Understanding Ryokan Culture

The Ryokan Collection consists of Category AAA ryokan where you can experience authentic, traditional Japanese culture and customs and indulge in old-fashioned Japanese hospitality and service at its legendary best. By understanding some of the customs and practices of a ryokan, you will be assured of a memorable experience and be able to make the most of your stay.

What is a ryokan?
Ryokan are traditional Japanese-style inns and have been a central part of Japanese culture for centuries. The first one opened in 718 AD, giving them a history of 1,300 years.

Most ryokan are family-run inns that entertain travelers and make them feel at home, as if they were staying at a friend’s home. Japanese culture arose as a result of both the delicate climate, and this omotenashi spirit – the spirit of hospitality, the urge to entertain people and see them happy. These two unique ideas made the unique ryokan culture flourish, and as a result, the number currently totals around 63,000 nationwide.

The big difference between a hotel and a ryokan is that the most important aspect of the ryokan is the meals. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the rooms and hot spring baths at a ryokan exist only in order for the guests to enjoy the meals. Most ryokan do not have a restaurant. The chefs create the daily meal based on seasonal ingredients that they obtain that day, so that each meal is unique and special, and could only exist on that day and no other. This is the hallmark of ryokan cooking.

The onsen (natural hot spring) has been revered in Japan for its healing and restorative powers for over 2,000 years, and is a central part of Japanese culture. That is why fine hot springs are an important element of hospitality, and of the ryokan experience.

In order to help you have the best possible experience of traditional Japan, let us explain a few key aspects of traditional ryokan culture, along with what you might expect in a typical day at a top-quality ryokan.

A day at a ryokan

14:30 - Arrival at the station
Most ryokan offer free meeting and send-off services. The ride to the ryokan is a good chance to enjoy the local scenery.
15:00 - Check-in
When you arrive at the ryokan, the landlady and staff greet you at the entrance with a warm welcome and a deep bow. You remove your shoes at the entrance hall, step up to the interior floor, then change into slippers that the ryokan provides. A member of the staff will take you to your room.
Most ryokan of The Ryokan Collection offer in-room check-in.
When you enter the room, you take off the slippers at the entryway and enter in bare or sock feet.
A different staff member, the room clerk, now brings tea and a small snack to the living room. He or she chats with the guest, confirms the meal start time and offers information about the spa, baths and other ryokan facilities.
*Many guests like to tip the staff at this time, usually Y3,000-Y10,000, which is passed to the room clerk in a small envelope. It is not necessary to tip the person who initially takes you to your room.

Guest rooms
A typical ryokan room is patterned on rooms in classical Japanese houses and contains:
- The *agari-kamachi*, or entranceway. After opening the door you step into this small area and take off your slippers before entering the room.
- *Shoji*, sliding paper doors, which separate the agari-kamachi from the room.
- *Tatami*, reed floor mats
- Low wooden tables
- *Zabuton*, cushions for sitting on
- *Futon*, sleeping quilts
- *Tokonoma*, an ornamental alcove built into the wall used for placing flower vases and hanging scrolls, this is usually an ornamental alcove that is raised one step above the *tatami* floor.
**Please note: This is a special place; one should not place luggage, handbag or anything else in it.
- *Oshibori*, a closet for the futon
- A glass-enclosed sitting area separated from the room by a shoji screen.

15:30 - Relax time in your room
The room clerk lays out the *yukata* cotton kimono, which you then change into.
While staying at a ryokan and strolling about the area, guests generally wear only the yukata, and not their regular clothes. The Ryokan Collection requests that guests provide
their size ahead of time to ensure a proper fit. If there is any problem, you should inform your room clerk.

16:00 Onsen (hot spring bath)
Many Japanese like to soak in a hot spring before a meal. Private baths for families and married couples can sometimes be reserved for 40 minutes or an hour at a time. Many ryokan provide guest rooms with outdoor onsen as well. Please consult the room clerk about the ryokan's policy on this.

Ofuro (bath)
The Japanese consider a long hot soak to wash away the day's weariness a major ryokan attraction and you should also find time to indulge in it. You may use your room’s private bath, or you may choose to use the communal bath. Men and women bathe separately.

Here are a few basic rules and practices when using the ofuro:
- Do not use soap in the bath. The tub of water is for everyone.
- Place your clothing in the basket and clean yourself with the soap. Rinse yourself off with the shower or use a washbowl to scoop hot water out of the tub.
- After washing thoroughly and rinsing off the soap, step into the bathtub. The water temperature should be 38°C to 42°C, and the water should be deep enough that an adult can sit submerged up to the neck.
- Get out of the bath, sit on the low stool provided, and wash yourself again thoroughly.
- Use the shower or water from the bath to rinse any remaining soap or shampoo from the floor.

At many ryokan, natural hot springs supply the hot water for indoor and sometimes for outdoor open-air baths.

17:00 - Spa and other facilities
Until dinner, feel free to explore the ryokan and its surroundings, stroll through the neighborhood, or spend time reading in the library, for example. In recent years many ryokan have included an adjacent spa, so guests can enjoy a variety of spa treatments. Japanese-style spas offer facials and body treatments, which can be a great way to relieve the stress of your journey.

19:00 - Dinner
Meals are one of the main attractions of staying at a ryokan. The sense of marking and contemplating the changing of the seasons is an important part of the culture in Japan. People are brought up to be conscious of the beauty of the four seasons, and this is reflected in the meals at ryokan. The kaiseki cuisine which most ryokan offer is served as a set meal, and the guest does not choose from a menu like at a restaurant. Therefore, please inform The Ryokan Collection beforehand of any allergies or ingredients that you cannot eat. Special meals, such as vegetarian, can be arranged.

Although in general you can eat your meals in your room, recently many ryokan have set up other eating venues, and it is also possible to book individual dining spaces.
Here are some additional points about eating at a ryokan:

- Dinner begins at around 6-7 pm.
- Usually the cuisine is traditional *kaiseki ryori*, consisting of an 8 to 13-course dinner including a wide variety of small dishes with local specialties of *sashimi* (raw fish and shellfish), *nabemono* (meat, vegetables and fish stewed in a pot), *tempura* (deep-fried fish and vegetables), grilled fish, boiled vegetables and meat, vegetable hors d'oeuvres, *miso* soup, and rice.

Top ryokan serve their meals on fine traditional pottery, laquerware and glass from famous makers all over Japan, along with natural materials like ice and bamboo to emphasize the seasons. Sometimes food is served on very expensive tableware like traditional craftware and antiques.

- You will be provided with chopsticks, although you may request Western tableware.
- Beverages and additional courses are generally available at extra charge.

22:00 - After dinner
When dinner is finished, there are usually a variety of ways to enjoy your evening in the ryokan. You can enjoy a drink of local sake or wine in the adjacent bar, enjoy a private movie showing, a massage or *shiatsu* in your room, or a facial at the spa. Or you can go for a relaxing soak in the outdoor bath and contemplate the moon.

23:00 - Bed time
At top-class ryokan, a white *yukata* (cotton kimono) for sleeping is prepared after the room clerk finishes preparing the futon.

- Your room clerk prepares your futon (sleeping quilts) every night and puts them away in the morning.
- First a thin mattress is laid on the floor, usually a few inches thick and just soft enough. If you like it softer, you can ask the maid to double it up.
- Then there is a quilt, wrapped in a sheet, then you, then another quilt, wrapped in a sheet or a duvet, which all together comprise your *futon*. 
The next day
7:30 - Wake-up time
The staff greet you in the morning with a hearty “Ohayo gozaimasu!” (“Good morning!”). Before breakfast you can enjoy a stroll in the forest or a soak in the outdoor hot spring bath, allowing the fresh air and nature to give you a nice early morning boost.

8:30 - Breakfast
Usually, breakfast is served in your room. The food is delicious Japanese home-style cooking, including miso soup, rice, pickles and grilled fish presented on dishes unique to the ryokan. Western breakfasts are also available; please request in advance.

10:30 - Check-out
Checkout time at a ryokan is typically 10:00 to 11:00. It is possible to settle your bill in your room. Credit cards may be used. On the way out, you may like to stop in at the boutique, to pick up a gift of sake or souvenirs such as yukata and amenities to remind you of your stay.

Just as when you arrived, there is a shuttle service to the nearest station. The staff and other customers will give you a friendly sendoff, in the spirit of the ryokan’s omotenashi.