

WHERE JAPAN

A BRUSH WITH ROYALTY

The Tokyo Palace Hotel has a rare and treasured commodity, writes **Ben Groundwater**.

Tokyo is a paradox: there's plenty to see, and yet there's rarely a good view. In this vast urban jungle where skyscrapers abut skyscrapers, where neon reflects more neon, and where low-rise outer suburbs stretch into infinity, you seldom find a point from which to take it all in, to marvel at the enormity and to gaze past it to a horizon. It's just more buildings, more windows, more billboards, more lights.

Unless, that is, you're staying at the Tokyo Palace Hotel. It has views. This 23-storey building enjoys a rare break in the urban foliage, an unexpected gap in the heart of the city where gardens, riven with walkways, stretch out to each side of the eponymous Imperial Palace, and where a wide moat encircles the old residence and its grounds, holding modernity at bay.

From my south-facing room at the Palace Hotel I can see all of this, the gardens and the walkways and the moat. It's a spectacular view that's framed by the skyscrapers of Tokyo's downtown Marunouchi district, where the twinkling lights of a million offices take on a sense of romance thanks to their distance.

I can enjoy this scene, too, from another rarity in Tokyo: my balcony. Many of the rooms at the Palace Hotel have private outdoor areas set with tables and chairs, places to relax and breath in the city's remarkably clean air, to watch each morning as the joggers make their way around the palace grounds, to see the city buzz during the working day, and to gaze at the sky as it turns to dusty pink and finally to black each evening, as the lights in the office blocks twinkle and night falls.

This hotel doesn't feel like it's set in the geographical, financial and spiritual heart of a metropolitan area of almost 40 million people. There's a deep sense of calm that's clearly not accidental: a distinctly Japanese attention to detail has been applied to every tiny facet.

You notice that care the moment you stride into the foyer and see the wide picture windows framing perfect garden scenes; the original artworks hanging with a curator's flair on broad walls; the check-in area tucked out of sight in a quiet corner, where highly trained staff move guests in and out of the hotel with practised ease.

Everything here is serene and composed, the ideal antidote to the boisterousness of

TRIP NOTES

FLY

Qantas flies daily from Sydney and Melbourne to Tokyo Haneda. See qantas.com

STAY

The Tokyo Palace Hotel's spacious, stylish rooms range from JPY70,000 to JPY1 million a night. See en.palacehoteltokyo.com

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Ben Groundwater stayed as a guest of Tokyo Palace Hotel.

Tokyo. Though the hotel has been at this location since 1961, the original building was demolished in 2009 and completely rebuilt, reopening in 2012, which is how it manages to command such spaciousness, as well as a sense of cool modernity.

The guest rooms here blend Japanese sensibilities with western style. My room has a wide double bed, a small couch and a table, and floor-to-ceiling windows leading out to the balcony. On the walls hang original works of Japanese art – there are more than 1000 unique pieces throughout the hotel. In the bathroom hang Imabari towels, Japan's finest. It's tempting to spend my whole stay right here, staring at the palace and its pedestrian boulevards. However, there are things to do, even if I forsake the chance to explore the nearby shopping malls of Ginza, or the yakitori joints of Yurakucho, or the grounds of the palace.

Most of the hotel's highlights involve food. There are 10 restaurants on-site, many of which are housed – somewhat confusingly, at first – in a complex called Wadakura, a warren of rooms and hallways that hide a high-end tempura restaurant, a teppanyaki joint, a fine-dining sushi bar and a larger area that serves kaiseki, Japanese-style set-menu dining.

Breakfast is served at the ground-floor Grand Kitchen and it's truly spectacular. While it's tempting to opt for the multi-cuisine buffet, the ultimate experience is the Japanese set breakfast, a platter of grilled fish, rice, miso soup, pickles, umeboshi plums and all the trimmings, served to diners on a terrace that overlooks the palace moat. I would stay at the Palace Hotel solely for this breakfast. It's exceptional.

There are also two on-site bars: the sixth-floor Lounge Bar Prive, with its views of the city skyline, and the classic Royal Bar, which was a fixture at the old incarnation of the hotel – as much for its famed bartender, "Mr Martini", as the venue – and has been meticulously recreated here. There's a warren of shops in the basement levels, selling everything from high-end Japanese crockery to French pastries.

Those attractions tend to pale in comparison, however, to the unique drawcard that awaits in my room, through the big glass doors and out on to the balcony: the lights, the colours, the romance. The view.

Clockwise from below: A grand deluxe king room at the Tokyo Palace Hotel; the view from the hotel is exceptional; Grand Kitchen at the Tokyo Palace Hotel.

