

Palace Hotel Tokyo
Hedge
February 2013



A Tale of Two Cities

DUNCAN MADDEN delves into the heart of one of the world's most exciting capitals and discovers a city of contradictions – history and tradition rubbing shoulders with Tokyo's neon-lit madness



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHINICHIRO SAKAICHI IMAGES

"IRASHAI MASHITAAAAAA!" The traditional Japanese welcome that rings out across the foyer from a perfectly formed line of immaculately attired staff is the first thing I hear as I pull up outside the Palace Hotel Tokyo. The enthusiasm and warmth of their greeting is typical of Japanese *omotenashi* (hospitality), and echoes not only through this luxurious five-star hotel complex but also through every shop, restaurant and bar I visit on my trip to Japan's capital city.

A huge, sprawling metropolis of 13 million people, it's a mix of contradiction and mystery, technology and tradition, bustling shopping malls and whisper-quiet

temples. There really is nowhere else quite like Tokyo. Battered by a history of war and natural disaster, its resilience is hidden behind a polished veneer of neon-lit convenience and a desire to help in any way possible. It's *Blade Runner* battling *The Seven Samurai*, and I'm lost in translation.

My home for the week is the Palace Hotel, perhaps the best-located in the city. Centrally set in the swanky environs of Maranouchi business district and next to the Nihonbashi financial centre, fringing the moats of the Imperial Palace and offering extraordinary views over the modern skyline and the tree-lined Imperial Palace gardens, it's the culmination of a

\$1.2bn development. Facilities include business suites, conference rooms, a shopping mall, pool, and even a giant purpose-built chapel [pictured overleaf].

Emerging from the shadow of two former hotels, the Palace Hotel rises 23 storeys – it's contemporary, imposing. My 18th floor deluxe room (depressingly, slightly larger than my west London flat) houses a bed big enough for several, an open-plan bathroom that perfectly balances showiness with privacy, and office space with every modern convenience you could wish for. Painted in earthy, natural colours, it's a place to relax as much as to work, and subtly echoes the aesthetic of the city around it. ▶



► Details are exceptional and authentic. Bath towels are from century old Imabari; teas from venerable Maruyama Nori, founded in 1854; and the teacups originate from Sabae in Fukui prefecture, where they've been making them for 1,500 years.

And then there's the loo. A marvel of invention and machinery (in an area I feel has been widely and unduly neglected by the technology world), a motorised and warmed seat, imaginatively directed water jets, electric 'odour' neutralisers and – best of all – subtle sound effects to cover your own are all available at the touch of a button. I had hours of fun.

Mine is one of 278 guest rooms alongside 12 suites designed to cater to the most extravagant tastes and demanding needs (presidents and rock stars had already visited by the time I was there). More than half offer sweeping terraces or balconies

with carefully cultivated views that make the most of the skyline without imposing on the Japanese royal family's privacy – they still live in the Imperial Palace next door. This nationally-owned Japanese hotel had to tread very carefully in its development plans, such is its proximity to the fiercely loved and respected royal residence.

Surprisingly unburdened by jet-lag after my lie-flat business class bed, I explored while my friends slept. Maranouchi feels like an extension of the Palace Hotel's carefully maintained calm, the peaceful and ancient Imperial Palace garden and its moats reaching tendril-like towards the foundations of skyscrapers looming inexorably yet respectfully on all sides. I strolled the plush, posh Maranouchi Naka Dori, strongly reminiscent of Bond Street or Madison Avenue, with its fashion labels and fine restaurants vying for attention.

“ The peaceful and ancient Imperial Palace garden and its moats reach tendril-like towards the foundations of skyscrapers looming inexorably yet respectfully on all sides ”

Architecture is an interesting mix of western styles – the Amsterdam Centraal style station, New York grey-stone bank and Danish blue-tile department store a stone's throw apart – watched over by statues of Japanese heroes. At the end of the street, bustling but elegant Ginza interrupts, and a truer sense of the metropolis beyond washed over me. I wanted to explore further, but dinner in one of the Palace Hotel's ten restaurants was calling.

Spoiled for choice, we took the questionable decision to dine in French restaurant Crown (we promised ourselves after this that it would be Japanese food only), but were rewarded with a seven-course feast. Opened in collaboration with two-Michelin-star La Pyramide chef Patrick Henrioux, Crown [pictured top] is targeting its own set of stars, and from the chicken confit, chestnut and foie gras to the braised cheek of Japanese beef in syrah wine and 'grand piano' dessert (that took the chef a whole day to make), the signs are it won't be long until it picks them up. Gorged and wined, common sense dictated bed and the first proper sleep in 24 hours. Instead, we descended to the sultry Royal Bar for Japanese whisky and cigars, the barman indulging our questions and mumbling efforts at Japanese until the early hours.

The next day brought jet-lag proper – and a heavy, humid atmosphere to match. I took full advantage of Japan's first Evian Spa – 1,200 metres of white luxury handily spread over the hotel's fifth floor.

My signature jet-lag massage from Hiromi Ikeda (a local lady with a soft manner but steel-strong hands – seek her out) worked my muscles awake, and after a leisurely dip in the private reclining bath it was time to dive into Tokyo proper.

The underground here is enormous and on time, but even with the English ►

► language signs it can be brain-scramblingly confusing to navigate (trust us, triple-check every train you board is going where you actually want it to). We emerged successfully into sunny Harajuku, a dichotomy of the extraordinary, revered Meiji Shrine on the Shibuya side and a grungy, buzzing shopping street across the road. Tokyo encapsulated.

At the shrine we dutifully washed our hands and mouths with purified water, paid our silent respects to the Emperor Meiji and Empress Shōken, and scribed our hopes and wishes on the simple prayer boards, soon to be presented to the spirits by the Meiji faithful.

We caught sight of a wedding, too – a long elaborate procession of holy men spearheaded by a traditionally white-robed bride while the groom marched anonymously behind.

A five-minute walk through cool cypress trees brought us into another world and the unfortunately named Takeshita Street. Crammed with fashion stalls and boutiques alongside ice-cream parlours and up-and-coming designers, it bubbles with anti-establishment vigour and is a hotbed

“ Sumo is to the Japanese what football is to the Brits... Businessmen come and go, but the bouts roll on in a flurry of foot stomping, thigh slapping and salt throwing ”



of Japan's unique fashion scene. The pink plastic doll outfits of the infamous Harajuku Girls rub shoulders with punks, preppies and the downright bizarre, not to mention more dressed-up dogs than I've ever seen. Jaws drop and cameras click.

Time for something a little more authentic, then. Sumo is to the Japanese what football is to the Brits (minus the racism and hooligans, obviously), and if you're smart enough to time a visit with one of the big annual tournaments, it really is that rare thing – a must-see. The Grand Sumo Ryokugo Kokugikan Arena [pictured] opens its doors at 8am, with bouts all day.

Families and businessmen come and go, but the bouts roll on in a flurry of foot-stomping, thigh-slapping and salt-throwing. The fights themselves are furious and ferocious, often lasting only seconds but all eliciting huge excitement and shouts of "Yoiso!" from the enraptured crowds.

Equally as noisy and boisterous, early the next morning we visited another infamous attraction, Tsukiji Fish Market.

The market is the beating heart of Tokyo's most important food industry and sees 2,000 tonnes of fish cleaned, prepared and auctioned daily. We wander aisles of unidentifiable sea life, watch huge yellow-fin tuna carved into steaks by fish ninjas

with six-foot-long swords and sold off, often for hundreds of thousands of dollars each. You won't find fresher anywhere else.

My favourite meal was my last, at the hotel's teppanyaki grill GO, one of four Japanese in-house restaurants under the Wadakura banner. Sliced, diced, seasoned and cooked – our meal is prepared in front of us on a giant grill spreading nearly the length of the room. Our two master chefs work in perfect symmetry, creating culinary masterpieces before our eyes from scallops as big as fists and plump grey prawns to a sirloin of Nagasaki beef and fillet of Saga beef that are making me drool even now.

It's typical of my memories of Tokyo – evocative, powerful, mouth-watering. This is a city of contradictions – a business and technology hub at the forefront of a fast-moving world silently rooted in a deep sense of tradition, history and respect. And at its centre sits the Palace Hotel Tokyo, mirroring these values as the modern foil to its Imperial Palace neighbour. The perfect hotel for the perfect city, then. **H**

A deluxe room with balcony at Palace Hotel Tokyo starts from £454 per night. palacehoteltokyo.com Finnair flies up to twice daily from London Heathrow via Helsinki to Tokyo Narita airport. Business class flights with lie-flat beds in some planes start from £2,532 return. finnair.co.uk