



A Story
of **OLD** and **NEW**

CHRISTINE CUNANAN checks into
Tokyo's Palace Hotel for fresh air and traditional hospitality

“Talk about a hotel with a view,” I exclaimed, as I walked straight across my deluxe room at Tokyo’s new Palace Hotel to gaze at the skyline from the window. Then I opened the sliding door to step outside onto my spacious balcony, equipped with a table and chair.

“Perfect for editing some articles later,” I said to myself. I could already imagine setting up my temporary office here, especially as the day was fine and the kinetic movement of cars below created an infectious energy conducive to inspiration.

Almost every room in this very understated hotel, recently chosen as one of the best hotels for design in the world, has a balcony overlooking the Imperial Palace on one side and the Marunouchi and Hibiya districts on the other. This is a previously unheard-of luxury in a city that has literally been closed up for decades, if not centuries.

Basically, this was a front row seat for a view of some of the priciest and most picturesque real estate in the world. It was also the only hotel in central Tokyo with immediate access to fresh air.

When I booked the Palace Hotel for a weekend, I didn’t think having a balcony would make a big difference. After all, hotel experiences are usually about more space inside, rather than outside. However, this small but important detail made for an entirely different experience in an already special hotel.

CLASSIC EAST MEETS WEST

The Palace Hotel gives you the best of both worlds.

It’s completely classic Japanese in feel – so even foreigners checking in for a quick trip to Tokyo, for instance, will feel they’re not just in some modern box of a hotel that could be anywhere in the world.



The Lounge Bar Privé

MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THESE

For Tokyoites, the original Palace Hotel just across the street from the Imperial Palace in the heart of Tokyo evoked poignant memories as the venue for everything from job interviews to marriage broker meetings.

The original Palace Hotel was a lovely, old-fashioned institution with history and impeccable service. The staff undertook their duties with great pride, fully understanding the traditions of Japanese hospitality they were continuing.

Before it re-opened with a new persona, everyone wondered: how would this circa 1960s Japanese hotel successfully engineer a complete makeover and transition into the cosmopolitan 21st century, without losing its identity completely?

The new Palace Hotel, open for just over a year and at once grand and intimate, today stands on the same grounds as the original Palace Hotel, an old and equally grand hotel.

But it's also Western enough to be comfortable. The rooms, which are among the most spacious in Tokyo, are simple and well designed. Every piece of furniture is streamlined for efficiency and chosen to be easy on the eyes – perhaps because the real attraction is the view outside.

The Palace Hotel is not a small establishment, but it has a sense of intimacy rare for Tokyo. It has the atmosphere of a modern ryokan in Japan and yet also of an aristocratic home in France, full of beautiful details and pockets of beauty.

“That’s exactly what we were aiming for,” one of the hotel staff exclaimed, when I happened to observe aloud that the Palace Hotel feels like a very grand home.

It has a large cozy fireplace and a white Steinway piano in the lounge, as well as six-meter high shelves with ebony trim and filled with lovely objets d’art that make you want to stop and notice everything. In total, the hotel has over 1,000 paintings, glass pieces and metal works on its property.

You also can't help but notice the greenery everywhere – from artfully decorated centerpieces to strategically placed flowers and plants that relax the eye and help you appreciate nature in the middle of a built-up city environment.

There is even a dramatic Japanese maple planted outside one of the lobby seating areas.





*"There is only one Tokyo
and there will only be one
experience like the Palace
Hotel. We're celebrating
an unfiltered appreciation
of our country's culture."*

*- Takashi Kobayashi
Palace Hotel president*



A RYOKAN WITH A VIEW

Second, you're in the middle of Tokyo and the views just don't get better than this. Almost every room has a balcony that's palatial by standards in these parts, looking out onto the public portion of the 3.5 square kilometer Imperial Palace grounds and a complete skyline of western Tokyo.

It's Japanese hospitality at its best, in the middle of Tokyo. The Western-style beds are covered with 300-thread count Japanese linens, while the bathroom towels are from Ehime Prefecture. The teas on offer include the famous Maruyama nori teas from Tokyo's Tsukiji district.

But at the same time, it's international enough so that even a non-Japanese speaking foreigner will feel completely at home.

Most of the rooms feature open-style bathrooms with separate soaking tubs and showers, as well as the latest in technological gadgets.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE LOCATION

Finally, the Palace Hotel has one of the most prestigious addresses in Tokyo, at 1-1-1 Marunouchi, just opposite the ancient Otemon Gate of Edo Castle. This area is central to Tokyo's heritage, dating back to the early 17th century when the Tokugawa shoguns moved from Kyoto to Tokyo.

You see the Edo Castle from almost every room, and it's beautiful gardens and pathways winding around the moat practically invite guests for an afternoon walk or a morning run. That is, if they can manage to tear themselves away from their rooms.



IT'S ALL ABOUT DETAILS

In the deluxe room I stayed in, two unusual designs particularly stood out.

1 There's a stylish stool in an ample-sized foyer with a contemporary lamp fashioned out of twigs above it, to enable guests to sit and remove their shoes before entering – a rather nice habit ingrained into the Japanese psyche and practiced in every home to psychologically separate the outside.

2 A shiny white lacquer cabinet right next to the television set opens up to reveal a most amazing in-room bar that looked more like a jewel box than shelves full of tipple.



A FRENCH SPA IN TOKYO

The Palace Hotel boasts of a 1200-square meter evian SPA, reportedly the only one in the world outside of France. It offers heated baths, marble saunas, and cold plunge pools. The entire spa experience is based on the journey of evian water through the Swiss Alps.

The spa's piece de resistance is the Vitalizing Signature, a treatment created exclusively for the Palace Hotel's evian spa. It starts off with Japanese trigger point-style bodywork to improve the flow of Qi throughout the body. Then a Swedish-style deep tissue massage is applied to release tension and enable the body to naturally restore its balance.



"We wanted the look and feel to celebrate the hallmarks of Japanese aesthetics."

*- Masaru Watanabe
Palace Hotel general manager*

DESTINATION RESTAURANTS

It may be Tokyo's most fashionable hotel of the moment, but the Palace Hotel Tokyo fully intends to earn a global reputation as a dining destination as well. It houses seven fine dining restaurants as well as an all-day restaurant and an open lounge.

CROWN

This stylish French restaurant with one of the best views in Tokyo is a re-make of the original French restaurant of the old Palace Hotel that many Tokyoites know and love. But this time, the Palace Hotel has partnered with a star chef and they're aiming for a Michelin star – or two, or three.

Chef Patrick Henriroux, who has held on to a two-star rating for his restaurant La Pyramide in Vienne, France for over 10 years, is overseeing the operations at the Crown. So far, it is receiving rave reviews.

WADAKURA

The Wadakura restaurant, with four separate dining venues, was named after one of the six moats of the Imperial Palace. Michelin two-star Chef Shinji Kanesaka holds court at Sushi Kanesaka, an intimate sushi restaurant, while Teppanyaki is served at the equally intimate Go restaurant, and tempura is cooked around a counter at Tatsumi.

There is also a main dining area offering wonderful kaiseki set menus, amidst a lovely view of the Tokyo skyline.



Crown



Crown



Wadakura

AMBER PALACE

Serving Shanghainese and Cantonese cuisine, this restaurant is overseen by the same operators of Fureika, a famous Tokyo restaurant with two Michelin stars.

GRAND KITCHEN

The hotel's all-day dining restaurant features a casual atmosphere and open-plan food stations. It feels like someone's home, with cookbooks and coffee table books casually strewn on shelves, and kitchen accessories displayed in various corners.

THE PALACE LOUNGE

This is fast becoming the lounge of choice for stylish locals, who come especially for the Palace Hotel's famous Japanese-style afternoon tea. An eclectic medley of sweets and savory items are placed in a lacquer o-bento box and brought to the table by a lady in a kimono. To accompany this afternoon degustation are various teas – and you can taste and enjoy as many as you wish. ■

PALACE HOTEL TOKYO

www.palacchoteltokyo.com