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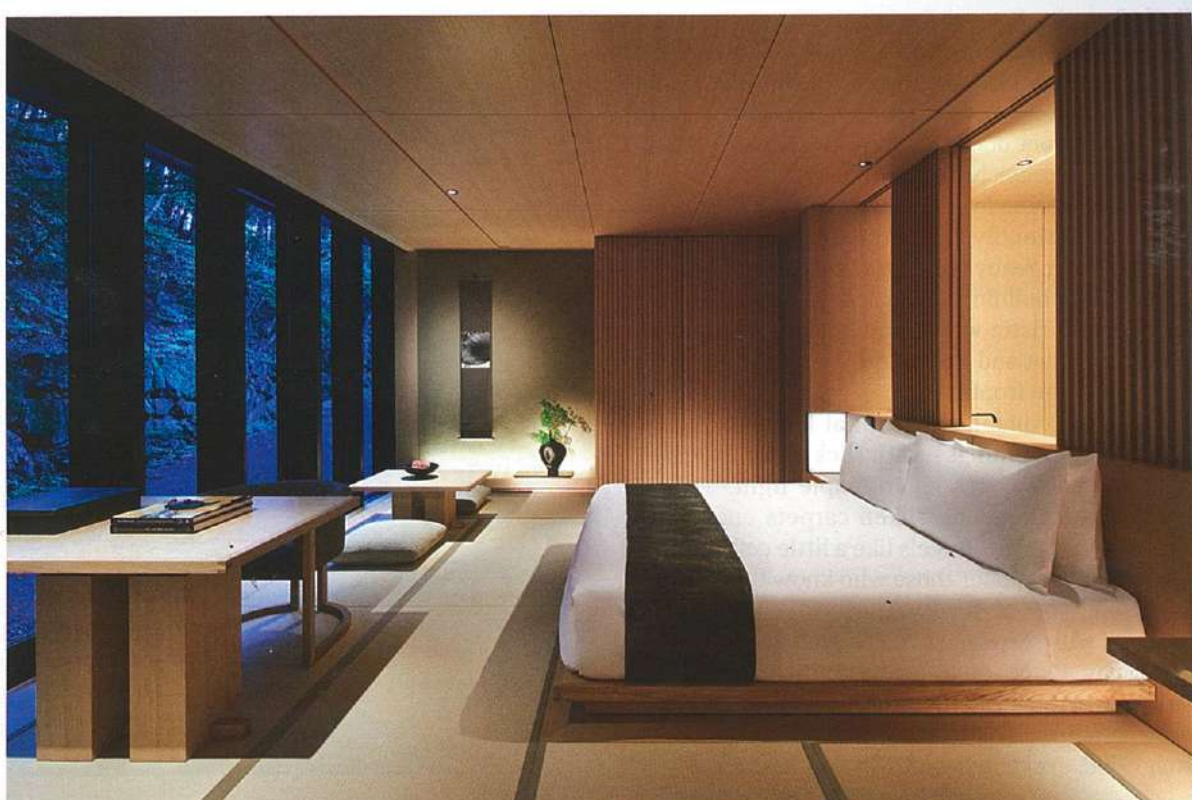
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TEMPLE TO TASTE

Lisa Grainger steps inside the new Aman Kyoto



EARTHLY PARADISE

The bedrooms are finely crafted from natural materials and food in the Japanese restaurant is served in handcrafted bowls

TO FULLY APPRECIATE the Aman Kyoto, which opened on November 1, it is worth considering what's around it and what it has become. Formerly the home of the country's emperors (hence its name: "Kyo" meaning capital and "to" meaning city), the once sacred city, with its moated castles and gold-filled temples, orange-painted shrines and lantern-lit streets, is one of Japan's most popular destinations.

While 25 years ago that wouldn't have been a problem – only 3.3 million tourists entered the country in 1995 – in 2017 more than 54 million visited Kyoto alone. Go to any of the little city's main attractions, whether it's one of the 17 Unesco world heritage sites, its covered food market or its historic streets lined with wooden cottages, and they're swamped, their coach parks full and their walkways flooded with excited kimono-clad girls wielding selfie sticks.

Which is why sweeping through the gates of the Aman, in the forested north, is such a treat. My luggage is whisked away by bowing staff and I can feel the memories of jostling crowds dissipating, my shoulders dropping and my lungs expanding as I'm accompanied past sweet-scented trees to my room.

The previous owner of the 32-hectare property, a textile magnate, spent his last 50 years creating this "secret garden" in which he hoped to build a museum celebrating Japanese obi belts. The museum was never built, although his vision lives on in the gardens, which were made to look thousands of years old, from the walls that resemble the foundations of a crumbled temple and the wells in deep caves to the natural-style landscaping, with plums that will blossom in spring, followed by cherries, peonies and hydrangeas. When I visit in early autumn the leaves have just started to change

and, amid a blaze of orange maples, lines of massive Japanese cedars soar into the sky, their roots carpeted by iridescent lime mosses. As I stroll around I see secret stone platforms and sunken fire pits, waterfalls and ancient-looking steps. It's so soothing, so exquisite, so richly soundscaped with birdsong that I immediately understand the concept of Japanese forest bathing, which has nothing to do with baths and everything to do with letting nature wash over you until you feel sodden with happiness.

The link with nature extends to the rooms: 28 of them, in six shed-shaped, double-storey latticed buildings set in the forest. Like those in the Aman Tokyo, designed by Kerry Hill, the interiors are politely, meticulously Japanese; so much so that you feel you ought to whisper as you take off your shoes at the front door. Every inch is finely crafted from natural materials: grey stone in the bathrooms, pale wood on the bedroom walls and fine cream tatami on the floors. Floor-to-ceiling doors can be opened to let the forest air flood in and wooden bathroom shutters slide back to create one giant suite. The art encourages introspection: a glass vase holding a delicate ikebana arrangement; a scroll emblazoned with a single calligraphy character; a piece of handcrafted pottery the colour of coal and embedded with rough flecks of copper.

But then everything in the property has been created to highlight local culture. In the spa

a rock-encircled springwater onsen has been dug outside so that you can soak, naked, in the moonlight, listening to trees rustle and owls hoot, before indulging in a body scrub using sake, rice bran, sea salt and green tea. The concierge can organise flower-arranging lessons, meditation sessions with monks, evenings with geishas, afternoons in Zen gardens – as well as, rather marvellously, visits to Kyoto's quieter attractions on an electric bicycle.

Then there's the food. As one may expect, the Japanese restaurant – headed by Koji Mita, who formerly worked at the three-Michelin-star Kichisen in Kyoto – is exceptionally refined. It offers a ten-course feast, ranging from fine broths to delicate sashimi, served on a massive slice of tree trunk. What is less predictable is the standard of its western restaurant, where the Italian-trained Japanese chef Kentaro Torii cooks a mean spag bol, an inventive take on fish and chips (super-light bream wrapped in vermicelli and deep-fried) and, at breakfast, egg rolls so paper-thin and golden that you immediately want to learn how to make them.

The best thing about the hotel, though, is its location; not far from Kyoto's sights and within cycling distance of exquisite small temples and gardens, yet removed from the madding throngs. Although listening to the dawn chorus and watching red maple leaves fall while snuggled beneath soft clouds of down duvet was pretty transporting too. *Doubles from £994; aman.com. Ampersand Travel (ampersandtravel.com) offers a seven-night tour to Kyoto from £4,380 per person, including accommodation at Aman Kyoto and Park Hyatt, transfers and some guiding. Return BA flights to Osaka cost from £717 (ba.com/osaka)*