



## A Night in Old Edo

*For those willing to try something different, staying at a ryokan inn offers a chance to experience a new dimension in Japanese omotenashi hospitality.*

The entranceway of the Sadachiyo inn features traditional lanterns and a jinrikisha carriage.

Traditional Japanese inns, or *ryokan*, trace their roots to the rest houses of the Edo Period (1603–1868). During this time, the number of travelers surged throughout Japan, thanks in part to the ruling Tokugawa shogunate, which demanded provincial daimyo (feudal lords) to show allegiance by periodically relocating from their local domains to the Edo capital (modern-day Tokyo). Their comings and goings sent business soaring for rest houses along the major thoroughfares, as famously depicted in Hiroshige’s series of woodblock prints, “The Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido Road.”

Today, travelers have access to a staggering range of accommodations all over Japan, from luxury and business hotels to capsule hotels and backpacker hostels. And yet, out of so many tantalizing choices, thousands of visitors every year continue to prefer *ryokan*, with their time-honored traditions, even

in the heart of 21<sup>st</sup> century Tokyo. To learn more about their appeal, I booked a room at Sadachiyo in Asakusa, one of the city’s most historic sites and a top-ranked tourist destination.

**4:32 p.m. Check-in:** Established 70 years ago, Sadachiyo has been run by the same family for three generations. At first glance, it could easily pass as an Edo Period inn, with its picture-perfect roof tiles, hanging lanterns and willow trees. As I approach, I can imagine the huge relief that travelers of the past must have felt when they finally reached such an inn after a long journey.

“*Irasshaimase!*” A lady welcomes me at the door in an elegant kimono. Stepping inside, I am instantly transported back in time. The entire interior is a showcase of Edo Period culture: ukiyo-e woodblock prints, Imari porcelains and wooden shingles, among other artifacts. Throughout, there are prominent displays of original firefighting paraphernalia, including



The cypress bath: study the instructions before taking the plunge.



Tasty dishes: a serving of plump, juicy clams in a leek-infused broth.

uniforms and *matoi* staffs that identified firemen’s units—prized relics from a time when large fires were commonplace due to the city’s dense population and tightly clustered dwellings.

Reaching my room, I remove my shoes at the entrance and slide the door open. The interior is a seamless blend of old and new, tastefully appointed with a low table, an antique chest and, in the *tokonoma* alcove, a large print of a Kabuki character. It also has all the standard modern amenities: TV, mini-fridge, safe, en-suite bathroom and high-tech Western-style toilet. After the hustle and bustle of Asakusa, I am more than ready to change into my *yukata* cotton robe and stretch out on the tatami straw-mat floor for some serious downtime.

**6:10 p.m. Bath:** The inn has two communal baths, one of cypress and the other of stone. As bathing is central to the *ryokan* experience, I decide to take the plunge. Thankfully, the changing room to the cypress bath provides detailed English instructions. 1) Remove clothing. 2) Thoroughly scrub and rinse in the washing area. 3) Finally, sink into the deep, hot communal tub—which, as it turns out, I have all to myself. For a truly authentic Edo Period experience, perhaps there should be a few other ladies in the tub to chat with. But for now, I’m content to just soak and relax in luxurious privacy.

**7:00 p.m. Dinner:** *Ryokan* typically charge per person per room, including dinner and breakfast. The attendant explains that different social classes ate different foods in the Edo Period. Samurai had austere, disciplined diets; ordinary folk, on the other hand, were free to eat and drink as they pleased. Luckily for me, Sadachiyo specializes in the latter cuisine, which is refined and plentiful. Tonight’s menu consists of ten dishes, including succulent sashimi, crisp tempura and a *nabe* pot of plump, juicy clams in a leek-infused broth. Everything has been painstakingly prepared with a focus on variety, seasonal specialties and artful presentation.

**10:25 p.m. Bedtime:** Meanwhile, my bedding has been laid out—a futon mattress on the tatami with a comforter on top, creating a soft, white cotton cocoon. TV would ruin the illusion of sleeping in an Edo Period inn, so I just call it a night.

**9:50 a.m. Check-out:** After breakfast, I chat briefly with proprietor Tomohiko Mochizuki about the traditions of *ryokan omotenashi* hospitality. “People’s ideas about *omotenashi* change over time,” Mochizuki says. “There is no fixed definition or set of rules.” For 70 years, Sadachiyo has aimed simply to respond to guests’ evolving needs by providing more flexible meal plans, among other services. “What matters isn’t what we *think* is hospitality, but what others *feel* is hospitality,” Mochizuki points out. “More than anything, we want our guests to be comfortable while experiencing authentic Edo culture.”

While a *ryokan*’s services may change from year to year, or from century to century, this aspect of *ryokan omotenashi* is timeless. Mochizuki adds, “It’s all about making people feel at home.”



Authentic *ryokan* are increasingly rare in Tokyo. Homeikan is one of the city’s most historic *ryokan*, dating from the Meiji Era (1868–1912). Its main building is a Registered Tangible Cultural Property.