



HIIRAGIYA RYOKAN, KYOTO



In the latest in our series on small, off-the-radar hotels, **Stephanie Plentl** experiences the customs and hospitality of a traditional Japanese inn

It's very hard not to feel humbled by Kyoto, Japan's former capital and Imperial City for more than 1,000 years. The sense of cultural refinement runs deep despite the current swathe of karaoke bars and pachinko parlours. It's a city of exquisite temples and gardens galore, skinny streets, paper lanterns and delicate wooden tea houses where geishas still entertain. Here, traditions are tightly held and the discipline used to perform them defines the mindset of Japan. For a fish-out-of-water Westerner like me, every day is a marvel of customs and courtesies.

Staying in a *ryokan* - the quintessential Japanese inn - is a revelation of meticulous service and etiquette. One of Kyoto's finest is Hiiragiya, an enchanting downtown establishment that's hosted Elizabeth Taylor, Charlie Chaplin and Japanese royals. It began operating as an inn in 1861 and though Mrs Nishimura - the elegant sixth-generation owner - speaks English, few concessions are made to the modern world and foreign visitors. A little research on *ryokan* conventions will prepare you for this unparalleled experience of genuine Japanese hospitality.

First, arrive at your confirmed time: the flagstones outside are refreshed with water to welcome new guests. Outdoor shoes are left in the hall and corridor slippers are proffered;

Hiiragiya is blissfully quiet but for the shuffling of slippers between its 28 rooms. Those slippers are left in your room's antechamber - only socks touch the clean tatami mats inside. You may be surprised by how sparse your room is - especially considering the hefty price tag - but allow the ritual to unfold. Wood-panelled ceilings, papered windows and sliding doors instantly cocoon you; frothy green tea is brought to the central low table, while you sit cross-legged admiring the *tokonoma* - a revered alcove with hanging scroll, objet d'art and seasonal flower adornment - and the manicured greenery outside. Everything conspires to create a Zen-like ambience of calm and reflection.

It would be a shame not to trundle with the other tourists up to Kiyomizu-dera temple, from where the blushing sunset view of Kyoto and its mountain surrounds is mesmerising. That evening, back at Hiiragiya, your bath will have been run

with spring water kept hot by a wooden lid. There are more bathroom goodies here than you could wish for. The custom is to shower first with soap before soaking in the deep cedar tub. On immersion, water pours decadently over the edge as the warm, soft wood gives off a sweet, fresh scent. After luxuriating, slip into the *yukata* - a cotton robe that one wears to dinner - which has been laid out for you. Your kimono-clad attendant will now be knocking at your door, punctual as ever, to begin the *kaiseki* feast.

Kyoto is synonymous with *kaiseki* - haute cuisine so creatively presented you won't know whether to eat it or frame it. The succession of seasonally inspired dishes is brought to your room on gleaming lacquerware with lots of sake. Thankfully, you've not got far to go - once you are sated, your attendant will remove the table and replace it with a thick futon mattress and reading light. A deep sleep is assured, before she's back with breakfast: Western (with eggs) or Japanese (with fish). At checkout, ask Mrs Nishimura for a tour of the 200-year-old golden *shoji* screen, tea-ceremony room and immaculate garden of cherry blossom, maple and bamboo. As you leave, she will wave from the entrance until you are out of sight - a charming final courtesy of a culturally unique stay □

WAYS AND MEANS

Rates at Hiiragiya (www.hiiragiya.co.jp) start at 32,000 yen (about £190) per person, based on two people sharing, including dinner, breakfast and service charge. Japan Airlines (08448-569700; www.uk.jal.com) flies from London to Tokyo daily from £837.95 return. For bespoke tours throughout Japan, Nemo Glassman (www.plus-alpha.jp) is an exceptional personal guide.

ABOVE A guest room at the Hiiragiya inn is a dining area during the day and a bedroom at night. **INSET** The Kiyomizu-dera temple overlooks Kyoto