

## The Best New Luxury Hotel in Japan: The Four Seasons Kyoto



**Ann Abel**, CONTRIBUTOR

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The silk brocade on the bedroom cushions was painstakingly woven by [Hosoo](#), a Kyoto atelier that dates from 1688 and produces textiles for Dior, Chanel and Vuitton. The air-tight tea canisters were crafted by [Kaikado](#), another centuries-old local artisan that makes the best in class, and their lids seal just so. Even the folders for the card-keys—one of the most banal details in any hotel—were carefully thought through, with windows cut into their front faces to reveal the artwork inside. The hand-adzed floors came with six-figure price tags (but feel wonderfully textured and tactile underfoot), and an illuminated sheet of *washi* paper worth \$50,000 hangs in a corridor as art.

The designers overlooked nothing (and the owners, it seems, deemed no expense too high) at the ravishing new [Four Seasons Kyoto](#), which opened last fall near center of town. There is grandeur in spades: quadruple-height ceilings in the dining room, a leather-clad Hermès rickshaw in a hallway corner, extravagant floral designs by [Nicolai Bergmann](#), billed as “the Jeff Lethem of Japan” in a nod to the Four Seasons’ house florist (see the George V in Paris). There’s an enormous fitness center and stunning underground swimming pool, and the spa draws on the best of the East ([Sodashi](#)) and the West (the cult line [Biologique Recherche](#)).

And yet, somehow, nothing feels overdone. The creative visionaries involved have lived up to Japanese ideals like tranquility, harmoniousness, discretion and even *wabi-sabi*, or the perfection of imperfection. It’s lavish, to be sure, but it feels right.

Surprisingly, a lot of it was the work of an American firm, [HBA](#), and the talented designer Agnes

Ng, who made such an imprint on the place that the staff named one of the storks that hangs out in the pond outside after her.

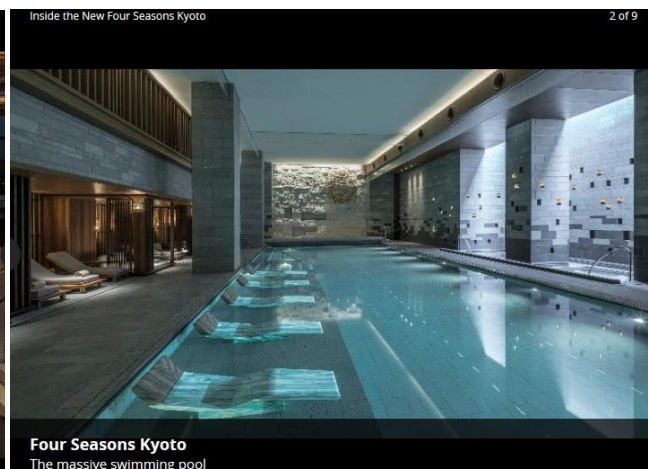
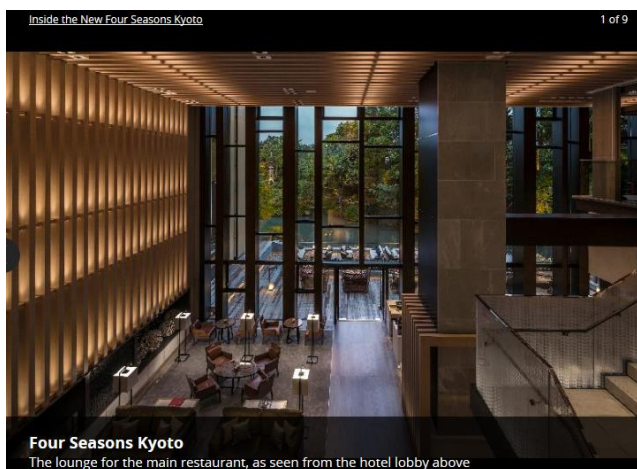
That pond is important. It's part of the 800-year-old garden that's the centerpiece of the hotel. Many of the rooms overlook it, but even in those that don't, its presence infuses the hotel with a certain energy. At roughly 100,000 square feet, the well-tended garden is believed to have been the villa of the son of an important 12th-century samurai. It was described in epic poetry, and part of it has been compared to the "Island of the Immortals" in Japanese mythology, where they lived in harmony with nature. The history is heavy, but the feeling is tranquil and timeless—and all the more compelling when you know that several staff members were born on the site.

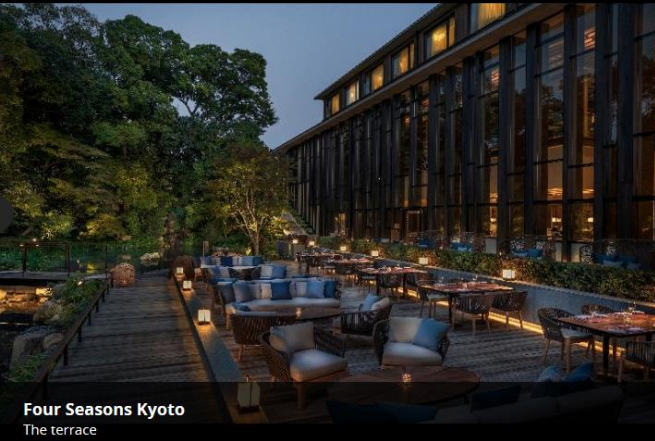
And yet, the place is thoroughly modern. The 110 guest rooms and 13 suites are spacious and sun-splashed and have intuitive panels for lights and drapes and iPads for everything else. (Disclosure: I stayed in one as a guest of the hotel.) The teahouse in that garden is used for meditative tea ceremonies by day, but come twilight, it turns into a swanky bar serving fine *sakes*—including one produced exclusively for Four Seasons—and premium Champagne. The cocktail program at the other two bars—designed by Proof, the outfit behind trendy spots like [Manhattan](#) in Singapore—is so of-the-moment that one of them serves exclusively stirred drinks and the other only shaken ones.

The main restaurant, Brasserie, is what it sounds like, an international dining room with a modern, lightened-up French twist. The local ladies who lunch hold court in the bird's-nest-shaped banquettes. The breakfast buffet is a standout. The second, much smaller restaurant is [Sushi Wakon](#), which has just 10 seats at the bar for Edo- (Tokyo-) style

sushi, a rarity in Kyoto but considered to be more refined than the local version. It's overseen by master sushi chef Rei Masuda, who was awarded two Michelin stars for his [Sushi Masuda](#) in Tokyo. Alex Porteous, the Four Seasons' general manager, says (in an informed way) that he expects the hotel outpost to earn the same by the time the next ratings are released. The unctuous bluefin tuna and silky uni sushi—flown in daily, like everything else, from the famous [Tsukiji market](#) in Tokyo—would be worth the trip by themselves.

Kyoto isn't the only place in Japan to have seen Four Seasons up its restaurant game. The Tokyo hotel in Maranouchi, which opened 15 years ago as an early [Yabu Pushelberg](#) project, has been steadily updated over the years. In 2015, [André Fu](#) reimagined the top-floor dining room as a sleek, outward-looking space, and the chef took the menu in a more relaxed direction, away from fine-dining French and into the territory of sliders and popcorn in the bar and Caesar salad and skate *meunière* in the dining room. Close to Tokyo Station, the Imperial Garden and the dizzying shopping of Ginza, it's a fine base for exploring the city. But coming back to eat is its own no-detail-overlooked luxury.





**Four Seasons Kyoto**  
The terrace



**Four Seasons Kyoto**  
The main restaurant and bar, getting ready for lunch



**Four Seasons Kyoto**  
The 800-year-old spiritual garden



**Four Seasons Kyoto**



**Four Seasons Kyoto**  
A colorful (and delectable) dish in the Brasserie: Firefly squid and grilled Kyoto bamboo shoots with pea mousse



**Four Seasons Kyoto**  
The upstairs bar, which serves only stirred drinks