

# The highs and lows of bedding down in Japan

"TRAVEL," says an old Japanese proverb, "is the greatest pleasure in life." Testimony to this fact are Hiroshige's fine woodcuts which illustrate the "The Fifty-three Stages of the Tokaido," one of the most humorous works in Japanese literature, a bestseller for two centuries, adapted for movies and television and familiar to almost all Japanese.

Nothing had prepared me for the opulent impact of my first impression of Tokyo as I was deposited at the Imperial Hotel's revolving doors. I was whisked by scudding bellboys to the front desk which buzzed with immaculately groomed and formally attired clerks. I was greeted, bowed at and beckoned by hands, my bags swept before me towards chiming and flashing elevators.

The room into which I was ushered contained a profusion of towels, bathrobes, yukatas (bathrobe and pyjama garment), slippers, along with a pay-as-you-use refrigerator (stocked with chocolates, liquor juices and sausage) and sweeping views over Hibiya Park.

This was a long way from my ultimate destination, a tatami mat on the floor of a temple. I was to experience the heights of luxury accommodation down to the lowest, with everything in between, from "love-hotels" to capsules.

The Imperial, the country's first western style hotel, was originally constructed in 1888. Frock coats and top hats were the order of that day and, according to one newspaper, it provided plenty of room for the arrival of "horses and carriages and jinrikishas".

My room could have accommodated all of them at the same time. In 1919 Frank Lloyd Wright took on the expansion of the Imperial incorporating the ultimate in luxury, romanticism and efficiency.

Investigation showed that almost anything is available at the Imperial at any hour — massage until 1 am, swimming

## TRAVEL

By BERWYN LEWIS

pool, jogging track, sauna, stationary, maps, telex, lounges for business and pleasure, galleries of shops and restaurants, arcades of bars and banquet rooms. It is tempting to surrender to this hotel's aura of fantasy, its expanse of lobbies and mezzanine floors where it seems the whole world congregates in turbans, saris, kimonos, bridal outfits, jogging outfits and business suits.

Outside, a Tokyo night beckons with slithering neons, confusion of streets without names or building numbers, soaring high-rises, shambles of shops clustered beneath overhead railways.

Taking refuge in a steamy noodle bar, I attempted the impossible — eating soup with chopsticks, a satisfying meal for less than ¥500 (about \$A3) and hope that no one from the Imperial could see me slumming it.

The next night was in sharp contrast. I met Mr Suzuki at the Century 21 Club (for members only) at the Imperial Hotel. We feasted on a huge platter of precisely arranged *sushi* accompanied by a bottle of Scotch which was served with all the grace and ritual of a tea ceremony by a kneeling Japanese woman.

An atmosphere of dedicated pleasure-taking ensued. I learned that it is considered polite to eat the entire portion of *sushi* in one mouthful despite bulging cheeks. It was unbelievably tender.

"Everything is tender in Japan," said my host during an interlude in chewing.

In a torpor of eel, abalone, shrimp and squid-trimmed *sushi*, we commenced bar cruising. First the Roppongi area where a barman mixed his speciality, a dark salty: freshly squeezed grapefruit juice and Russian vodka are shaken, martini-style, with ice, and poured through a silver strainer. This was served with

a slyer of kiwifruit and some dry cream cheese.

Several dark salties later, the barman had assumed the qualities of a kabuki actor playing to his tipsy audience at the bar counter.

It seems the Japanese have perfected the art of teasing the palate, enticing one towards further self indulgence by striving for a balance between salt and sweet tastes and dry and wet sensations in the mouth.

In another bar we tried a *chuhai* (meaning cocktail) *shochu* which is a cheap drink popular with the Japanese equivalent of "yuppies". It tastes like a weak, dry martini.

Tokyo is famous for its bars which serve delicious snacks like grilled asparagus, smoky eggplant and barbecued capsicum, with drinks.

We strolled past the high-tech minimalist shopping arcades where one extremely expensive dress was displayed against a stark background, where a French restaurant displayed one tomato, and a fabric shop featured a single length of cloth against a rock.

Narrowing alleys led to a street of hundreds of discos, and more bars. One of them, Ink Stick, is reputed to be David Bowie's haunt, another, Le Bar, in Nishi Azabu, prides itself on its collection of thousands of varieties of Scotch, another is supposed to be where Johnny Rotten hangs out.

Every bar has a story, be it gangsters, gays or *geijin* (foreigners). There's the smallest bar in the world, which is the size of a car and parked in the middle of the footpath, and there's an Australian bar, Maggie's Revenge.

By the time we stumbled out, the last subway had closed (they run until midnight or 1 am and are safe at any hour). The cab ride home was horribly expensive.

According to plan, I moved on to my next location, the Seifuso, a *ryokan* (Japanese inn) in Iidabashi, about three kilometres from the Ginza and a five-minute subway ride. Around \$32 a night buys the ultimate heavenly Japanese



retreat, complete with tatami floor and rice paper screen doors.

These slide open to reveal an emerald green Zen-style garden containing huge leaping frogs, moss-covered shrine, a pond with a stone-work bridge and a stone-flagged path which winds between sprays of orchids.

It was a perfect retreat from the bustle of Tokyo's streets, less than a few hundred yards away. My futon mattress and quilt and a bath awaited me.

As a first-time to Japan, elaborate care is taken to

explain the intricacies of bathing Japanese style, the footwear system which involves exchanging one's shoes for one-size-fits-no-one slippers at the entrance and how, at the entrance to the toilet, one changed from one pair of slippers to another.

The bathtub is square shaped and wooden, an ominous invitation to be boiled alive. Soap is taboo: one showers and then gets in. An hour later I surfaced, red, gleaming and ready to sip green tea from the lacquered tea-making box on the table, watch Japanese TV and make

phone calls in the air-conditioned comfort of my room.

Breakfast at the Seifuso is a choice of Japanese or western, fish, rice, seaweed and pickles or boiled egg, orange juice, tea or coffee and marmalade.

Next destination: Kyoto, original capital of Japan, city of over 2,000 shrines, temples, gardens and art treasures, a 500-kilometre journey taking four hours by bullet train (*shinkansen*) which runs every 15 minutes.

The Hatanaka *ryokan* was situated in a quiet tree-lined street and surrounded by little

**QUOTE:** *Love hotels are not brothels, they provide couples with very stylish, inexpensive accommodation and all the accoutrements for unadulterated love-making . . .*

tea-houses and tiny fast-flowing streams which swarm with brightly coloured carp.

The Hatanaka is the epitome of luxury. My room had its own soft pine wooden bath complete with matching scrubbing brush, stool and bucket. Prices are \$95-\$200 a night including two meals.

Dinner, served in my room, was a panorama of the senses: immaculately arranged *sushi* on a leaf and perched on ice, neat cubes of cold fish, a delicate broth, miniature toadstools, tofu, okra, raw baby broad beans, tempura and rice served according to an apocrypha of symbols representing streams, blossoms and glaciers. Eating it was an act of sheer barbarism.

The Gion district is reputed to be where *maiko* (apprentice geishas) entertain. At sunset the rowdy *pachinko* (pinball) parlours light up, geishas in gauzy kimonos alight from taxi cabs which bear paper lantern signs on their rooftops and at the Gion Corner the show, a two-hour collage of Japanese culture, begins.

It includes *kyogen* (a comic play), *kyomai* (Kyoto style dance), flower arrangement demonstrations, a tea ceremony, Koto music with Japanese harp, *bunraku* (a puppet play) and *gagaku* (court

My next stop was Koyasan (Mt Koya), a sort of Japanese version of Katoomba, a five-hour journey by train, cable car and bus into the mountains south-west of Kyoto. Established in the ninth century AD, this mecca for the Sinto Esoteric Buddhist tradition and vegetarian town was prohibited to women until 1872.

Its famous cemetery, Okunoin, contains more than 100,000 tombstones and monuments to famous emperors, shoguns, poets and warriors. Wandering down its cedar- and pine-lined pathways, I could almost feel the grinning

gargoyles and demon-faced deities breathing down my neck.

At sunset, I checked into my temple room, overlooking a garden of gnarled pines (the happy tree), pink and white azaleas, ferns and moss. The monks at this temple, the Shojoshinin, could be glimpsed lazing back smoking and watching TV as the sombre bells steadily tolled in neighbouring temples.

The monks enjoy a lifestyle of contemplation and minimal labour. Rearranging gravel with rakes, aligning incense sticks and snuffing or lighting candles seem to be the major occupation.

That night one of the monks shyly asked whether I liked sake. He returned with a brass kettle filled with hot temple sake which rendered me deliriously drunk. Fortunately all I had to do was roll on to my futon a few feet away.

Back in Tokyo after an all night bus ride, I headed for the Kamata district, the region of "love hotels", checking into the Windsor Hotel.

Love hotels are not brothels. They provide couples with very stylish, inexpensive accommodation and all the accoutrements for unadulterated love-making — porno movies and books, vending machines for condoms, a bar, two-way mirror windows, seductive lighting, specialist interest underwear, a love seat, an elaborate bathroom equipped with an inexhaustible supply of vibrators and massage devices, creams and sprays for all occasions as well as a soft bed.

They can be used for overnight accommodation as well as a playpen: the price is \$25 per two hours, or the same price for all night after 5 pm.

And finally, the capsule hotel which was more like sleeping in a mortuary with its stacks of plastic sleepers, the size of large self-contained

bathtubs complete with concertina doors. The floors of the capsule hotel are divided according to sex; there is no obvious provision for couples.

Each container provides an illuminated panel of dials for operating one's personal colour TV set, radio, phone, lights, alarm clock as well as towel, yukata and locker. It felt safe and very futuristic.

Is this how the next generation will sleep in their satellites? Capsules are mostly used by people who have missed the last subway home because, at \$20, they cost less than a cab fare.

The cheapest accommodation to be found in Tokyo, apart from the subway corridor, is the sauna. Although not openly acknowledged, one can spend a very comfortable night sleeping in the adjoining lounge with access

to all the baths, showers, toilets and as much hot water as you can handle, all for

"To worship at Zenkoji, led by a cow." Today the Japanese use this saying to invoke the atmosphere of a leisurely trip. In its enigmatic haiku fashion, it suggests that whatever happens on the way is more important than reaching the destination. It can be traced back to a story about a woman who was hanging washing on the line when she saw a cow, followed it and ended up in the temple of Zenkoji.

To me, it summed up travelling solo in Japan which demands patience and a sense of surrender to the unexpected.

(Berwyn Lewis flew to Japan as a guest of JAL and partly subsidised by the Japan National Tourist Organisation.)