

Origins and History of the Japanese Ryokan

The Japanese ryokan embodies many of the best elements from the Japan of olden times, such as culture, technology, art, and customs. Ryokans are the place to go to experience the lifestyle treasured and handed down by the Japanese people; staying at a Japanese ryokan is surely the ideal way of getting to know the true 'Japan'.

The origins of the Japanese ryokan can be traced back to the so-called '*fuseya*' of the Nara Period (710-784). '*Fuseya*', which were free rest houses, are thought to have been the first facilities in Japan for travelers staying overnight. Back in those days, with transportation facilities and traffic networks still undeveloped, traveling was indeed perilous, for people had no choice but to sleep out under the stars. Large numbers of travelers died of starvation by the roadside, and so Buddhist monks who could no longer turn a blind eye set up the '*fuseya*' with the aim of assisting travelers. In particular, *Gyōki*, who later became a high priest, constructed roads and bridges in dangerous locations, and also opened nine '*fuseya*' within *Kinai* or the Five Home Provinces around Kyoto (namely Yamashiro in Kyoto, Yamato in Nara, and Izumi, Settsu, and Kawachi in Osaka). The *Ritsuryō* System (the historical legal system modeled after that in China) was established, and a centralized state system was developed in the Nara Period. It was around this period that roads leading to the capital and *umaya* (public facilities for travelers built along the main roads of the country under the *Ritsuryō* System) were first constructed.

In the following Heian Period (794-1191), pilgrimages to religious sites became popular among members of the imperial family and aristocrats, and *Shōen* manors (private land owned by aristocrats, temples and shrines, and also by powerful families of the provinces) and temple buildings came to be used as lodging houses. The accommodation facilities set up in the temple precincts were open to religious devotees and worshippers, and later came to be called '*shukubō*' (temple lodgings). These have been passed down to today as lodging facilities open to the general public.

During the Kamakura Period (1192-1333), there

emerged the '*kichin-yado*' (a cheap inn). This type of inn came to be called '*kichin-yado*' from the fact that no meals were provided, with the traveler being charged only the price of the wood used for fuel in cooking his own meal. As the years went by and the Edo Period (1603-1867) arrived, highways were constructed and the money economy developed, leading to frequent trips by merchants. To support them, '*hatago*' inns which also provided meals were newly established. For a while, the '*hatago*' and the '*kichin-yado*' existed side by side, but by the latter half of the Edo Period, the '*hatago*' inns had become the mainstream. Meanwhile, the Shogunate (the Japanese feudal government) established a system known as '*Sankin Kōtai*' aimed at preventing the provincial *daimyō* (feudal lords) from gaining too much power and forcing them to swear a pledge of allegiance, and consequently, the *daimyō* lords were obliged to live in Edo or their domains in alternate years. When traveling to or from Edo, the *daimyō* lord and his large entourage of attendants would stay at a '*honjin*' (a lodging officially designated for a *daimyo*) or '*waki-honjin*' (secondary lodging for a *daimyō*) located at *shukueki* and *shukuba* post towns along the route. Assignments for providing '*honjin*' or '*waki-honjin*' for the *daimyō* entourages were mostly entrusted to reputable families, temples and shrines, and the wealthy. Today, the '*hatago*' inns would probably correspond to ordinary ryokans, whereas the '*honjin*' and '*waki-honjin*' would be equivalent to deluxe ryokans, yet it appears that there was a considerable gap between the two types of lodgings.

In the Edo Period, moving freely from one place to another was not officially permitted, but pilgrimages and visits of worship of a religious nature were exceptions. Moreover, as regulations were not so rigid concerning short trips to hot springs for *tōji* (hot spring cure) or sightseeing, a travel boom arose among the ordinary populace. At the popular tourist sites and *tōji-ba* (therapeutic hot spring resorts), quite a number of the long-established inns later developed into ryokans and remain in operation throughout the country today.

Then, with the Meiji Reformation, a trend toward Westernization swept Japan, and the diffusion of railways brought radical changes to the way people traveled. Instead of traveling mainly on foot, people started to take the train as a means of transportation, and many ryokans were established near railway stations. Furthermore, the purpose of travel broadened, such as traveling to a cooler place in the summer or to a warmer place in the winter, or even just for leisure, which led to the emergence of numerous ryokans in tourist spots and hot spring resorts all over Japan.

The '*hatago*' inns standing along the former highways declined, and the '*honjin*' which were no longer used by *daimyō* lords remained only to become historic sites. Nevertheless, the appeal and advantages of the '*hatago*', which provided meals, and the '*honjin*', where a unique culture based on the spirit of hospitality was fostered, were passed down as a part of traditional Japanese culture; they formed the original model of the Japanese ryokan, and laid the groundwork for the development of the Japanese ryokan.

From the latter half of the 1950s when post-war Japan entered an age of rapid economic growth, Japanese people became more affluent and began to indulge in traveling, with recreational company trips, group trips, and school trips becoming fixed events in society. In line with this new trend, large ryokans came to be built one after the other at tourist sites and hot spring resorts. Having passed through the era of mass transportation, we have entered an age in which people prefer to visit ryokans that are committed to improving quality and that offer unique and attractive features. This stems from the diversification of the purposes of travel and of personal preferences. Globalization has been underway for a while now, and ryokans, which are loved by Japanese people, are also now enjoying increasing popularity among visitors from overseas.



温泉旅館・昭和初期

An onsen ryokan (ryokan with hot spring baths) - in early Showa.



木造建築の日本旅館

A Japanese ryokan of wooden structure.



鉄筋コンクリート造の旅館

A Japanese ryokan of ferroconcrete structure.