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## ROOM AT THE INN

# A Tokyo treasure

ROSEMARY NEILL

Located in Meguro, a relatively undiscovered Tokyo neighbourhood, Hotel Gajoen is, in aesthetic terms, the loveliest hotel I've stayed at. Decorated by leading Japanese artists of the 1920s, it combines classical Asian culture with art deco voluptuousness and contemporary convenience. The drapes and lighting in my suite might be operated via hi-tech control panels, yet as you wander through the lobby, restaurants, ornamental gardens and adjoining heritage museum, it feels as if you are in a living artwork.

Even the women's loos are an attraction — at weekends, stylishly dressed Tokyoites queue to use the facilities and photograph their deco opulence. The art theme extends to the lifts: their shiny black walls and doors are inlaid with preening mother-of-pearl peacocks.

Hotel Gajoen, a short train or taxi ride from central Tokyo, started out as a restaurant in 1928 before morphing into Japan's first society wedding venue and a boutique hotel. Its curved foyer features a series of wall-sized, painted wooden panels depicting impossibly graceful ladies in kimonos eating, gossiping and fishing.

Locals line up for high tea at the Pandora cafe, which overlooks a waterfall a couple of storeys high. It's all astoundingly park-like, given the property is cheek by jowl with an office tower.

Attached to the hotel is a remnant of the original restaurant building, the Hundred-Step Staircase. The stairs, which actually number 99, lead to tatami-floored rooms given over to intricately painted wall and ceiling panels and carved pillars; one is made from a 200-year-old yew tree. Guests and locals can tour these rooms, which now form a designated heritage property.

Hotel Gajoen still operates as a wedding

venue, but its accommodation wing, spread across three floors, feels intimate and serene. There are 60 guestrooms in three styles. Choose from Western, a combination of Western and traditional Japanese furnishings, or ryokan-style; all are palatial by Tokyo standards.

The smallest are 70sq m, while my Ambassador Suite is bigger than most Sydney or Melbourne city apartments. It features separate living and dining areas, a bedroom with two double beds and a vast marble bathroom

that has a touch of Trump about it with a black spa bath and gold-plated fittings. It also comes with a steam sauna and generous supply of Paris-sourced Omnisens toiletries.

The living areas and bedroom offer a soothing palette of moss green, charcoal and blondish woods, while a custom-made sofa spans an enormous picture window and its view of a canal lined with cherry blossom trees. (During cherry blossom season crowds

through the canal as the trees burst into a chorus line of frothy pink.)

The executive lounge doubles as a breakfast room and is a hybrid of Japanese subtlety and Scandi sleekness. Breakfast is generous and elegant, a mixture of Western standards and Japanese treats including fresh grilled salmon and fermented soy beans. Tea and coffee are served in individually patterned cups and saucers supplied by an upmarket Japanese ceramics company, reflecting the hotel's impressive attention to detail. Diners are spoiled for choice, with seven food outlets linked to the hotel. I try the Canoviano for Italian and the Shunyuki Chinese restaurants, both of which emphasise health-conscious vegetable and seafood dishes. The meals are beautifully presented, although I find the subtle flavours of some Chinese banquet courses a little tame.

Just metres from the hotel is the stunning Buddhist Daien-Ji temple with 500 statues dating back to the 1700s. Despite its historical riches it's more a neighbourhood place of worship than a tourist attraction, and the locals I see making offerings include a Lycra-clad cyclist and an elderly woman in a kimono.



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Meguro is an emerging (dare we say it) hipster suburb that offers the best of two worlds. Its excellent train connections make it easy to get around Tokyo, yet its temple and canal-side walk seem far removed from the crush and bustle of one of the world's great cities.

Rosemary Neill was a guest of *Small Luxury Hotels of the World*.

## CHECKLIST

### Hotel Gajoen Tokyo

1-8-1 Shimomeguro, Meguro-ku Tokyo, 153-0064, Japan; +81 3 3491 4111; [slh.com/hotels/hotel-gajoen-tokyo/](http://slh.com/hotels/hotel-gajoen-tokyo/).

**Tariff** Family deals (up to four) from \$689 a room a night are available on Wotif and Expedia.

**Getting there** A three-minute walk from Meguro station. Three subway stops, or a few minutes' taxi ride, from Shinagawa station, which offers express services to Narita airport.

**Bedtime reading** *An Artist of the Floating World* by Kazuo Ishiguro

**Stepping out** The Mori Art Museum, located on the 52nd floor of a high-rise, and Tokyo Photographic Art Museum are a short train ride away, as is Shibuya, youth culture and shopping hub and home of the city's most-photographed intersection.

**Brickbats** There is no Western television programming apart from CNN; seats on the hotel's shuttle bus to Shinagawa station cannot be reserved or guaranteed.

**Bouquets** The guest library, lined with heritage painted panels, is a beautiful place to work or read, and offers free espressos and soft drinks.

**Also try** The Phoenix, Yogyakarta, Indonesia; Gallery Park Hotel & Spa, Riga, Latvia; 45 Park Lane, London.







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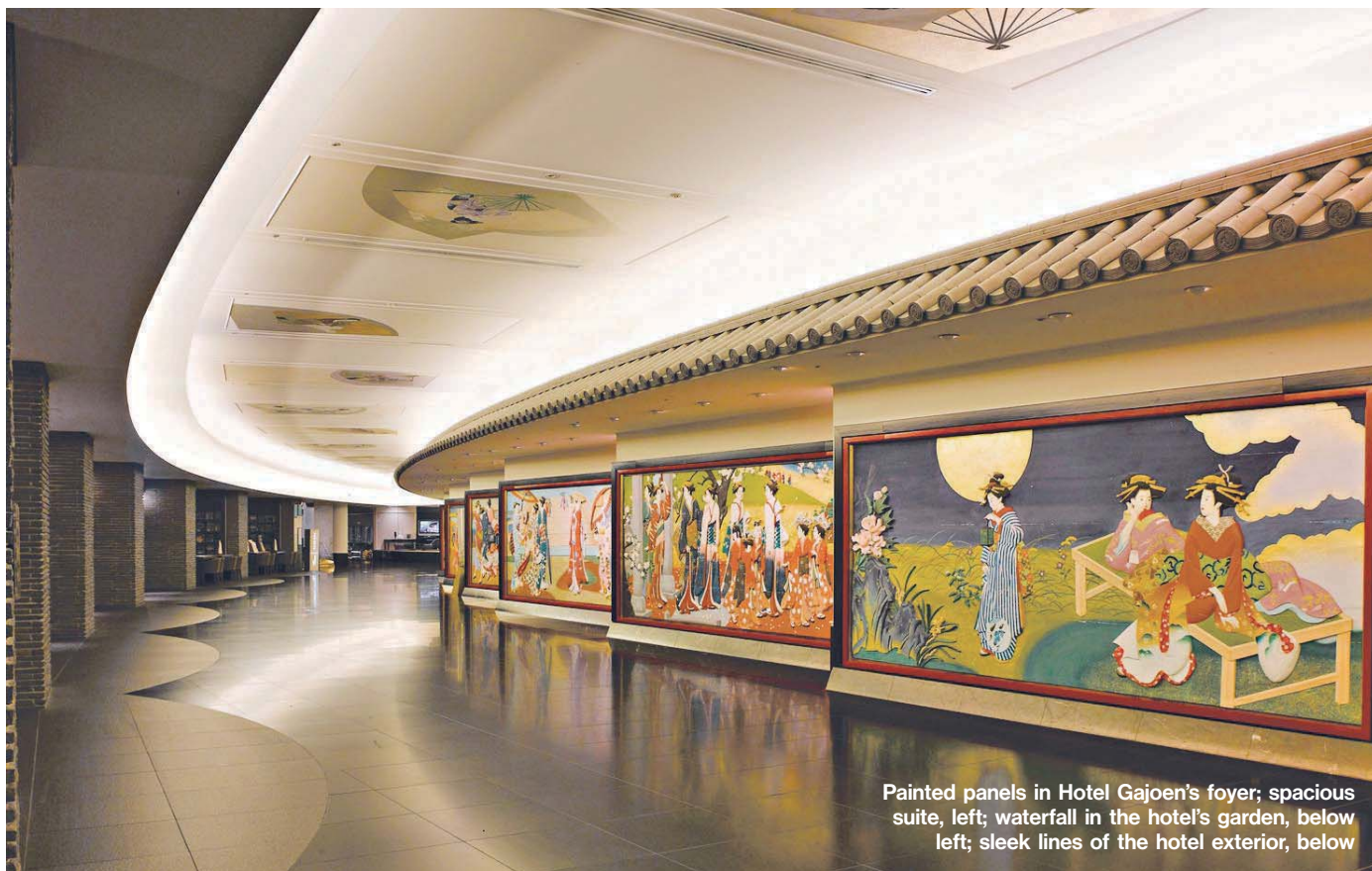
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Painted panels in Hotel Gajoen's foyer; spacious suite, left; waterfall in the hotel's garden, below left; sleek lines of the hotel exterior, below