

Culture

Marumo Ryokan – a Home from Home



Author Mukesh Williams

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Marumo Ryokan in Matsumoto is the story of an adopted son who, after recovering from a near-death war experience, revitalized the ryokan. Marumo carries the spirit of never giving up. Devastated by a fire in the late 19th century, it was rebuilt and stands as a beacon of hope. Today, the three-story ryokan in Nakamachi-cho creates the atmosphere of a home from home. It also has an attached café where classical music resonates, evoking a sense of nostalgia. Once you are inside the ryokan, you feel as if you have been living here for a long time, even though you might have checked in only a day ago. It is a great place to stay and experience the charms of a bygone era preserved in amber. If you get a room with a view of the river, you can watch people come and go through the latticed windows and get a sense of the past. The powerful air conditioning and double windows keep the room warm. The tatami mattresses and traditional bedding will give you a good night's sleep.

From Shinjuku station to Matsumoto, the Azusa Express train takes two hours and thirty minutes, and from the station it takes five minutes by taxi. At a cost of 12,000 yen, it is possible to make a two-way trip. There are about two trains every hour, so booking is not difficult. Both the ryokan and the café are located a few kilometers from Matsumoto station, accessible by bus or taxi. It is possible to buy a 500-yen bus pass for a day or pay 640-yen one way. The people of Matsumoto are quite friendly, carrying with them the conviviality of the region. Marumo Ryokan is small, with only eight rooms, all located upstairs on the second floor. The rooms are of uneven size and will be assigned to you depending on availability. Booking a room is done by telephone only.

A single room costs 5,500 yen without food, including tax, while a room with breakfast costs 6,600 yen, including tax. A sumptuous Japanese breakfast can be eaten as early as 7 a.m. and as late as 8.30 a.m. In 2020, after the emergency declaration, the ryokan was closed for three months. Both the ryokan and café partially reopened in 2022, much to the delight of regular customers. As of March 2023, the ryokan is open for four days, from Thursday to Sunday. Fumihiro Miura, the owner of Marumo, is determined to restore the working hours of the ryokan to seven days a week once cities return to normal.

Marumo Café

The café was established in 1956 (Photos 1 & 2). Sanshiro Ikeda designed and refurbished the café in a retro style which captures the limitless possibilities of freezing time in space and furniture. Ikeda

Photo 1: author



Marumo Café entrance and the author

Photo 2: author



Marumo Café interior

Photo 3: author



Marumo Ryokan outside

Photo 4: author



Marumo Ryokan reception room with Matsumoto folkcraft furniture

was the founder of *mingei kagu*, or folk-art furniture, in Matsumoto. Most people go to the café first and then become aware of the ryokan. The café starts at 9 a.m. with a morning set for 680 yen and continues to take orders until it is sold out. Once the morning set is sold out, the café serves cheesecake and coffee, and it is possible to order a set of English tea as well. The café closes at 4 p.m., with last orders at 3.30 p.m. On Mondays and Tuesdays, it remains closed.

The café is constructed in a reasonably large area that can accommodate 45 chairs, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, only 32 chairs are in use. It provides both Japanese and English menu cards, and the waiters can understand English. An antique piano gives the feeling of music. A weaving loom tells the history of handmade craftsmanship. The effect of the furniture on the space is magical. The sunlight entering through long Japanese windows provides a feeling of exhilaration. The smell of coffee, toast, and cheesecake adds a dreamy flavor to the place. It is the combination of all these things that makes the place unique.

History & Background

The wooden structure of Marumo traces its history to Sadao Nitta, whose family were hoteliers. Sadao was the adopted son of businessman Nitta. In 1868, Sadao inherited his parents' business, and after 19 years, that is, in 1887, he constructed Marumo Ryokan (Photos 3 & 4). The ryokan is located on the banks of the Metoba River near Nawate Dori, also called Frog Street. In the past, Japanese merchants and traders used the street. It was a place where Japanese railroad workers and travelers used to stay packed in one room. Sadao was passionate about keeping the rich atmosphere of

the city for the coming decades. He believed that Matsumoto would flourish forever, and to make that happen, he advised shopkeepers not to make any outside changes to the streets or its architecture, though they could make changes inside. To realize this goal, he asked the prefectural government to pay each owner a one-time sum of 300,000 yen, and the method worked. The street still preserved the traditional “*kurazukuri*” architecture (street and building) of the 1930s. The simplicity and sense of community that the Japanese used to have can be experienced here. It once was a place where intellectuals and artists such as Count Nogi Maresuke, lyricist and composer Rokuske Ei, and conductor Seiji Ozawa came to stay. Now music lovers and ordinary tourists come to stay, enjoying the same atmosphere as of yore.

After the big fire that destroyed most of the traditional buildings in 1895, Marumo was rebuilt. It once used *kura*-style architecture and was embellished with folk furniture using dark lacquer. When the buildings were burned down, the only thing that was left were the rice or sake storehouses. People understood that the storehouse architecture could have been resistant to fire. So they started building all other structures in *dozo*, or storehouse style, with wooden scaffolding, white plaster, and a black-tiled roof.

Though hardly any innovation is done from the outside, the rooms are made comfortable with modern amenities and reinforcements. Two shared toilets, upstairs and downstairs, might seem inconvenient to a modern traveler, but given the small number of rooms there is hardly any waiting time. A common bath is reasonably comfortable. The big oil heaters strategically placed in the corridors and the dining-room make the place warm and comfortable. A 10-minute walk from the ryokan can take you to a

seno (public bath). Marumo does not offer dinner so that customers can explore the unique ambience of Matsumoto and enjoy its variety.

"The scenery of Matsumoto is beautiful," Fumihiro says. "It is not a place where you can reach your goal, but it is a place to rest. From here, you can enjoy the art and nature of Matsumoto. We have good access to nature in the highlands around Utsukushigahara and Kamikouchi. I consider Marumo as a place people come back to after enjoying the day and then start from the same place the next day. I would like customers to rest well at our place." Fumihiro believes that those who love "newness" will not find Matsumoto "attractive", but those who love "tradition or something old and original" will find it "suitable". The way Matsumoto is organized generates "nostalgia". Fumihiro explains that Matsumoto Castle encapsulates a "flowing culture hidden inside, just as other buildings do". He says the younger generation is doing "something new, which would be the history of Matsumoto in 50 years to come". Many people come from overseas to experience the traditions of Matsumoto, visiting Kyoto, Matsumoto, and Magome as a set. Seeing three cities in a row, they can understand the rich heritage of Japan and compare Matsumoto with other cities. Although Matsumoto is a small city of about 240,000, it has its own charm that attracts both Japanese and foreigners. These charms are hidden in its museums, bookstores, carved wooden utensils, and handicrafts.

Omotenashi

Every city in Japan boasts about preserving and practicing typical Japanese hospitality. But this is more evident in Matsumoto than elsewhere. The taxi driver will not start the meter till he exits the station area and will talk to you about the climate of Matsumoto, especially why it doesn't snow much in Matsumoto and where to eat. Handicraft shopkeepers will explain about crafts and traditions, whether you buy anything or not. If you visit the shops again, they will recognize you and greet you. Many shops have helpers who will open the sliding door for you, bow with a smile, and see you off. Marumo incorporates this tradition in its own way. *Omotenashi*, the concept of hospitality or taking care of you, is related to the way a guest is welcomed – knowing what he or she will need. At Marumo, the "comfort and satisfaction" of the guest come first. Any new staff inducted into the ryokan or café is trained in *omotenashi*. If you have a dietary restriction, you can tell the lady of the house. For example, if you don't eat eggs or mayonnaise, they will be excluded from your breakfast. If you need information about where to eat or what to see, they will not just hand you a sightseeing booklet; they will also tell you what to do and where to go.

Sadao's Biography

Sadao inculcated the values of sincerity and working for the happiness of others through his own and adopted families. These twin values are reflected today in the functioning of Marumo, and in

the documents and artifacts he has left behind. It is also reflected in his strategies to preserve the past and create an aesthetic for Matsumoto in both architecture and attitude. Sadao's love for classical music played an important role in Marumo's culture. Sadao privately published an undated autobiography of 86 pages called *My Biography (Watashi no Hansei)*, which reflects his sincerity. In it, he mentions that, as a military man, he fought in China. Severely wounded in battle, he lay dying at the field hospital in Hankou. Then he heard the Prelude to Bizet's *Carmen*. The music revived his spirit. He writes, "I forgot everything at that moment. Shortly, my heart felt warm, and I tried not to cry." After his convalescence, he returned to Matsumoto to spread his love of classical music through Marumo. "I did not only do ryokan as my life's work, but I always thought that I wanted to touch the hearts of people through the music I loved. To realize it, I thought of starting a café where people could listen to classical music. That was 1966. I believed that through music, everybody's spirit and heart would be enriched, and they would feel happiness even amid poverty. At that time, hardly anyone listened to Bach, but I bought many records of the composer, believing that Bach would speak to people's souls. Other than this, I also bought Beethoven, Mozart, and Schubert. Within one year and a half, I bought more than a thousand LPs, each costing 2,300 yen. At that time, one coffee cost 50 yen, and a ryokan stay was about 300 yen. My calculation was very rough; we did not earn but rather increased our debt."

Sadao's love of Western classical music is reflected in the café, which often plays classical and jazz music. He ruminates that after working for 45 years at the ryokan he felt satisfied: "I did not have any blood connection with my grandfather, who had started this ryokan, but I think I succeeded in his will almost as my destiny. I feel as if my ancestors are protecting us. Sometimes I hear my grandfather's voice saying, 'Keep up the good work. Live honestly and seriously. Don't drudge to earn money. If you treat people wonderfully, you will be happy when you come over here.' One day, I will go there. I would like to say goodbye to this world with my heart content, just like I felt at the war place when I was about to die." This highly emotional note shows the man's sincerity and desire to create a vibrant Marumo that works for the welfare of others. Sadao's biography reveals the way his spirit and consciousness are connected to his grandfather and, through him, to the past. The past becomes a guiding force. Sadao's inherited family values become the guiding forces of business. His autobiography highlights three values in living a contended life: working honestly, treating others with respect, and not becoming greedy. Sadao forged a bond with the family that adopted him.

The Youthfulness of Marumo

In recent decades, young people have started favoring antique techniques and products made from them. Young from other countries, especially from the United States, Canada, Australia,

France, Germany, Denmark, and Italy, have shown a keen interest in old Japanese architecture, furniture, and cuisine. Many international students who speak fluent English have also sought part-time work at the café. This has given Marumo the bilingual ability to communicate with international customers. They enjoy a hot cup of coffee while sitting in cane-and-wood-crafted chairs and traditional wooden tables.

Supply of Fresh Fruits

Matsumoto depends on a rich supply of fruits from its apple farm, watermelon village, Kuromon market, Azumino, and small fruit shops. These fruits are used in ryokans, restaurants, and coffee shops to prepare various delicacies or are eaten sliced. For 1,080 yen, Seiko Fujimori, caretaker-cum-food manager, provides a sumptuous Japanese breakfast that has fish, eggs, different salads, Japanese rice, and fruits of many varieties. She even includes preserved juices and salted fish made with traditional expertise. Her network in Matsumoto with fruit and vegetable sellers is quite old and elaborate, so the supply of the products they sell is fresh and constant. She uses mushrooms, carrots, and local vegetables to prepare tasty breakfasts.

Places to Visit from Marumo Ryokan

Matsumoto has a rich tradition of art, food, and culture. While staying at Marumo, it is possible to travel to Matsumoto and see how soba noodles or miso paste are made. Many people make soba at a noodle shop near Matsumoto Castle. It is great to make your own soba and eat it too. The Ishii Miso Factory allows you to taste their aged miso, which is a delicacy here. The Seiji Ozawa Matsumoto Festival is quite popular with music lovers. Many national and international musicians perform on stage here. Matsumoto is a city of museums, and from Marumo Ryokan it is possible to visit the Japan Ukiyo-e Museum, the Matsumoto City Museum of Art, and the Yasuka Museum of Art.

Seiko Fujimori

Seiko Fujimori is the heart of the ryokan (*Photo 5*). She is now 84 years old but carries the energy of a much younger person. She is friendly and ready to explain the workings of the ryokan. She is an early riser, waking at five in the morning and reaching the ryokan by 5.15 a.m. She buys fruits and vegetables and goes to the ryokan to prepare breakfast for all the occupants. By 11 a.m. she is ready to change the linen and clean the rooms with the help of two other ladies. She even mends the linen and stitches pillow covers. She appreciates any stitching or cooking style and is still ready to learn. She claims that her hard work every day keeps her fit as a fiddle. She has four children who are all running their own businesses. One of her sons has opened his own shop in Aeon Mall with a high

Photo 5: author



Seiko Fujimori and the author

investment, but is doing well. Her commitment to Marumo Ryokan reflects the spirit of its founder. Her sense of community and conviviality keeps Marumo together, giving it the force to create a memorable experience for its customers.

A Place Worth Visiting

Marumo is one of the oldest ryokan-cum-café in Matsumoto. It is not far from the station and has a classic café attached, which often plays classical and jazz music. Marumo is built in a castle town and has its own traditional ambience. The government has recommended Marumo Ryokan as a national treasure. Today, it is 151 years old and has a long history of Japanese hospitality. The architecture uses the traditional style of ryokan and has beautiful *mingei*-style wood furniture that has been used for decades without much change. Marumo has its own inconveniences prevalent in any old Japanese house, but the comforts the place offers far exceed its discomforts. The simplicity and sense of community that the Japanese once had can be experienced here. If you possess the temperament of a writer or an artist, you will love the place. Sadao, the founder of this place, was into art. He introduced classical Western music to the inhabitants of Matsumoto and preserved its traditional *kurazukuri* architecture in both streets and buildings. Marumo is a place worth visiting in exploring the hidden beauties of Japan. **JS**

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