

# STATELY ROOMS WITH A VIEW

Japan has two state guest houses – one in Tokyo and the other in Kyoto – which are used to welcome and accommodate dignitaries from overseas. The general public, too, can now ask to visit these houses. We booked an appointment and took a look around.

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## State Guest House Akasaka Palace

The State Guest House Akasaka Palace in Tokyo was constructed in 1909 as the Crown Prince's Palace, and sits on a site that is approximately 120,000 square meters in area. The Palace is of a Neo-Baroque style, reflecting the architects' and artisans' concerted efforts to construct a building befitting of Japan's first European-style palace.

"The Palace was built at a time when Japan was actively importing Western culture in a bid to join the ranks of elite nations," explains Hideo Yamazaki, a former director-general of the State Guest House. "I suppose that it was also meant to show that Japan

possessed the technology and ability to construct good Western architecture."

The management of the Crown Prince's Palace was transferred from the Imperial Family to the government after World War II and the Palace was used to house the National Diet Library and other public facilities. However, as Japan built closer ties with other countries and began to receive dignitaries from overseas more often, the Japanese government decided to renovate the building and make it a state guest house. Renovation work began in 1968 and took about five years. The State Guest House in its current form was completed in 1974.

Since 1975, it has been made open to the public for a very short period during the summer months. However, beginning in April 2016, the State Guest House has been opened to the public except when foreign dignitaries are in residence.

"The Japanese government is now making concrete efforts to bolster tourism and open more national facilities to the public," says Yamazaki. "As part of these efforts, the government decided to make the State Guest Houses open to the public



- 1 The Kacho-no-Ma room is mainly used for official banquets. It can seat up to 130 people.
- 2 The State Guest House viewed from the front gate
- 3 The three chandeliers which hang from the ceiling of the Hagoromo-no-Ma room are the largest in the State Guest House. Each weighs 800 kilograms and is made up of 7,000 parts.
- 4 A goddess driving a chariot and four staring lion heads are among the features of the Asahi-no-Ma room.

as much as possible so that people from Japan and overseas have a chance to visit them.”

Currently the front garden, main garden, main building (the former Crown Prince’s Palace) and the Japanese-style Annex (Yushin-tei) are open to the public. The State Guest House, which has two stories above ground and one below, is made of granite and is completely symmetrical. It has a patina-green tile roof in the center of which stand two bronze statues of samurai warriors. The front garden extends between the house and the main gate, where 142 beautifully pruned pine trees create a distinctly Japanese atmosphere. In 2009, the main building, front gate, fountain in the main garden and other features were designated as national treasures.

Four rooms in the main building are open to the public. The first room visitors enter is the Sairan-no-Ma, which is named after the gold-colored relief of a “ran” phoenix next to the large mirror and the marble fireplace. The room is decorated in the Empire style, a popular design movement which originated in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The walls and ceiling are decorated in gold foil with motifs including weapons and armor, musical instruments and the sphinx.

The next room, called the Kacho-no-Ma, features thirty-six oil paintings on the ceiling of flowers and



birds completed by French artists, while on the walls hang thirty oval elliptical cloisonné plaques depicting plants, flowers, and birds such as ducks, woodpeckers, hens and doves. The walls themselves are made of wood, lending a relaxed feel to the room overall.

The Asahi-no-Ma is characterized by a painting on the ceiling depicting a goddess driving a chariot with the rising sun behind her. The room is notable for its cylindrical columns made of Norwegian marbles, while on the floor is a carpet featuring cherry blossoms embroidered with the use of forty-seven different purple threads. The lions positioned in the four corners of the ceiling have been painted to create the illusion they are staring down at visitors.

The final room which visitors enter is the Hagoromo-no-Ma. On the ceiling in this room is a 300-square-meter painting of scenes from the noh play *Hagoromo* (Robe of Heaven). The walls are decorated with a variety of music-related motifs.

“While the State Guest House is a European-style palace building, Japanese elements have also been incorporated in the garden and building design,” explains Yamazaki. “This fusion of Western and Japanese features really captivates foreign visitors.”

#### I N F O R M A T I O N

Admission to the State Guest House requires advance application online. A limited number of admission tickets are also available on the day on a first come, first served basis. Advance applications can be submitted at:

[http://www8.cao.go.jp/geihinkan/koukai\\_e.html](http://www8.cao.go.jp/geihinkan/koukai_e.html)

The State Guest House is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Up to 4,000 visitors per day are allowed to enter. The admission fee is 1,000 yen for adults and 500 yen for junior high and senior high school students. Audio guides in Japanese, English, Chinese, and Korean are available for 200 yen.



## Kyoto State Guest House

The Kyoto State Guest House opened in 2005 as a facility for receiving dignitaries from overseas who come to Kyoto, a city that symbolizes Japanese history and culture. The premises cover an area of 20,000 square meters in Kyoto Gyoen National Garden, where the house of a court noble is once said to have stood.

Kyoto State Guest House was designed to be “modern Japanese,” says Yamazaki. The exterior of the building exhibits a traditional Japanese architectural

style, he notes, but is actually made from reinforced concrete.

The garden and the building have been designed as a harmonious whole, and guests can enjoy the garden landscape from every room of the house. This reflects the philosophy of *teiyoku ichinyo* that has been handed down since ancient times.

The garden is home to a variety of trees including pine and cherry, and has a large pond stocked with about 140 red, gold, black and other different colored carp. The pebbles on the bed of

the pond were unearthed during the construction of the building, while the cylindrical stone in the pond is said to have been one of the foundation stones of the Gojo Bridge that spanned the Kamo-gawa river in Kyoto in the sixteenth century. The corridor bridge over the pond offers a view of the garden, and the trees of the Kyoto Gyoen National Garden serve as *shakkei*, or borrowed landscape.

The buildings dotted around the garden give visitors a taste of the history and culture of Kyoto.





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One of them is the Juraku-no-Ma, which serves as the lobby of the guest house. The chairs here are made using traditional Kyoto joinery techniques, while the seat of the vivid red chair in the lobby is covered with Nishijin brocade.

The tapestries on the walls of the Yubae-no-Ma room have been made with the use of the *tsuzureori* technique. Each is 2.3 meters tall and 8.6 meters wide. The tapestry on the east wall depicts a scene in which the moon illuminates Mt. Hiei, situated just to the east of Kyoto. The tapestry on the west wall shows the sun setting behind Mt. Atago, which stands to the west of the city.

Fuji-no-Ma is the largest room in the Kyoto State

Guest House, and is used as the venue for banquets and welcome ceremonies. The wall is decorated with a *tsuzureori* tapestry featuring welcoming wisteria flowers along with thirty-nine other plants and flowers. Measuring 3.1 meters top to bottom and a massive 16.6 meters across, the fabric was produced by around fifteen craftsmen who took one year and seven months to complete the work. The lampshades on the ceiling combine a Kyoto joinery framework with handmade *honminoshi* paper.

Kiri-no-Ma is a dining room where Japanese food is served. The main feature of this room is a 12-meter-long low table in the



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center which can accommodate up to twenty-four people. The table is coated with glossy black lacquer of an almost mirror-like luster.

All the four rooms mentioned above and the garden will be made open to the public late in July. When the house was opened on a trial basis over twelve days in the spring, around 21,000 people visited.

“Most of the visitors were very satisfied,” comments Yamazaki. “We hope that many people will come to enjoy Kyoto’s traditional culture at the Kyoto State Guest House.”

- 1 At the Kyoto State Guest House, a corridor bridge over the pond connects the eastern and western buildings.
- 2 Chairs and a table topped with a flower basket in the Juraku-no-Ma room
- 3 The Fuji-no-Ma room has a stage on which Japanese traditional performance arts such as noh and Japanese dancing are performed for guests.
- 4 This tapestry in the Yubae-no-Ma room depicts the sun setting behind Mt. Atago. The light blue carpet in the room represents the reflection of the sky on the Kamo-gawa river which runs through the city of Kyoto.
- 5 Hideo Yamazaki, a former director-general of the State Guest House

All photos: Tadashi Aizawa