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# JEWEL IN THE PALACE

Checking in at the Japanese capital's Palace Hotel Tokyo proves to be an exercise in sublime pampering, as CHRISTINA KO discovers

# I

THE ASIAN STEREOTYPE in me is rearing its snap-happy head. We are seated in one of the two private *teppanyaki* rooms that comprise GO at Wadakura in the Palace Hotel Tokyo, where a chef is creating both a cheerful cacophony and a beautiful series of dishes using two metal spatulas on a heated grill with a fluidity that comes of pride and practice, pausing politely and emphatically in action for the explicit purpose of improving my photography experience. We are, after all, in Japan, the country that founded the cliché of the camera-toting tourist in the first place.

The onslaught of courses is relentless yet welcomed, a succession of impeccably presented foods cut, cooked and curated before our eyes — a slice of *trompe l'oeil* toast forged of potato (the white), bacon (the crust) and a white-fish stuffing; scallops the size of your palm garnished with a garlic-cheese cracker made on the grill; and of course beef, a choice of sirloin or fillet, the former bursting with sturdy and robust flavour, the latter oozing fat like a juicy secret. To think, this is just one of the four types of Japanese cuisine served under the Wadakura name — there's also a *tempura* room called Tatsumi, a main dining room and Sushi Kanesaka, a branch of the Michelin-starred restaurant in Ginza that's self-managed.

Divine eats are no accident at the Palace, which houses six more food-and-beverage outlets in addition to the four-in-one Japanese experience at Wadakura, which is named for the fountain park and Imperial Palace moat that lie immediately before the property. It was part of the hotel's mission statement, when it was completely rebuilt after 50 years in service, to pull together an unparalleled portfolio of dining — no mean feat in a city already known for its culinary wonders, from well-documented 10-seater *omakase* bars to mass-market ticket-machine ramen counters.

The in-house hot list starts with Crown, a French standby from the hotel's former glory that lives on in exactly the same place it stood before redevelopment; the floor number may be different, but the precise altitude remains unchanged. The corridor that leads into the restaurant features a pattern meant to emulate the folds of an evening gown, intended to get guests in the mood for a night of dressed-up glamour. The interiors are dark, plush and

modern, romantically dreamt up with details such as open-backed seating to better show off a dramatic robe.

There's also Amber Palace, opened by the group behind the one-starred Fureika Chinese restaurant, a piece of old China transported in luxurious form to modern Tokyo, a venue that almost glows thanks to its amber colour scheme, mixed with thoughtful ornamentation.

Throw in the warm, Western-themed Grand Kitchen, the intimate Lounge Bar Privé and the men's club Royal Bar, and four-day, three-night guests such as ourselves, theoretically, wouldn't ever have to even leave the premises of the Palace Hotel. Eventually, we do of course, taking advantage of the hotel's Marunouchi location, a five-minute walk from Tokyo Station and 15 from hopping Ginza.

But after a full day exploring the heart of Japan — gawking over the Lolitas in Harajuku, analysing Shibuya street culture, idling through Daikanyama's pseudo-suburbia and even navigating the seamless service of the metro system — the hotel is a welcome sight come evening. I suffer an addiction to executive lounges, with the irrational lure of endless *canapés* and beverages, and the Palace's version is quite the ultimate, with a





CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PHOTO:  
THE SWIMMING POOL; THE LOBBY;  
AMBER PALACE



*THE EMPHASIS AT EVIAN SPA IS ON MINERAL ENRICHMENT,  
NOURISHMENT AND VITALITY*

rooftop location, floor-to-ceiling windows, a couple of meeting rooms that seem well-used by business parties and a quaint terrace area, culminating in a perfect excursion for the peckish. A concerted effort to hit every session — breakfast, tea and pre-dinner cocktail hour — turns up everything from impeccable scrambled eggs to crunchy chewy macaroons.

A few manage, mysteriously, to find their way into a napkin, and then to my hotel room a couple of floors down, where they're savoured in the bathtub with a bit of bubbly and a lot of bubbles, courtesy of the Anne Semonin products used exclusively across the property. This sublime end to a day is made picture perfect by the angle of the bathtub, allowing a direct view of the balcony and the Tokyo skyline. Balconies are a hot commodity in this city — remember, this is the country that invented the capsule hotel — and the Palace Hotel has terraces by the dozen.

The catharsis found in a hot bath at night can only be exceeded by the first appointment the following

morning at Evian Spa, a minimalist French facility situated inside the hotel. Everything is very white and very clean, the only incongruous item in the venue being me, with 8am bed-head and casual attire. The staff, of course, wear uniforms the colour of snow and smiles broad as sunlight.

The first Evian Spa in Japan (and only the second outside of France) offers a menu of treatments exclusive to the country, though the emphasis across the brand globally is on mineral enrichment, nourishment and vitality. A favourite treatment is the Vitalizing Signature, an 80-minute affair inspired by the Japanese philosophy of *seitai*, using pressure from fingers, thumbs and elbows to stimulate energy flow, combined with Swedish deep-tissue techniques to release stress. From wherever the approach is derived, the result is the same — a blissful 80-minute blackout in that heated bed, after which I emerge like a phoenix with no bones, reborn loose and supple, and a little bit confused and woozy.

There's nothing a little while in the relaxation room won't cure, where loungers the same scarlet as the Evian font are arranged in stark contrast to the ivory palette, and Evian waters in varying temperatures are provided for rehydration.

Your time in the spa is technically unlimited (until 10pm, at least, when it closes) — go for a sauna in the marble room or wake yourself up with a dip in the cold plunge pool — but make sure you don't dive so headfirst into tranquillity that you miss your check-out time.

When I enter the lift 10 minutes past the appointed hour, I find my key card disabled and myself unable to return to my floor. It's nothing the efficient hotel staff can't easily solve, though, and 15 minutes later (with two hours until I'm due to leave for the airport) I find myself back at the executive lounge greedily taking up an entire family of sofas on the terrace, MacBook loaded up with TV shows and perched firmly in my lap. That tray of macaroons never had a chance. ■

