

Interview with Jeffrey F. Seward, General Manager, Aman Tokyo

Aman Off the Beach

AMAN
TOKYO

By *Japan SPOTLIGHT*

Aman, best known for its resort hotels, has come to the big city with what for Tokyo are big spaces. Aman Tokyo is the sixth Aman property to be designed by Kerry Hill Associates who saw the various installations of stone and light through from beginning to end (usually in Japan there are several different subcontractors). The main gallery is dedicated to recreating a Japanese space, yet to Western eyes evokes something different, something almost verging on the sacred — unsurprisingly, given that the combination of dark stone and natural light was a feature of late Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals. It flies in the face of the actual location — the top of one of the newest skyscrapers in Tokyo — and perhaps that is the point. Surrounded by concrete, smartphones, and the sensory overload of the modern, the eyes and mind can only respond to the expanse of space, at finding oneself removed from the hustle and bustle of daily life. *Japan SPOTLIGHT* sat down with Mr. Jeffrey F. Seward, general manager at Aman Tokyo, to find out more.

Japan SPOTLIGHT visited Aman Tokyo and interviewed Mr. Seward on Oct. 19, 2015.

JS: Can you give us a little background on the Aman for our readers who might not be so familiar with it?

Seward: In 1988, Aman was based on the notion of space and privacy, rather than a typical resort hotel. Really a sense of peace and belonging is what Aman is about. In fact the word *aman* is Sanskrit for peace. We now have 30 resorts and hotels but this is the first city hotel, with more of those coming and private residences for guests in 20 of our locations as well. So it is really about transformative experiences for our guests. We do not really look at globalization as a word — it is more the locations and cultures we want to be part of and that our guests want to travel to. So that is how the company will continue to grow.

JS: Can you tell us about your own background and how you got into this industry?

Seward: I had known the executives of Aman for many years and I had many years in the hospitality industry. I am still young and I had worked with Ritz-Carlton, another group, in Dubai, in South Korea, and I had been in Japan many times on sales and meeting trips.

Photo: Aman Tokyo



JS: It is interesting that you picked Otemachi, which is the center of Tokyo and not often thought of as a location for a resort hotel or even a quiet city hotel. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Seward: Well, first off the Japanese market is very important to us — it is one of our top outbound markets to our resort properties and part of the reason for the success of Aman. So it makes sense for us to be in Tokyo and be able to embed our guests in Japanese culture. Then you look at where Japan is, and how inbound tourism is growing,

whether it is stopovers from the Americas or visitors from other parts of Asia. You could also really look at it as a kind of celebration with the Japanese people, to say that the first Aman city hotel is in Tokyo.

JS: This project from inception to completion took 10 years, a long time by any standards. Do you have any thoughts on that, in terms of risks or rewards or even the process itself?

Seward: I think when you are in a brand new building, particularly one like this which is the international headquarters, a lot of things

change in the ebb and flow. They are great partners. Not partners in this business sense, of course, as we are a tenant, but they were very glad to have an Aman on the property.

JS: Looking at other city hotels, a 10-year time line would scare people.

Seward: I think it all depends on the city, the architects, the partners, the investors. I've been in this industry 30 years and I've seen it take longer than 10 years in some cases, but in other cases much less.

JS: Now we are really thinking that Japan could be a big player in tourism, perhaps even by European standards. As you may know, increasing tourism is one of the pillars of "Abenomics". Tokyo is still an important tourism city but domestically we often think that Kyoto or Nara or some other locations should be important destinations. What are your thoughts on that?

Seward: Well we can look right where we are sitting in the middle of Tokyo. You don't fly into Japan through Tokyo and just change planes for Osaka or Nagoya. And in spring of 2016, we are opening our first resort, Amanemu, in Shima, a beautiful area well known for its hot springs, and we are looking at more sites in Japan. But Tokyo

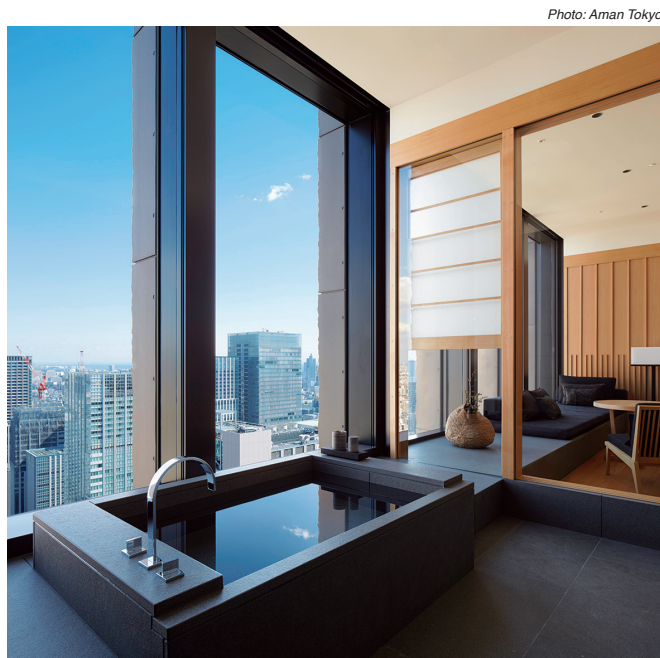


Photo: Aman Tokyo



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is already an international city and people want to be here, they want to have interesting meals and go to the Imperial Palace and the galleries, so it is a pretty easy sell.

JS: There will be a G-7 Summit next year in Shima. Did that play a role in your decision to choose that area for your first resort?

Seward: No, we were already there starting work on the site when that was announced.

JS: Do you think that local Japanese places, whether in the Tokyo area or further afield, would be interesting for tourists?

Seward: Oh absolutely. If you look at the numbers of inbound travelers both from other parts of Asia and the rest of the world, it is clear this is true. Our guests come for that immersion in culture and they will take some of our Aman journeys to outlying areas outside of Tokyo.

JS: Looking ahead to the Tokyo Olympics, do you expect to see an even larger increase in tourism?

Seward: Of course, as we get closer, but the increase we are seeing now is not because of events that are still some years away. Now it is about the PR the government has been doing, the word of mouth from people who have been here, the various parts of the culture that draw people here because they want to see it firsthand. Many different factors, but when you add them all together you see what we are seeing now.

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Photo: Aman Tokyo



JS: What are the particular challenges of operating in this kind of environment as a city hotel, compared to a resort?

Seward: It is not as large a difference as it may appear. We do what we do. I have worked at both city and resort hotels all over the world. It is always about having a great team, a great facility, being able to give the guests something unique that engages them and touches their emotions. It's just easier to do that in Japan because the Japanese service culture is so deeply ingrained.

JS: You mention the high standards of service in Japan and, of course, the hotel industry is a service industry, yet overall in the service sector, as compared with the industrial sector, productivity is quite a bit lower. What do you think about that?

Seward: I would disagree with that. I've worked all over the world and I can say my team here are aware of efficiencies and processes and how the various parts interact in much the way I would want them to be. And when I talk with my fellow GMs across the city, I hear the same thing. Of course it goes to leadership and mentoring and the ability of the senior team members to convey to the junior team members and so on.

JS: It may very well be that the international luxury hotel sector is an exception, but we have heard in many interviews that the overall rate of productivity in the overall service sector, which is everything that is not industrial, is roughly half of what it is for the industrial sector, and that is a pretty wide discrepancy.

Seward: I have only been here two years, so while I can certainly speak about my team and how they understand profit and efficiencies and deal with them, I may not have the requisite knowledge to speak of the wider sector.

JS: The international hotel industry also provides various job paths. Many international students here, whose native language is English, regardless of dialect or accent, look to get jobs at international hotels such as Aman. English language ability may not be *the* most important thing, but it seems that it is becoming increasingly important.

Seward: It is what it is. Fortunately or unfortunately English is the major international language and whether we are talking about business travelers or the top percentages of tourism, in an outlying area their expectations might not be as high but in a major international city they expect to find someone who can talk to them. And it is not just a question of room service or getting your laundry back on time, it is also about safety and security as well.

JS: Having worked in so many places and so many cities, did you have a favorite before you came to Tokyo?

Seward: You know I get asked that all the time and I cannot really say I have a favorite. I still correspond with people I worked with years back, and I have been able to work in so many places and have a chance to see and try to understand their cultures because I am interested and because that is part of what travel is or should be.

JS: What got you interested in doing this?

Seward: The Broadmoor Hotel, the first of the really deluxe 5 diamond hotels. (The diamond system is a rating used by the American Automobile Association and was the standard in the US before Michelin.) It's in Colorado Springs. I was a boy when we first went there and the doorman was dressed very formally, big brass

buttons down the front of his jacket, and I remember I turned to my father and said “I want to do that.”

JS: What do you think it would take in terms of both public and private sector initiatives for Japan to become a really big player in international tourism?

Seward: Well, if we look even now at where Tokyo was 10 years ago as a destination for luxury travelers, there is almost no comparison. I do not know if it is fair to compare Japan to France or any other country, because each is unique and has unique things about it, but if we look at Japan and the mix that is available of a very ancient culture with a very modern culture, all of this Japanese pop culture that has been exploding around the globe, it hits a certain critical mass and people want to come and see and experience it. In plain terms, that is partly why we are here; having hosted so many Japanese guests at other properties, we certainly could see the value proposition for being here and having as much presence here as we can.

JS: The Tokyo Metropolitan government is taking initiatives to have all road signs be not just in Japanese, or even Japanese and English, but some other languages as well. Do you think that would be helpful for tourists, because Tokyo is laid out so differently from most Western cities?

Seward: Maybe I can defer answering that for now, because I’ve only just acquired my Japanese driver’s license.

JS: Do you think that an increase in tourism could bring an increase in business?

Seward: Of course, business of one kind or another always follows tourism. It can be related in that someone is here and sees the need for something, or someone just comes in, and as the government makes it easier to come in and invest and start business there is no reason why it should not happen.

JS: What is the future ambition for Aman?

Seward: Worldwide, of course there are many other cities where there are these mixes of old and new where guests can have a chance to have an immersive experience in a place. In Japan, there is the resort that will open in Shima and there really are many other parts of Japan where Aman could be a very good fit for both the

Photo: Aman Tokyo



locality and us, and that would give guests even more choices here, whether to go to this or that resort, so it is still a wide open field for us where we are nowhere near saying “Oh we want to do this much or that much.”

JS: Even though almost all the new luxury hotels here are in mixed-use complexes, they have spaces that function almost as public galleries. They have art that has been chosen to reflect an aesthetic or functionality that might not have been in previous years, something that draws people in a way that we do not even associate with hotels *per se*. Would you comment on that?

Seward: There are a few things to say on that. Yes, you can always have another draw but for Aman this is about creating a sense of place and Kerry Hill has done amazing things with light and space and dividers and shadow and contrasts, etc. You look at the volcanic basalt walls that give texture, then you look at the stone flooring where each piece of stone has a different hue, and that then is juxtaposed with the actual height of the atrium. You hope that architecture and design does that.

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Written with the cooperation of Richard P. Greenfield, a Japan-based journalist, editor, and consultant.