

# THE ART OF JAPANESE HOSPITALITY

The Palace Hotel Tokyo offers a gracious introduction to refined elegance with its immediate vicinity beside the Japanese Imperial Palace in the heart of the city's prime business district.

**W**ith an exclusive address of 1-1-1 Marunouchi and the Japanese Imperial Palace as an immediate neighbour, expectations are high at the Palace Hotel Tokyo.

After all, the hotel has been hosting royalty and heads of state since it began in 1961 as the government owned Hotel Teito. In May 2012, the hotel reopened after a three-year long refurbishment as the anchor to a US\$1.2bil (RM3.9bil) mixed-use development. The property now includes 10 restaurants and bars and Japan's first Evian Spa. It remains privately owned and managed as a testament to a brand of homegrown hospitality that Japan is much admired for.

"To have stayed at Palace Hotel is to have experienced the very essence of the Japanese culture," Palace Hotel Co president Takashi Kobayashi said. "From the Aji stones at our entrance to the linens in our guest rooms, from the omotenashi at first encounter to the general management, we celebrate an unfiltered appreciation of our country's culture."

The crowds of this sprawling city seem a world away as I step into the hotel's tranquil lobby on a chilly autumn day. A host of impeccably dressed staff give a warm welcome followed by a swift check in.

The public spaces are washed with light from floor-to-ceiling windows framing perfect views of maple trees lining the historic Wadakura moat that was previously linked to the one encircling the Imperial Palace. There is no ostentatious décor, as the hotel has opted for the quiet elegance that defines Japan's image. Swans gliding by on the moat add to the serenity.

The hotel has invested in a collection of 720 pieces of precious artworks incorporating motifs of water and scenery that the Japanese are fond of, which are displayed throughout the hotel.

I am mesmerised by the alluring poetry of the 5550cm-long art wall made of white artificial marble and crystal powder that runs behind the reception, with its fleeting glimpses of blooms and petals seemingly floating and disappearing. Created by rising young artist Shinji Ohmaki, the crystallised artwork depicts endangered species of Japanese flowers, serving also as a reminder of the fleeting beauty of daily life.

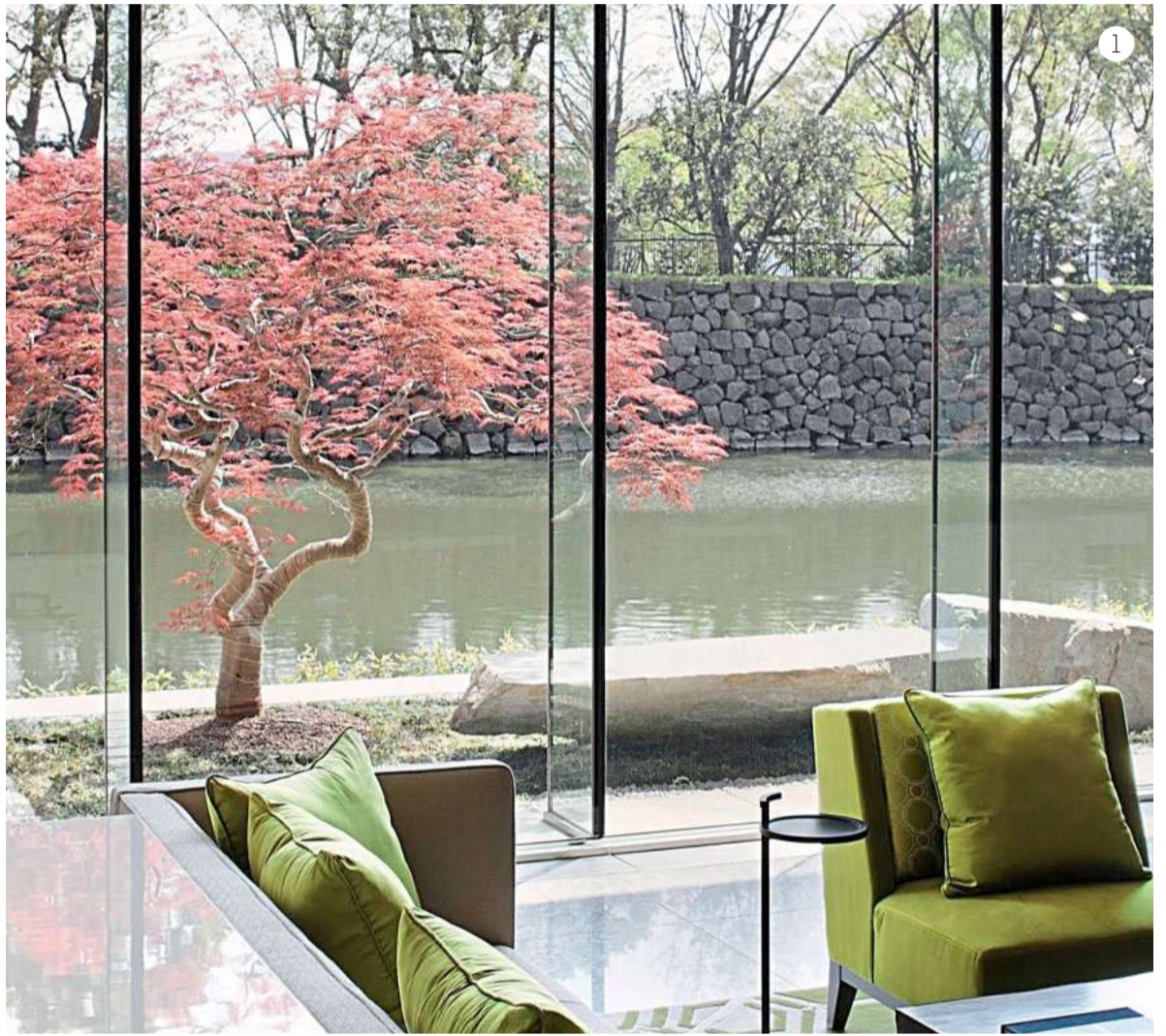
Nearly all of the 290 spacious rooms and suites command stunning perspectives of the Imperial Palace gardens, surrounded by the Tokyo skyline. The view is especially captivating from the balconies at dusk when the landscape morphs into a fairylane of lights.

An earthy yet sophisticated palette envelopes the rooms, which are equipped for the 21st century traveler with 46-inch LCD television, Blue-ray players and high speed wifi.

Products sourced from some of the finest Japanese traditional brands are offered – Imabari bath towels from the Ehime prefecture, renowned for its luxurious linens for 110 years; and Jugetsudo teas made by Maruyama Nori, which are accompanied by tea cups handmade in Tochigi prefecture in the Mashiko-yaki style of pottery dating back to the Nara period. The saucers originate from Sabae, a city in Fukui prefecture famed for its emperor-commissioned Echizen lacquerware.

Above all, the hotel staff is highly anticipative of guests' needs. During check in, I had casually enquired about a little park in north Tokyo that reportedly had splendid autumn foliage. A minute later, the concierge had sent up a map and detailed reports that it had 75% of its fall colours, from a staff member living nearby.

The Palace Hotel's enviable location has it just across the street from the ancient Ottemon



Gate that leads into the Imperial Palace's East Gardens, where remnants of the original Edo Castle can be viewed. And steps away is Marunouchi Naka-Dori, a fashionable tree lined shopping street similar to New York City's Madison Avenue and London's Bond Street.

As such, the hotel's highly rated restaurants are often packed especially French restaurant Crown, which is a collaboration with Michelin-starred chef Patrick Henrrioux. Another Michelin star chef is Shinji Kanesaka, presiding over Sushi Kanesaka, one of a quartet of restaurants under the Wadakura banner. The Palace Lounge is abuzz daily with Tokyo's ladies of leisure indulging in afternoon teas alongside businessmen from the nearby Marunouchi commercial district.

But no matter how busy it gets, the Palace Hotel Tokyo retains an air of perfect tranquillity to sit still to enjoy the moment.

1 The light filled lobby exudes a genteel air with large windows framing perfect views of maple trees lining the surrounding moat. The Aji stones cladding the hotel's exteriors are the same ones as the moat.

2 A view of the Palace Hotel Tokyo from the Imperial Palace's Tatsumi Watchtower across the moat.

3 Wood, stone and water defines the beautiful Wadakura dining room.