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AN URBAN RYOKAN AND ROOFTOP ONSEN IN TOKYO

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Photos: Nacasa & Partners





ONSEN RYOKAN YUEN SHINJUKU

Embodies the essence of traditional ryokans adapted for modern travellers

Surrounded by a sea of summer-green bamboo, a wooden gate with a blue noren curtain opens onto a tranquil pathway lined with lanterns, pebbles, plants and, at the far end, a rock handbasin with trickling water.

This sounds like the entrance of countless traditional ryokan inns across Japan, the serene pathway typically providing guests with a sense of transition from the outside world to its inner sanctum. Yet this hotel isn't located on a rural mountainside or quiet Kyoto lane. Instead, it can be found in an area more famed for its futuristic neon lights and skyscrapers than its traditional aesthetics: Shinjuku in Tokyo.

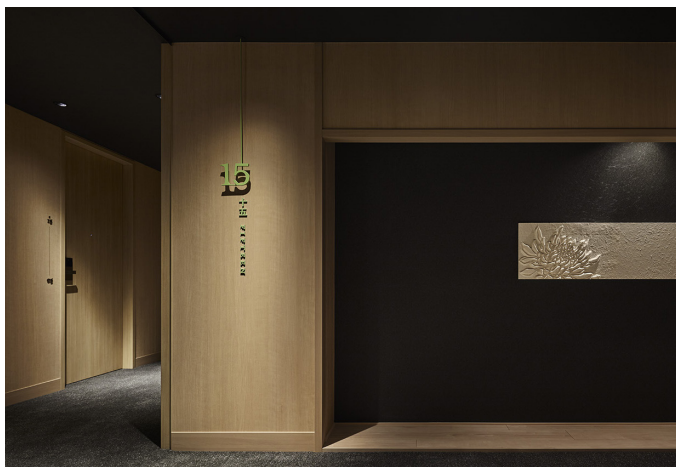
The traditional and the contemporary easily overlap in ONSEN RYOKAN YUEN SHINJUKU, which recently opened on a quiet street about a 15-minute walk from Shinjuku's main train station. The atmospheric 20-metre entrance walkway leads into a discreetly positioned grey 18-floor tower, complete with 193 guestrooms resembling a contemporary take on traditional sukiya tearoom-style architecture.

'Through unique impressions and delicate sign designs, I would like guests to feel the unique qualities of Japanese hospitality,' explains Shun Kawakami, founder of artless Inc.



'Yuen Shinjuku is a modern and urban version of the traditional Japanese ryokan,' says Daishi Yoshimoto, its designer from UDS. While the hotel is owned by JA Mitsui Lease Buildings, UDS is involved in its planning, design and operation.

'We extracted the essential features of a ryokan and "edited" it to fit the practical needs of modern travellers,' Yoshimoto explains. 'While the front facade is that of a very traditional ryokan, the traditional design begins to gradually blend and shift to modern contemporary design as the guest proceeds towards the lobby and on to the guestroom. This transition is intended to be very subtle and natural so that the whole experience is comfortable and memorable, while being authentically Japanese.'



Stepping inside the modern, minimal space, a series of design touches evoke ryokan interiors: from the night-time shadows of bamboo plants moving in the wind, seen through white washi-paper screens behind the check-in desk, to the hovering under-lit wooden platform with circular straw cushion, minimal ikebana displays and the traditional incense burning in corridors.

Clean-lined signage by Tokyo-based branding agency artless Inc. guides guests to the elevators.







The seven room types span a range of sizes, but all share the same aesthetic: tatami-style flooring, low-lying white beds, walls that evoke traditional plasterwork, and touches of craftsmanship in the round ceramic washbasins made in Shigaraki and the tiered wooden jubako boxes containing amenities.

The windows are also eye-catching in their simplicity: a single horizontal slit framing views across the Tokyo skyline. Inspired by the traditional concept of yukimi shoji (which literally means 'sliding screens for seeing the snow'), the intention is for guests to slow down, position their gaze and savour the view.

Kakatojo restaurant on the ground floor — a warm mix of grey stones, a sugi cedar wood ceiling and an L-shaped counter made from a single piece of Japanese ginkgo — serves contemporary Japanese cuisine, plus delicious breakfast in tiered ceramic boxes.



But the hotel's crowning glory can be found at its apex: the rooftop onsen, for which an undisclosed amount of mineral-rich onsen water is delivered weekly by lorry from the mountainous Hakone region. Here, noren curtains lead to indoor and outdoor baths for men and women, plus a small lounge with a wall of glass, where stunning views across Shinjuku can be enjoyed post-bathing.

<https://www.uds-hotels.com/yuen/shinjuku>