

**FOOD MILES**

'We did our best to devour two platters, totalling 100 chicken wings, between six of us'

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**SKI-FREE ZONE**

From snowscooters and fat bikes to skeleton bobs, there's a winter-sports toy for you

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**SEVEN WORLDS**

Visit the locations and meet the animals from the new David Attenborough series

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# Travel on Sunday



A new kind of magic in old Kyoto

*The dazzling Aman hotel leaves visitors lost for words in a city known for its tranquil beauty. Danielle Demetriou gets an exclusive first look*



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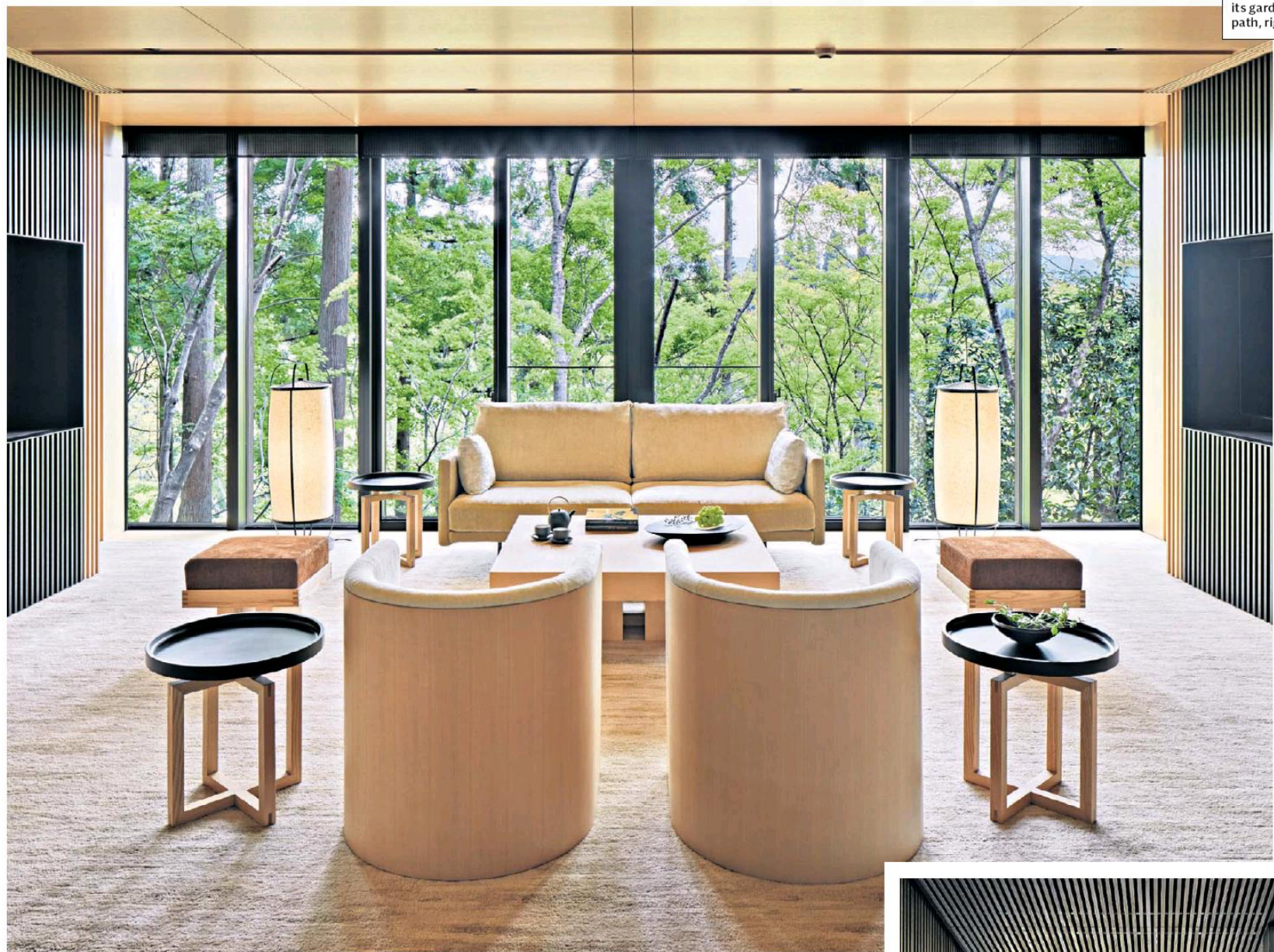
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# COVER STORY

**MODERN LUXURY**  
Washigamine Suite, main; its garden path, right



pavilions that together house 24 rooms and two suites. Inside, it is spacious and serene, with tatami mat floors, expanses of light wood, a monochrome painted scroll on the wall and a wabi-sabi vase containing snow willow berries – the perfect backdrop to the floor-to-ceiling windows framing a symphony of green.

I soon discover it's a tricky place for timekeeping. Walking to lunch, I'm constantly distracted – by stray scarlet leaves; even an errant baby snake crossing my path. At one point, I enter a garden and find a plaque dedicated to Hill.

Eventually, I make it (late) to the spa. In classic Japanese style, it starts with a bath. After washing on a wooden stool, I lower myself into the mineral-rich hot spring *onsen* baths, first indoors, and then outside, surrounded by sculptural boulders. My therapist Koko takes me into a simple treatment room. "Have you heard of *shinrin-yoku* – 'forest bathing' in English?" she asks. "Being in nature makes your body and mind healthy. Here, forest bathing is everywhere."

She soaks my feet and guides me through a meditation, as a Buddhist bowl chimes. Along the way, she

employs an alchemic mix of ingredients – sweet osmanthus, camellia oil, brown rice husks, a sprinkle of 24-carat gold and a cup of Kyoto sake so pure it's offered to the gods living next door at Kinkakuji temple.

Suitably soaked, scrubbed and purified, I'm finally deemed ready for a restorative massage – after which I'm revived with green tea and wagashi sweets.

It's dark when I emerge, the gardens transformed into an other-worldly tableau of shadows and lanterns. I breathe in the cool evening air while slowly ambling back to my room – and then, of course, find myself late for dinner.

I make my way to the Living Pavilion, an intimate space with a round central fireplace, curved chairs and handcrafted wall tiles. I do a double take when I spy on the menu, somewhere between the fish carpaccio and Wagyu beef fillet, fish and chips. It's a typically playful touch by chef Kentaro Torii, who fuses home-cooked Kyoto cuisine and Western dishes, often using foraged goods.

The fish and chips, incidentally, turns out to be a chunk of coral trout, wrapped in shredded pastry on potato purée with pickled turnip. Once back in my room, I soak in my *hinoki* (cypress) wood bath, which is big enough for a family – it has two plugs and takes 30 minutes to fill – before falling into a deep sleep.

The next day starts early with an electric bike ride, one of a string of insider experiences offered to guests; others include spending time with a geisha in the invitation-only confines of an *ochaya* teahouse. Aman guests can meet a *geiko* (the Kyoto term for geisha) or a *maiko* (apprentice), playing *oshashiki* games,

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## Floor-to-ceiling windows frame a symphony of green

### SUBLIME RETREATS

Feeling like an extra from a Japanese fairy tale, **Danielle Demetriou** explores the sensational new Aman Kyoto and its 'secret garden' in the middle of mountainside forests

I have known Sakura-san for approximately 20 minutes when she finds herself lost for words – something I can tell, even in our short acquaintance, is rare.

Not long before, she greeted me in Kyoto station with a smile and a spy-like whisper into wires ("she's arrived!"), before sweeping me into a waiting car.

Since then, she has chatted about everything from typhoons to parenting tips (plus an abridged story of her life). Now, however, still seated in the back of the car, I ask her to describe our destination – and she is suddenly silent. "You will lose your words too when you arrive," she says eventually. "The sounds, the breeze, the nature... it's too beautiful to describe."

It's quite an introduction to Aman Kyoto. The hotel, which opens on Friday and marks the third Aman in Japan, was always destined to have a sprinkling of magic. Not only is it set in Kyoto, a time capsule packed with traditional culture and more than 2,000 temples and shrines; even more rarely, it is cocooned within a "secret garden", surrounded by more than 75 acres of mountainside



**OUTSIDE LOOKING IN**  
The Living Pavilion, top; and inside a Hotaru room

forests. The cult hotel brand has long been synonymous with contemporary luxury, with minimal retreats for new-generation jet-setters around the globe, from the deserts of Utah to the canals of Venice. It's one of a string of high-end openings on the brink of shaking up Kyoto's hotel scene, as Japan braces itself for an influx of visitors ahead of the 2020 Summer Olympics. Others range from the Ace Hotel to Park Hyatt.

As the view from my car window shifts from central Kyoto's crowds to residential streets, we eventually pull into a white stone-walled drive. I'm swept up in a flurry of uniformed staff taking bags, smiling, bowing, asking about my journey and whisking me into the Arrival Pavilion. Sunlight filters through the black-latticed facade and into a serene interior of light textiles and curved-back chairs, plus flowers arranged in an abstractly folding ceramic vase.

It's classic Kerry Hill. The Australian architect – who died last year – masterminded countless Aman retreats around the world, which all balance a clean-lined modernity with a deep sensitivity to its surroundings.

On the way to my room, we wander along wide paths that hover between forest wilderness and garden cultiva-



**FANCY A DIP?**  
The outdoor onsen in the spa, above

tion, with towering trees – Japanese maple, cherry, cedar, camellia – rising into the sky, alongside boulders encased in jewel green moss. As we walk, I hear how it was, according to Aman folklore, about 20 years ago that Hill first visited the site with the (since departed) founder Adrian Zecha – and it was love at first sight.

The original Kyoto owner was hoping to build a museum to show off his vast collection of obi textiles – but his plans were abandoned after he passed away. When Aman stepped in, the basic garden foundations were already laid, around which the hotel is now structured, a process that took 20 years, mainly due to Kyoto's strict regulations.

My room is in Hotaru – meaning "firefly" – one of six scattered

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# COVER STORY



## DINNER DATE

Taka-an Restaurant, above; a Hotaru room, below

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drinking tea and enjoying a dance performance and dinner in the Kamishichiken district, the oldest of Kyoto's *hanamachi*, the "flower towns" of the *geiko* and *maiko*.

The early-morning scenery is refreshingly low-key compared with the usual tourist trail, as we pass schoolchildren, cycling housewives and local shops. Entering the red gates of an empty Shinto shrine, I copy Sakura-san by tossing a coin at the altar, clapping my hands and bowing in prayer. I then stroke and lift a famous stone, laid protectively on several cushions, which apparently makes wishes come true. Next stop is Ryogen-in temple, home to five small but exquisitely formed Zen gardens with calming lines of raked sand. Again, no one is around aside from the woman who runs the temple, who is trying to catch their escaped kitten before it jumps in the sand, and her monk husband, who gives us a quick raking demo.

Back at the hotel, Sakura-san says she has a surprise. Leading me up a steep path, I see an immaculate breakfast laid out beneath a black bamboo-framed paper umbrella. I tuck into wooden boxes containing Japanese treats, ranging from sweet-miso marinated fish to hot tofu (simmered by the chef before me).

There is still one more adventure



I find myself absorbing a soundscape of flowing water, birdsong and rustling treetops

to come: an exploration of the gardens. Smiling Aoi-san – self-described as "100 per cent Kyoto!" – leads our mission, wandering around with a basket strapped to her back. We stop whenever she spies something – from hot-scented wild sansho peppers, as

served with my Wagyu the previous night, to a praying mantis (Sakura-san, a few steps behind, consults "Google sensei" on her iPhone to clarify).

Soon, I spy my second surprise of the day: a grand moss-covered staircase, leading into the forest. Feeling like an extra from a Japanese fairy tale, we climb the 43 wide steps, another legacy of the textile museum that was never built. At the top, we sit on straw cushions (whipped out of Aoi-san's basket). Here, I'm asked to close my eyes and follow a meditation – and I find myself absorbing a soundscape of flowing water, birdsong and rustling treetops.

Eventually, as I slowly open my eyes, the forest once again comes into focus – and, this time, it's me who is lost for words.

☐ Doubles from £782 a room per night, room only (0081 75 496 1333; [amankyoto.com](http://amankyoto.com). 1 Okitayama Washimine-Cho, Kita-ku, Kyoto).

