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— Asia & Australasia Edition 2016 —

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An Interview with **Toshiro Maruyama**

Luxury Travel Guide Global Awards
General Manager of the Year 2016



Toshiro Maruyama

General Manager of the Year (Hakuba Onsen Ryokan Shirouma-so) – Japan

Toshiro Maruyama has been delighting travellers for the past seven years as the General Manager of the rustic family run establishment of Habuka Onsen Ryokan Shirouma-so. Toshiro is an advocate for naturalistic luxury, believing that luxury travel is more than that of just modern commodities. He has over 10 years of collective experience in the travel industry and a further 10 years of experience working for a luxury establishment. This impressive resume has equipped Toshiro with a deep understanding of his prestigious clientele's needs and expectations. Despite the high flying visitors, he remains enthusiastic of Hakuba's natural surroundings and showcases traditional Japanese culture with pride. The *Luxury Travel Guide* spoke with Toshiro to delve deeper into his arcane lifestyle.

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How has your background prepared you to be an effective general manager?

I would say that a combination of education and real-world experience have contributed to and influenced my management style. Degrees in Business Administration and Accounting as well as qualifications for Certified General Travel Service Supervisor and Business Ability 1st Rank have given me a wide range of knowledge related to business, tourism and guest services.

In terms of career, my experience as a trainer for Tokyo Disney Resort has allowed me to learn from some of the best in the industry about how to run a high-level operation. It was there I learned the importance of superior customer service and exceeding expectations while adhering to the highest standards. The company also taught me about vision-building

and developing team spirit plus the role of continuing staff education – these are elements that have stood the test of time and are essential to the management of a first-class resort.

My years spent living and working at a leading overseas resort grounded me in the fundamentals of the tourism industry and I gained understanding of the necessary systems we must have to provide the best service. I learned to be quick on my feet and responsive in a fast-paced multi-lingual environment.

My experience with Goldman Sachs as one of my clients allowed me to interact closely with wealthy individuals to get a firsthand look at their value-system and global outlook. The insight gained helped guide my own world-view and I have endeavoured to put those lessons to work at my hotel.

What are the biggest challenges of your role?

Looking back, one of our greatest challenges was bringing the somewhat closed and traditional world of *Ryokan* (Japanese inns) to a global clientele, since there was not much of a precedent. To not only become known, but also accepted and embraced by this new and underdeveloped segment was not without its rough patches. However, we have been able to succeed to the extent that our reviews are rated with high satisfaction and the results speak for themselves – we were able to double our sales figures in five years.

Going forward I would like to look beyond my own hotel and work to bring the culture and spirit of Japanese Ryokan to wider audiences. By transmitting our culture and making it more accessible to international travellers, I believe there will be more opportunities opening up for Ryokan across Japan. Each region has unique individual charm and it is this element that makes for great and memorable travel – something we are all committed to provide.



It is my wish that people from all over the world will visit various localities to take in and admire the delightful sights and marvellous hotels unique to each area. I also hope that residents will feel pride and appreciation for what makes their region special.

How would you describe your customers? What are their typical needs and expectations?

Many of our customers are well-travelled and independent from financial or time-related constraints. They visit us because we offer a high-quality, immersive experience with a

realness that they cannot find elsewhere. Our attractiveness lies in the totality of the experience we provide. From the traditional recipes handed down from my grandmother, to my *taiko* (Japanese drum) performances, rice cake ceremonies, the history found in the 300 year old architecture of the hotel, the beautifying properties of the local hot spring, heavenly powder found at local ski resorts, the hospitality of townsfolk – these are all factors that bolster our unique offering. To come in contact with the lifestyle and smiles of local villagers; this is what creates memories and this is what people come for. When guests are able to get up close and personal with the various elements of Hakuba, it touches people and adds another layer to the visit. The personal touch is what matters and judging by the positive reviews, I am confident our guests agree.

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How has the hotel and hospitality sector changed since you first joined the industry?

For many years people associated quality with such things as luxurious, imported furniture set in wide-open lounges with expensive chandeliers, large swimming pools and spa areas, multi-ethnic dining options, and an assortment of world-class champagne and wines.

As for hospitality, there was an omnipresent mentality towards customer satisfaction akin to tunnel-vision. This is of course not wrong but recently we must acknowledge how the values and needs of the customer are evolving. There is now increased focus on regional specialty and locality; one-of-a-



kind experiences linked to a specific area and place. Hotels that are effectively incorporating this into their experience are able to benefit and truly thrive. It's about knowing the market but also reading ahead somewhat. Hotels must know what they have and make proper use of it by turning it into a meaningful offering. So this requires a bit of insight to know your value and make sure the market is getting the right message. In our definition of hospitality, we aim to touch something in people on a deeper level. Sometimes this requires flexibility since everyone is different and has different needs, but at the end of the day we are aiming to create memorable experiences. We want people to leave our hotel with a lasting impression, and this is formed through the totality of the positive experience they had while staying with us. Every bit is as important as the other and contributes to the integrity of the whole.

How do you perceive the term 'luxury travel'?

For me this means providing an organic and rich experience that leaves one fully satisfied at their core. I choose this definition over materialistic fulfilment because simply having the best “things” does not guarantee the best experience. Our value is measured by the extent to which we are able to touch our guests and place within them a sense of comfort and belonging that they cannot find elsewhere. When they visit us, even if it is their first time in Japan, we want them to belong.

So while the hardware is important, the software, our approach and our “heart” are what constitute the magic formula to make everything coalesce. This is not something you can read about in a manual and it is the culmination of many years of engagement and study; trial and error plus a little of my own sensibility thrown in. The staff and I always have our eyes on improving and aiming higher so by accomplishing these objectives, we are now closer to unlocking the true meaning of luxury travel and how it is best manifested.

How important is the traditional and family element to the overall experience at Shirouma-So?

Many travellers who stay with us have selected our hotel after considering a wide range of options. These guests have chosen the Japanese Ryokan and for us to deliver the optimal experience the many traditional aspects and family element are indeed very important.

Judging by the reviews, the feedback regarding atmosphere (tatami straw mats and traditional futon blankets), cuisine (seasonal, local), and relaxing hot spring onsen baths are among the top categories. From the home-style cooking passed on through generations, the private tours given by villagers, we create an environment that is inherently inclusive and it is through this inclusiveness that we foster relationships. We

want guests to feel connected – to Hakuba, to the food, the people, and to the surroundings. It is about the relationship we are creating. The relationship is the bond and the bond is what continues long into the future. We place a personal touch on everything we do and people notice. They notice when you care and this is one of our strong points. In the end, we want to impart our version of community on guests and have them take that away with them. We personalise down to every last detail, and we have been fortunate in that this has been well-received and leads to many repeat bookings.

**What are some popular local options for entertainment?
How can you help to elevate guest's experience?**

Many options are available and this is one of the areas where we are most proud – you will never run out of things to do in Hakuba! Besides enjoying nature at its best (in all seasons), guests can visit the snow monkey park, historical sites such as the castle and local shrines, plus take part in various activities and tours that we arrange. Guests have reacted quite favourably to being guided to those little-known areas you never find in a guidebook or on the internet. From the out-of-the-way trail that leads to a magnificent mountaintop view to the traditional craft workshop normally only reserved for locals – these are things that we provide to customise, personalise and really make sure that travellers get the most out of their trip. It's as if we have a stake in their trip – just as much as they do – to help them gain top satisfaction. So you could say that we are not bystanders in people's travel, rather we are active players.

In your opinion, what are the essential components to creating a successful hotel?

Looking beyond my own hotel, I try to maintain an expansive outlook and appreciate the way in which resorts are linked to the surrounding environment. Even a first-rate hotel, if the area is not attractive, will not be able to put forward a strong package and offer the best value. Our job is to make sure travellers get the most out of their stay, and this means managing the hotel experience (which we directly control), but also while guests are out interacting with villagers, shopping, sightseeing, we know there are factors out of our direct control but we can surely influence them by working to position Hakuba as an eminent travel destination. The attractiveness of the area plays an important role in reinforcing the attributes

of the hotel and the overall success and longevity will be ultimately judged in the context of location. Therefore, I am always thinking of ways to increase the value of the region.

In my case as soon as I graduated from university and started working, the Winter Olympics came to Nagano and although my hotel was doing well, the general feeling around town was that we needed to do something to stave off the inevitable post-Olympic blues. In order to continue thriving I decided that going forward it was not enough to simply be a good manager; I had to raise my level in terms of overall operational standards. It was this realisation that led me to train at Tokyo Disney and also live and work overseas.

In addition to running the hotel, no matter how busy we may be, I am involved in the production and hosting (as MC) of local events such as World Cup Ski-Jumping, Snow Festival and Hakuba International Trail Run. We aim to enhance the overall Hakuba resort experience by continuously offering events and activities that guests can enjoy.

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In terms of lifting the community, I conduct free seminars for neighbouring hotel owners to help them properly welcome and integrate overseas travellers. I also lecture at the local high school on Travel English (Hospitality English) to keep younger generations engaged in the new economy we are embracing. Throughout my various endeavours, the overall objective has been to create long-term customer satisfaction for the entire destination. As the region gathers strength, the individual operators will benefit and this is the basis for my success model. It is through this mindset that we have been able to grow and prosper as we have and I look forward to continued service to my guests and to my community.





Local Hospitality and Traditional Design in the Japanese Alps

Hakuba, Japan

Seated in the foothills of the Hakuba mountain region in Japan, Hakuba Onsen Ryokan Shirouma-so is a peaceful luxury retreat, combining traditional Japanese style with excellent natural baths and a fantastic location. Iconic design and local hospitality are the hallmarks of the property. This property combines a beautiful mix of 'Wa' modern Japanese architecture with wooden beams and Edo period agricultural designs. The owner loves to create tastes and flavours that have been passed down through generations of Japanese cooks, using the seasonal specialities of the Hakuba region. The property is very much connected with the mountains, providing discounted lift passes, ski and snowboard rental and clothing rental. There is also a drying room to ensure that any wet bits of kit can be made ready for the next day on the slopes.

A major part of the attraction of the hotel is the peaceful and luxurious natural onsen baths. Water coming into the tago stone pool comes directly from the mountains and the stone has a grainy surface, and closely resembles wood, creating an interesting combination of texture and colour. Although perhaps not to everyone's tastes, traditional Japanese bathing is done in the nude; guests can choose whether to observe this or not. In either case, the waters are relaxing and supposedly also healing. Softly lit guest rooms feature exposed brickwork, with mountain views. Each one has been individually designed, using the original shapes and spaces, and transforming them into relaxing and calm accommodation options. The entire property makes the very best of Japanese customs, from home cooked cuisine to furnishings and hospitality. From the hotel, guests will be perfectly placed to explore Shinshu, Azumino, and the other parts of the Nagano region.



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