11 seats at chef Ryūjiro Nakamura's main counter – or the extra six in the anteroom serviced by his sous chefs – is notoriously difficult, with bookings usually backed up for months in advance (and then more often than not reserved for wealthy regulars with personal connections to the guy who wields the knife).

I don't have a booking; I'm not even here to eat. I'm doing something even harder than snagging a table – I've been granted a look around the kitchen before Chef Nakamura opens for service.

As I squeeze through the passageway with the woman who's made this possible, Rachel Lang from Melbourne-based luxury tour company Plan Japan (planjapan.com.au), Chef Nakamura leaps up from his seat at the counter and roars his greeting before wrapping Lang in a hug. I sip tea as the room fills with loud Japanese chatter.

Few locals would ever have seen one of their rock star sushi chefs like this. The country's best are famously reserved and stony-faced, their restaurants like temples. For most, a seat at Ryūjirō's 25-centimetre-thick Kiso cypress counter is a rarefied place of restraint and serenity.

But today, everyone's wearing T-shirts and wooden flip-flops. One guy's deboning unagi, a freshwater eel, while someone else slices corn. As I tiptoe into the one-man-wide galley kitchen, one of the chefs

is frying up okonomiyaki (savory pancake) the size of dinner plates for the staff meal, sprinkling them generously with katsuobushi (bonito flakes). "No customer would ever, ever see this," says Lang as I press myself against a dormant Jospier grill to let one of the team dart past. I feel like a teenager who's gone backstage at a Harry Styles concert.

Travelling with Plan Japan is like nothing I've ever encountered. This money-can't-buy behind-the-scenes tour of a Michelin-starred kitchen is just one of the stops on my five-night stint; we also retreat to elevated regional ryokans, cover stretches of the country's ancient walking trails, check out lesser-known ramen spots and wake up in Tokyo's best hotels. It's mostly stuff I could probably arrange myself but Lang magics away all the angst of planning and logistics, and offers a different sort of "in".

In 2017, Lang hosted a group of real estate professionals and secured one-on-one time with Kengo Kuma, the architect who designed the Japan National Stadium for the Tokyo Olympics. While anyone who wakes up early can check out the famous Toyosu Fish Market, Plan Japan can open doors usually closed to the public, where the negotiations between top chefs and the most sought-after vendors take place. And any good hotel concierge can organise tickets to a sumo match but wouldn't happy-hour drinks with one of the giants of the sport be more fun? The more time I spend with Lang, the clearer it becomes that there's not a lot she won't do to dazzle me or any of her guests.



She once even managed to convince a top chef to open on his day off so she could bring a group that took up all of his eight counter seats – spots that are booked up to a year in advance. (Plan Japan food tours are usually capped at around eight or nine people to fit the invariably tiny omakase restaurants.) "Booking restaurants in Japan isn't like London or New York or somewhere like that," explains Lang. "Over there, if you've got money you can buy your way into whatever you want. It doesn't work like that here. The top restaurants here are 'introduction only'. You generally only have a chance if you know someone. And even then it's nearly impossible."

Several days later, we're about 250 kilometres west of Tokyo in the mountainous region of Kamikochi in Nagano Prefecture. As I step out of the car there's a crispness to the air. Kamikochi is part of the Chubu Sangaku National Park in the Northern Japanese Alps, where shady pines and willows and clear streams filled with excitable brown trout remind me of the Canadian wilderness, something I'm sure would be even more pronounced if one of the park's brown bears decided to make an appearance.

Local guide Hiroshi takes us along several well-marked trails, pointing out the properties of different trees. "Come back in late October, that's when this tree's leaves will turn gold and fall to the ground like golden rain," he says of the tall, pine-like Japanese larch

that are clustered in one particular grove. After about an hour, we reach a turn that you'd barely notice without a knowing set of eyes. "Can I take you to a secret spot?" he asks. This is what I always want from travel; show me the secrets.

He leads us along a rocky pathway to an ice-blue stream, burbling over smooth white pebbles, then points out the towering Mount Myōjin-dake, which means "Light of God Mountain", a detail you won't find in many guidebooks as the Shinto significance of this area has largely been overridden by its secular designation as a national park. "I like to come here when I have some time, just to chill by myself next to the willow and yew trees," says Hiroshi. "No-one else really knows it's here."

Practising hospitality that has remained unchanged for centuries, ryokan follow a gentle, comforting rhythm. On arrival you're greeted warmly, usually with hot tea and a Japanese sweet made from something local, perhaps plums or chestnuts. In your room a cotton yukata is laid out and after changing, you stroll to the onsen, either shared or private, ideally with mountain views. Dinner and breakfast are intricate, multi-course, highly-seasonal processions.

Byaku lodge (above, left and right; byaku.site) in the tiny riverside town of Narai-juku, one of the ancient post towns (rest stops for travellers) along the Nakasendo Trail in the Kiso Valley, is unlike any



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ryokan I’ve stayed at. A former sake brewery (the front door is still marked by a large ball of cedar, the traditional ornament used to indicate that new sake is ready to buy), the property follows the playbook of other ryokan, with an extra chapter on elegant indulgence.

The interior walls of my two-storey villa are textured with muted greys and tans – straw, concrete and wood – and I find two sets of soft linen pyjamas the colour of bark laid out on the loft bed. The bathroom is modern with toiletries made from sake products; I pick up a soft sachet and breathe in the scent of fermented lees. A knock on the door heralds the arrival of a bowl of grapes and a glass of wine, courtesy of Lang.

On the evening of our Kamakochi hike, we sit down to dinner in our pyjamas. The dining room is in the main part of the former brewery, the fermenting tanks preserved behind glass and a secret sake speak-easy hidden away in a small stone alcove. Like most ryokan meals, there’s a written menu to let you know what’s about to arrive but here there’s also an illustrated map that explains the provenance of each ingredient, from the sweet corn and soba sourced minutes away to the wasabi and carp found further north in the mountains.

The highlight of the eight-course kaiseki experience is a simple plate of autumn vegetables called “The nature of Kiso on a plate” – pumpkin, okra, Swiss brown mushrooms and purple onions. Each piece is cut and served in a curve that looks like a rainbow, beside a corresponding swish of bright-yellow miso. In Japan, a pea is treated with the same reverence as a pearl of caviar.

My final days in Tokyo include a private tour with a ramen-head – obsessive about the intricacies of noodle soup – and attending a traditional tea ceremony at Shunka-en bonsai garden. But it’s the final night that’s the real show-stopper. Yoroniku (6-6-22, Minami-aoyama, Minato-ku) is ranked among the top yakiniku (grilled meat) restaurants in the country. As I step inside, it feels as if all of the city’s sexiest and sleekest urbanites are here. I out-cool exactly none of them, yet I’m getting something they won’t: each morsel of thoughtfully selected beef will be specially prepared for me by the restaurant’s DJ-turned-chef and owner Vanne Kuwahara.

Dressed in a buttoned black shirt and matching bandana, the chef cooks like he’s spinning records. He layers the thinnest slices of marinated tongue onto the charcoal grill then flicks them onto our plates; it disappears on my tongue like fairy floss but the flavour has the feed-me-more addictiveness of bacon. His signature beef katsu sando is made with Japanese bread given the gentlest grill and lifted with a dab of secret sauce (my palate says plum but Kuwahara won’t divulge). He cuts the creation theatrically, with a Samurai’s precision.

It’s one of the most memorable meals I’ve ever enjoyed but the food is only half the story. I’ve seen a more intimate and relaxed Japan than I could have uncovered myself. Doors have been opened, pretences dropped. “For the first time I feel like I’ve dug below the surface of Japan,” I tell Lang as Kuwahara finishes his service.

“You’re getting there!” she says. “But Japan is so layered, especially for outsiders. You could come back 10 times and you’d still find more.”