

# Hospitality—*Omotenashi* Comparing Apples to Oranges...

By Lloyd S. Nakano

I'M a hotel guy; been so since joining the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Waikiki during college in 1969 despite a few lagniappes into other tourism businesses along the way. Twice over the past 20 years, I have been asked to “introduce” a Western-styled “luxury” product and services to the Japanese market...The first time, affiliated with Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts when literally no one here in Japan had ever heard of them. The top international brands were still Sheraton, Hilton, and Hyatt. The ranking hotels in Japan then were the Imperial, Okura, and Hotel New Otani. Just then, along came a “newcomer” — Hotel Seiyō Ginza, the *Western-style hotel* opened at Ginza 1-chome.

I remember staying here in late 1987 as Four Seasons Hotel broke ground in Chinzan-so. My job included opening a regional sales office in Tokyo and I happily stayed at all of the major hotels in the city! Here, I met then General Manager Takuya Nagai and, after hearing about the service philosophies of Seiyō Ginza, thought, “This guy is dreaming! How will they ever succeed?”

M a r r y i n g Western hospitality with *omotenashi*, that of *ryokan* and centuries of Japanese tradition...” To me, the concept was a non sequitur

— two completely incompatible concepts...like using *ohashi* (chopsticks) for corn soup, a spoon for *misoshiru* (*miso* soup)!

Where the Western concept was based on the Latin root for care (as in hospital), the Japanese concept was borne out of a *Zen* ritual of minimalism and *hikizan* or subtraction (less is more...). Back then, it never occurred to me that this subject would become such a focus point for me. It would lead to the second occasion for me to import a Yankee sense of luxury into Tokyo! It would be my joss to fulfill Nagai-san’s vision 15 years since that fateful encounter as managing director of Seiyō Ginza, a Rosewood Hotel. Thus, for nearly three decades, the contrasts between Western and Japanese sensibilities of “hospitality” have preoccupied my days, providing a kaleidoscope of opportunities to enhance the guest experience and cultural understanding of Japan.

Still, for this article, I needed help, so I asked concierges Reiko Nagaoka and Ai Seike, “What is different between Hotel Seiyō Ginza and our Western competitor hotels (Ritz-Carlton, Mandarin Oriental, Peninsula, Hyatt, and Four Seasons)?” They unhesitatingly answered, “We’re Japanese (of course!)”

So I asked, “What’s the difference then between us and the Imperial, Okura, or New Otani?” and sensing a trap they demurred... “Hmmm... *muzukashii desume* (difficult indeed)...” While biting their tongues, could they have been thinking, “We’re Western!”?

The focus of this article is not about comparing or citing differences between Japanese hotel companies with Western brands. It is my interpretation of the approach to hospitality that is anchored in a history of inn-keeping and monastic virtues versus that of modern, globally ubiquitous, international hotels. It will explore the basis for differentiation in the customer experience between the two and provide one explanation for the commercial success these brands are now

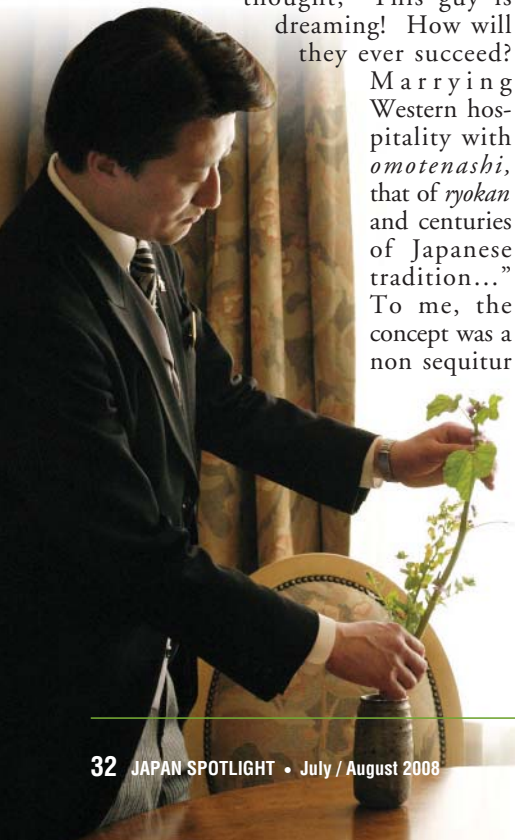


Hotel Seiyō Ginza, a Rosewood hotel

enjoying. I hope I raise some eyebrows and perhaps more than a few questions over whether domestic hotel operators risk becoming irrelevant, arcane, obsolete and unsustainable. At the least, I hope there will be no misunderstanding that I admire and celebrate *omotenashi* and only bemoan that most guests today are much too busy to indulge in the finest nuances of it — a quiet cup of tea, an acknowledgement of the seasons in décor, menus, crockery!

The past 30 years have taken me through many of the world’s top hotels in the most desirable locations. At each, I have encountered and learned original, new, and unique services, amenities, products and perspectives. As both hotel executive and cultural “student,” I have witnessed the *Aloha Spirit* become universal, *Keramah Tamahan* emerge as Balinese hospitality (and the proliferation of the spa), and now, *omotenashi* as the highest form of interaction between honored guests and master of the house.

In Japan, many of the leading luxury hotel operators are here as much to study and learn Japanese *omotenashi* — to implement its philosophies in their services not only here but wherever in the world such aesthetics can be appreciated — as to establish their brand in this most significant of Asian cities. In many ways, they have analyzed, studied and adopted elements of Japanese hospitality, incorporating them into their prod-



uct while their domestic competitors – having always taken being Japanese for granted – have not paid sufficient attention. In a way, the international operators are succeeding in delivering a “sense of place” (a Rosewood catchword) more articulately than domestic hotels have.

It is the reason why many Japanese guests have decided to eschew the traditional stalwarts such as the Imperial, Okura, and New Otani hotels and choose to stay at internationally branded hotels (Hyatt, Sheraton, Hilton, Four Seasons, Mandarin Oriental, Ritz-Carlton, Conrad, and Peninsula) even at dearer cost – often for services and products they neither desire nor have need of.

### Art Form vs Enterprise

*Omotenashi* evolved over the centuries as a distinct art form through *Sado* – the way of tea. As early as during the Kamakura era in the 12th-14th centuries, the ceremonial presentation of tea (originally only Buddhist priests) gradually opened up through the centuries to outsiders, establishing the “rules” of engagement between host and honored guest or weary traveler.

Between the mid-1400s and through the end of the 1500s, the art evolved into the ritual of minimalism and the sublime interaction that we endeavor to understand and appreciate today. Japan’s sense of *omotenashi* was thus born out of accommodating and entertaining an honored guest as opposed to the Western notion of *hospitality* related to caring or nursing one’s health.

Through ensuing centuries, the simplicity of the tea ceremony developed in two distinct ways – less became more and other non-related elements were introduced to enhance the sublimity of the ritual. A simple path leading to a minimalist and sparse *tatami*-floored room adorned by a single heater to boil water, promoting each celebrant’s focus and appreciation of the moment. Yet, adorned with fallen petals evoking the seasons, complemented by a single bud vase in the *tokonoma* (alcove) to exquisitely express nature, and punctuated by the delicate handiwork of an artisan’s pottery, the scene is set!

I could stop right here, couldn’t I? From what I’ve written so far, there’s no

point in comparing Japanese *omotenashi* with Western “hospitality” – they’re two completely different subjects! One is reality television, the other elaborate theater. Yet, notably, guests disproportionately compliment the graciousness and sincerity of their Japanese hosts. Moreover, the experience of staying at a Japanese *ryokan* with an *onsen* bath ranks high on visitors’ “must-do” lists while in Japan. So let’s explore this further. Let’s pinpoint that ephemeral *je nais sais quoi* aspect that has given the Japanese inn experience its unique desirability yet (sadly) also dooming them to limited viability.

*Omoiyari, kikubari, sarigenasa, saishin no chui wo harau, ninjou, chiisana shinsetsu, kokorozukai...* “Do unto others as you would have done unto yourself...” courtesies, considerations, selflessness, charity, love and sincerity... Can these terms become part of a practical corporate philosophy of customer service? Or, are they too vague, indefinable and impractical to be part of an employee training program?

The ascetic may say, “*Waza, kata, kotsu, konki, shitsuke...*” and the Western executive may expound “*Attention to detail! Practice makes perfect! Policy & procedure, discipline, technique and detailed job or position descriptions!*” In Hawaii, the locals aver, as with an “insider’s wisdom,” “*Eh Braddah!* It’s in *dah* genes! You cannot teach *dah Aloha Spirit!* You *gottah* be born with it! You either got it! Or, you don’t!” So, is hospitality an art, a skill, or instinctive?

Years ago, growing up in Hawaii, I remember seeing newspaper articles and editorials decrying the “loss of the *Aloha Spirit*” as a result of dilution through unprecedented transmigration growth of the permanent resident population into the state. “Only a Hawaiian could genuinely understand and grasp the beauty and irresistibility of the *Aloha Spirit!*” locals believed. Would Hawaiian hospitality be “lost” to the point of obscurity and diffusion so as to lose its relevancy? Would Hawaii become another Niagara Falls, a Poconos resort devoid of the things that made it alluring in the first place? Or, could the spirit of *Aloha* be taught in schools, churches and other institutions as a skill, vital to promoting the uniqueness of that paradise?

The “crossroads” for Hawaii meant abandoning inherent aspects of the *Aloha*



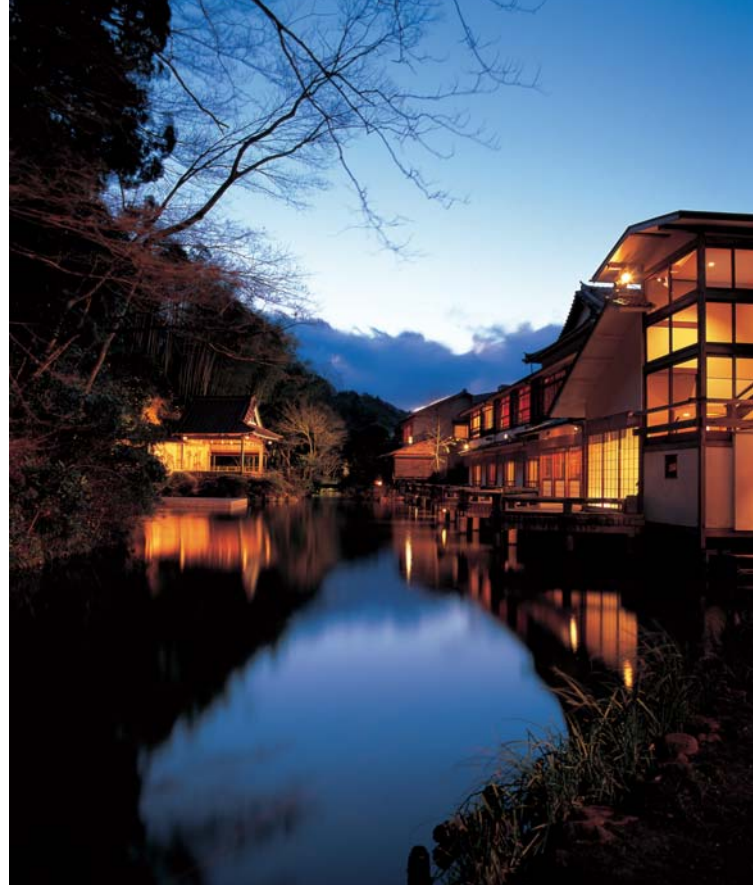
Traditional tea room

*Spirit*, commoditizing it in order to quantify it, teach it, even market it so as to ensure the future of a growing population and to give their local resident talent more opportunities for adequately paying jobs and a chance to pursue a satisfactory quality of life. *Omotenashi* is going through a similar transition. From automobiles to airlines, restaurants to retirement homes; manufacturers and service organizations – all claim to possess and deliver the essence of *omotenashi*.

“Hospitality” can be codified, like a foreign language; articulated in actions, gestures, services, acts of kindness, generosity, appropriate interactions, and the desire to help someone fulfill their aspirations. Hospitality has its own rules, syntax, grammar, etymological beginnings. Here in Japan, *omotenashi* has flourished in *ryokan*, *minshuku*, *yado* and *onsen* accommodating visitors, pilgrims and travelers through the centuries, all sharing common expectations, culture, ethnicity and often values as well. The nuances and protocol therefore developed like an elaborate *Kabuki* of “reading the air,” picking up small hints, anticipating needs, and unfolding the drama by encompassing protocol, rules of conduct,



Asaba Ryokan in Shuzenji, Shizuoka Pref.



spatial relationships and finite blocks of the customers' (and hosts') time. Perfection in execution lauded and appreciated as though having gone to theatre, the guest treated to a magnificent performance... exceeding expectations!

International hotel operators have abandoned inn-keeping as an "art" practiced by dedicated artisans in favor of franchising, branding and product development for the sake of investors and stakeholders – in other words, to grow a business and create careers for their executives and valued employees. In the process they have succeeded in globalizing their product and creating legions of hotel business executives versed in specialized aspects of the business. Not so with Japanese inn-keepers. Despite historical proliferation of such properties, codified services, designs, products and procedures have never been established or, for that matter, expected. Often multi-generational and passed along from journeyman to apprentice, proprietors

and operators depend upon their oral histories more so than rules and regulations.

Today, a guest in search of a place to leave their belongings and go to sleep at the end of the day will stay at a hotel. When that same traveler seeks solace, attention, personalized care, tradition and even culture, and has the luxury of time and the desire to indulge in the ministrations of their host, he or she will choose *omotenashi*.

### Ryokan – the Epitome of Japanese Hospitality

Kazuhide Asaba, proprietor of the eponymous *ryokan* on the Izu peninsula, agreed to help me with this article. I asked him what he thought were "different" in our concepts of hospitality. He cited two key areas – room dining and the guest room service philosophy. At Asaba, once occupied, the guest room is the customer's domain. It is the *nakai-san's* "stage," but he/she must be sensitive

to intrusion of this space. This "ma" (間 = reading the best timing or pause) and the interactions that occupy each meal, each event within the guests' experience represent the host's unique *omotenashi*.

In the language of *ryokan* hospitality, the word for subtraction *hikizan* defines the *Zen* approach to the craft. While it is a virtue to have "everything in its place" at the Western hotel, Japanese *ryokan* normally make minimalism their art. There is no place for unnecessary items – like the tea ceremony. For example, setting *yukata* in the room before guest arrival is unacceptable – it would not guarantee cleanliness, personalization, or *kikubari* (consideration). As in *Sado*, the Japanese tea ceremony, only the immediate and minimally necessary items need be present at any given moment. Could you imagine a room at Seiyō Ginza devoid of linen, pillows, bath amenities, stationery, or a minibar?

Yet, as ritualized and sublime the *ryokan* experience may be, it no longer

## A Difference of Philosophies

To be sure, there are many parallels. And again, there are many seemingly identical gestures, products, services and accommodations. Yet the fundamental origins being different, hospitality and *omotenashi* are not the same. What are the differences? Do they matter? If so, can they be taught? Is there a catechism? Or, are they inscrutably “Japanese” – sensed but not codified?

After much observations, discussions with fellow hoteliers, former staff (scions of notable *ryokan* and country inns), and comparisons with owners of *ryokan* like Asaba-san, it comes down to “guest expectations” – ritual, host-guest relationships, and to a certain extent, branding – how the Western hoteliers can proliferate their brands globally while the Japanese counterparts survive in niche markets only.

### Hospitality

What you give...  
 What you think...  
 What you show...  
 What is abundant...  
 What you sell...  
 What you feel...  
 What can be duplicated and copied over and over again...

### Omotenashi

What you withhold...  
 What you can only surmise...  
 What you conceal...  
 What is rare...  
 What is gratis...  
 What you know...  
 What once given can never be repeated...

Source : National Tobacco Information Online System

exists in most major cities in Japan. *Ryokan* have become destinations onto themselves – or destinations located within destinations. The customer arrives purposefully with no intention of leaving until it’s time to check out. The visit to the *ryokan* (along with its locale) is with the intention of luxuriating in Japanese hospitality as interpreted by the house itself. There may be nearby attractions. Still, all in its place; a visit either before or after but not during the time set aside to indulge in the unique and anticipated *omotenashi* of the house.

Can the best aspects of centuries-old and refined Japanese hospitality be incorporated into the luxury Western hotel experience?

At the Western hotel, things are a little different. Staff stand at the ready, anticipating the next “moment of truth” or “point of light” – a chance to be a hero (or heroine). Hoteliers are trained to look for the next trend in service or guest experience – technology, entertainment, aesthetics, mattress, linen, food, beverage. *Nakai-san* do not...they practice their people-reading skills, their *Sado* and *Ikebana* skills, conversation, posture, timing and practiced execution. Every gesture, every motion conducted under perfectly staged circumstances...

## The Best of Both Worlds...

Tokyo has witnessed an unprecedented influx of branded Western hotels over the past four years. Along with Japanese pop culture, food, arts and icons, it has become a city of flagship properties boasting state-of-the-art facilities, features and services. Guests, both foreign and domestic, have become connoisseurs of hospitality. Their expectations are higher than ever, and they can afford them, too! More than their hosts, the modern traveler is geographically and culturally adept. That traveler perfectly fits the profile to understand, indulge, and appreciate the artistry of *omotenashi*.

Luxury international brands have established standards of service and facilities that their loyal customers have come to expect and depend upon. Every top quality hotel must make CRM (customer relations management) their top priority, counting on guest loyalty everywhere they go. Yet, wherever guests go, no one wants to be in a “cookie-cutter” (*kintaro-ame*) property. A distinctive host culture and a “sense of place” have become prerequisites to meaningful travel. The brand itself has evolved, becoming a “guarantee” that minimal expectations of familiar services and products would be met, and

avoiding disappointment and dissatisfaction – the challenge being to deliver on all guest expectations while providing a unique and unforgettable destination experience or memory in the process.

Viscerally understanding a guest’s needs, demonstrating an enthusiasm and passion when delivering services, having a magician’s knack for anticipation and preparedness – at the end of the day, he or she must feel as if they’d just participated in an elaborate dance customized uniquely.

So going back to the conversation with Reiko and Ai here at Seiyo Ginza: what makes for a meaningful stay for today’s traveler? The answer of course is “Both!” – hospitality AND *omotenashi*! We “choose” identifiable services, products, philosophies, and most of all the staff (like Reiko and Ai) who elect the most desirable and appropriate solution given the task or challenge any guest may throw at them. **JS**

*Lloyd Nakano is managing director of Hotel Seiyo Ginza in Tokyo, which is the newest Asian property of the US-based Rosewood Hotels & Resorts chain. Previously, Nakano served as executive assistant manager at another Rosewood hotel, The Dharmawangsa, in Jakarta after working in Hawaii and North America.*