



DEBUT

Secret Garden

The Four Seasons Kyoto just opened, but with a design imbued with classical *ryokan* tropes and an intimate connection to the city's past, it feels like it has its own history. BY DIANA HUBBELL

ENTERING A CITY steeped in history and dotted with more than 1,600 temples, 400 shrines and 17 UNESCO World Heritage Sites—more than most countries—could prove a daunting task for a new hotel. Yet the Four Seasons Hotel Kyoto stepped onto the stage with the quiet grace of a geisha, seeming to blend effortlessly with its surrounds. It helps that the spiritual heart of the hotel is more than eight centuries old. Once the private *ikeniwa* (pond garden) of a revered samurai, the Shakusuien is a two-hectare sanctuary for local avian life and a textbook example of the dreamy, meticulous miniature landscapes for which the country is known.

“People remember it from when they were children. So many have told us that they are grateful for how we’ve protected the pond garden, and how we’ve respected it,” says general manager Alex Porteous. While its nostalgic value never waned, over the years the garden had lost a little of its luster. Painstaking efforts and research were necessary to bring it back to the level of splendor it must have had when it made a cameo in *The Tale of the Heike*, a 12th-century Japanese epic poem. “A lot of the wildlife has come back,” Porteous says. “We have kois and carps, little lobsters and an egret.”

After the time and energy put into reviving the estate, it is little wonder the

property is oriented to focus on the 800-year-old garden at its center. Throughout the rooms and corridors, nine-meter-long windows accented with traditional Japanese fretwork face inwards towards the *ikeniwa*, to showcase its tranquil and ever-shifting scenery. Sakura bloom pale pink in spring, while autumn foliage sees the scenery blaze into scarlet and crimson, before the stark ink-brush composition of winter. Carved cedar doors, *aji* stones, washi paper, shoji screens and designer Agnes Ng’s architectural nods to a *Miko*’s parasol or a waving bamboo forest extend the aesthetic to the rest of the hotel. “Agnes has taken the garden and brought it inside,” Porteous says.

The mission of immersing guests in Kyoto’s multifaceted story extends beyond the shady garden and into the city itself. Dozens of cultural activities, from geisha performances in the teahouse for adults to manga-drawing for kids, offer in-roads to the local culture. Best of all, bespoke tours by Hana Morioka, the hotel’s experience curator, include a visit to a secret shrine and a garden sealed off to the public. Says Porteous: “This is for those who want to explore a little deeper.” 445-3 Myohoin Maekawa-cho Higashioji-dori Shibutani-sagaru; 81-75/541-8288; fourseasons.com/kyoto; doubles from ¥51,000. 📍



FROM TOP: Views take in the natural side of Kyoto; one of the hotel restaurants; modern design incorporates ancient Japanese motifs.

