

TWO THINGS YOU MUST DO IN TOKYO, AND A THIRD THAT MOST PEOPLE DONT KNOW ABOUT!

Tokyo, a city always on the move, and a city of the future.

Nowhere else on Earth will you find such modernity and culture shock. The Japanese people have figured out how to enjoy modern life, from Cat Cafes, to Michelin star restaurants, there's something for everyone in Tokyo. Here's my quick guide of must see's that I find to be uniquely original to this amazing city:

1. **Harajuku:** You've heard the name before. This is where people from around the world come to consume. I'm not a mall person, but Harajuku is so full of sights and sounds that you won't feel like you're trapped in a strip mall looking at the same shops you'd find anywhere else. To be fair, Japan is a consumer nation and Tokyo has many places to shop, but Harajuku dethrones them all. There's stores dedicated to "Kawaii" or cute items, there's fetish shops, there's stores that are dedicated to Lady Gaga outfits. If you want different and special, this is the place to go. On top of that, you can't go wrong with the numerous restaurants in Harajuku. This really is a place to wander and get lost in, think of it as a modern Souk.



Your head will spin with all the stuff to look/buy/eat in Harajuku

2. **Have some Ramen:** I'll refer over to the Eater guide for the full list, but if you come to Tokyo, you have to try the Ramen. There's national competitions here for this stuff, it's the national dish and akin to Chili in the US – each region has something different to offer. Even if your connotation of Ramen is Top-Ramen noodle microwaved in a dorm room, you should get over it and check out some of the concoctions made in Japan. My personal favorite is Tanaka Second, where they serve a soup made with abalone. You'll be having Ramen more than once if you're a foodie, and Tokyo is the place to do it!



This is the Abalone soup Ramen at Tanaka Second. My personal favorite. However YMMV.

3. **Golden Gai:** This is something that just shouldn't be missed. Looking like a shantytown tucked away in a little corner of Shinjuku, Golden Gai is a cluster of small buildings leftover from old Tokyo, with merely six streets and alleyways so small they can only fit people walking through them. A magnet area for celebrities and artist types, this is the "cool spot" of Tokyo. Bars are hidden upstairs and are just a quick ladder climb away. Most of them are so small that they only seat 6-7 people, and many only serve regulars, but be nice, make some friends, and you'll be sure to have an awesome night bar hopping in this area.



You can't miss this secretive bar area. Believe me.

The FIVE things you have to do in Hong Kong during a layover!

Hong Kong is a conflux of ancient and modern, the intersection of East and West, and one of the most lively and exciting cities one can experience. Whether it's indulging in gourmet dim sum, shopping for electronics or random gifts in the Ladies Market, or just sightseeing from Victoria's Peak – I can't stress enough that there's something for everyone in this city-state. Having been to HK over a dozen times, I still choose to drop by here for layovers and without further delay, here are all the spots I recommend you checking out while you're here for a short period of time!

1. Victorias Peak: This is usually at the top of everyone's

list of tourist spots, mostly because it has incredible views of Hong Kong harbor, along with views of mainland China on just the other side of the peak. You can take a cab up here, the tram, or go for a hike! There's also a mall on top and lots of shops, so expect to spend a little bit of time taking in the view, and having a snack. If it's cloudy, avoid Victoria's Peak because you really won't be able to see much up here.



The view from here doesn't get much better as you can see out over both Hong Kong, and into Mainland China

2. Eat Dim Sum: This is where it all started. Dim Sum, or small snack in cantonese, means small dishes meant to be shared. Ask for opinions on which restaurant in Hong Kong serves the best Dim Sum, and you'll be hard pressed to find one answer. However, I will recommend **Tim Ho Wan** as one of the top Dim Sum restaurants in Hong Kong. It's a hole in the wall joint, and it doesn't have the traditional Dim Sum carts

rolling around for you to choose dishes. There is also usually a wait, but it goes by very quickly as the service is incredibly fast at this spot. If you're looking for something fancier, I suggest checking out **One Dim Sum**. Either way, if you're in Hong Kong, you HAVE to have Dim Sum! My favorite dish, which is tough to replicate almost anywhere else in the world is "Har Gao", which is steamed shrimp with chives inside a delicate doughy shell. The mark of a good Har Gao is a soft relatively thin glutinous shell that isn't too chewy yet doesn't break apart the minute you bite into it.



Tim Ho Wan. It's not the fanciest, but damn its good

3. Tian Tan Buddha: So i'd place this one in the tourist category, but definitely one of the tourist sites worth seeing. Located outside of Hong Kong city itself, it isn't a

terribly far journey, but definitely will take a few hours out of your day to visit. The Buddha itself is massive, and the area its located in (Ngong Ping) on Lantau Island, is green and lush, and feels a world away from the bustle of the city.

The cable car ride up is worth doing, and remember to bring your hiking shoes because it's a few hundred steps up to the top of the Buddha!



Come for the Buddha, stay for the relaxing atmosphere. (Pic Courtesy Artelounge – because they took a better one than mine!)

4. Walk Tsim sha Tsui Promenade: I'm going to preface this by saying, there's not a lot going on at just the promenade, but spend a little bit of time and just wander the area, because whether it's getting lost in Mong Kok (the nearby shopping area), sightseeing the Skyline of Hong Kong across the harbor, or just leisurely exploring the dozen or so museums in this

area, you're sure to find something to do by taking some time and just meandering. You might feel like you're lost, but I guarantee you'll be excited by this very walkable neighborhood of Hong Kong.



TST, or Tsim Sha Tsui, is one of the most interesting places in Hong Kong to get lost in.

5. Eat on a floating restaurant: There are quite a few of these “junk boats” in the harbor and each one boasts to possess the best cuisine. My favorite is the original – Jumbo. However, depending on capacity and how early you book you really can't go wrong because the experience of eating in the harbor on one of these boats, where you can choose fresh seafood brought live to your table, is something that is very uniquely Hong Kong. The menu constantly changes, but since

you're at a seafood restaurant, I would suggest ordering some seafood ☐



Great food, views on the water, how can you go wrong?

Whatever you do, you'll have fun, because Hong Kong is a city of lights and a city of life, and everything about it is vibrant and unique!

REVIEW: The Ritz-Carlton Mandapa Reserve in Ubud, Bali

This was my second experience at a Ritz Reserve, with the first being at the Dorado Beach Property. If you're not

familiar with the Reserve chain, it is the top tier of hotels within the Ritz-Carlton family, with only three current offerings, and a handful more in the works. The Ritz Reserve Mandapa is special, however, in that it is the first property in the Reserve line to be built entirely from scratch.

Let me start by saying, there is NOTHING average or normal about this property. One immediately notices something special is going on when they enter the 5.5 acre Reserve. It's hidden in a 300 ft long alleyway behind some nondescript businesses and a temple.



This is the hidden entrance. Go down this alleyway, and you'll be surprised what you find

Once you reach the end of the alley, you're greeted by two guards who greet you with smiles and open the gates to, what I would call, one of the most beautiful resort properties that has ever been built. The small alley opens up to a wide courtyard, and a beautiful lobby suspended over the Mandapa

valley, overlooking the valley forest and Ayung river below (which the staff told me is the longest running river in Bali).



The Lobby's overflow water feature and endless views of the valley below are a sight to behold

Every Ritz-Reserve has less than 100 rooms, and this one is no exception. This means that service is at a premium beyond anything you'd normally experience at even your top 5-star resort. Upon checking in you're introduced to your butler and personal concierge. Any wish desired is taken care of immediately. The attentiveness to perfection is so beyond any expectation that it only takes a few minutes before you begin to realize just how special the property is.



The 5.5 acre property sits in the sacred Mandapa valley next to the Ayung river

Golf carts take you everywhere, and the staff are there to assist you with a ride, often anticipating where you'll go next! I believe that this is the true difference between the Ritz-Reserve properties and other resorts, the service is not just responsive, but proactive. Combine this with the kind spirit of the Balinese people, and you have some of the most top notch hospitality i've ever experienced.

The rooms are split evenly between villas on the river's edge, and large suites on the upper floors. They are all BEAUTIFULLY appointed with custom finishes, high ceiling roofs, and luxurious amenities. The devil is in the details here, the toilets are high end electronic bidets which open and close for you with the help of motion sensors, while the individual sinks are hand carved teak bowls which are re-varnished after every stay. No expense was spared in the development of this Mandapa resort, and it truly shows.



The rooms are beautifully executed, with bright airy spaces, custom local finishes, and a moveable dividing wall



The bathrooms were one of the highlights, with gorgeous soaking tubs that were delightful just to look at, and some exotic finishes all around.

I did not get a chance to visit one of the restaurants at the resort (Kubu), which happens to be the #1 ranked restaurant (at the time of this writing in March 2017), but it sits right at the river's edge. Sawah Terrace served incredibly fresh and local cuisine for breakfast and dinner, while the library served some of the most refreshing libations i've experienced in my travels.

Rounding out the experience was a multitude of experiences in and around the property, from an educational tour of the rice fields right in the middle of Mandapa, to personalized cultural events that the hotel changed on a seasonal basis.

Of the hundreds of luxury hotels that i've had the pleasure of staying at, the Ritz-Reserve in Mandapa ranks near the very top. Kudos to the chain and all the staff for making this hotel an experience to remember.

RATING:

Hard Product:

-Location (How close is this to top attractions in the surrounding area?)

Ubud is a great city if you're looking for something more low key than nearby Seminyak, and you want to experience the rainforest and lush rice fields. This resort is set right in the middle of the city, but hidden in its own valley

10/10

-Cleanliness (Is the grout in the bathroom clean? How good is maid service here?)

Not a single thing out of place here.

10/10

-Upkeep (Is the hotel in need of a remodel, or is it being constantly kept up?)

Still a relatively new property, it is being kept in tip top shape

10/10

-Public Spaces (How unique/inventive/useful are the public spaces?)

This hotel has so many spaces to explore and is set in such a serene and beautiful setting that it doesn't get much better

10/10

Soft Product:

-Service (How good is the service here?)

From in-room check in to personalized greetings for every guest, along with very well trained local staff, I couldn't have asked for more

10/10

-Restaurants On-Site (Are the restaurants on site somewhere even the locals would go to?)

The food was incredible, but the menu could have offered just a little more variety at the pool area. However, it was still well above and beyond.

8/10

-Concierge (Specifically, how effective is the Concierge at

helping you with a new locale?)

The concierge service was stunning here, all Reserves assign a butler to each guest, and they really do look after you. For example, the minute I was done with breakfast, they knew I needed to get to the lobby to take a car into the city, and had everything from the golf cart to the driver arranged without my even asking.

10/10

TOTAL: 68/70

(35/70 is average)

PROS:

- The setting is surreal its so beautiful
- The service at a Reserve is beyond reproach
- The rooms are absolutely stunning in build quality

CONS:

- Only recommendation would be a revamp of the menu at the pool, or the addition of a few more items

SECRETS:

- Do take the time to make a reservation ahead of time with the concierge before you arrive, so that you can eat at Kubu, and so that you can plan for some of the local cultural events held by the hotel

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

Check out the Ubud guide!

REVIEW: The Ritz-Carlton Hong Kong, the TALLEST (and maybe best) hotel in the world

Ok, so saying that a hotel is the best in the world is sort of like saying "Pizza is the best food in the world". However, if there was a list of top properties this one would definitely make the cut.

The first part that we'll have to get out of the way, is that the Ritz in HK is indeed the tallest hotel in the world, occupying the 102nd to the 108th floor of the ICC building on the Kowloon side of the city. As such, the views you get are completely superior to almost any other building or establishment in the city of Hong Kong. Combine this with the fact that the hotel is on the Kowloon side, and you end up seeing the gorgeous Hong Kong side skyline (which is world famous and rightfully so).



That's the exterior, and yes, it is VERY tall



The harbor views from the rooms are all incredible thinks to

the height of the building.

To get to the hotel, you start with an elevator ride from the lobby. Staff are there to assist you and it's rare that you even have to push the "up" button for the elevator banks.

When the Ritz says that they're a full service hotel, they really mean it here. Once you're up in the main lobby you have the option of going up to the rooftop bar, or taking a separate bank of elevators to your room.

The rooms themselves are incredibly well put together, with impeccably beautiful furniture, and small luxurious touches such as ipods with custom playlists pre-loaded for the guests.

These are the things that make a hotel experience that much better, and really show off the attentiveness of a property.



The main lobby is actually on the 103rd floor, and is a grand affair

I should mention that there are some incredible restaurants in the main lobby. The staff calls it the “360 degrees” of dining. This is because there’s multiple restaurants on all sides of the 102nd floor, including TWO 2-Michelin star restaurants, a caviar bar, and an incredible breakfast/lunch/dinner buffet restaurant. I had the pleasure

of dining at Tin Lung Heen which I highly recommend trying out – it's elevated Cantonese cuisine. Cafe 103 serves daily buffets for all three meals, and frankly speaking – it's one of the best buffets i've been to – where they don't cut corners just to give you more variety. Between all the restaurants, the pool and hottub on the top story, and the Ozone bar also on the rooftop of the property, you can more or less stay in the hotel all day and not have to leave.

And that is where I have to admit – that this property was so nice that at times it made me not want to leave. Don't get me wrong, Hong Kong is such an incredible city, full of vibrant life, cuisine, and culture. However, you know you're staying at a near perfect property when you make excuses to stay just a little bit longer.

If you're staying in Hong Kong there are a LOT of luxurious hotel choices, but you'd be making a mistake if you didn't spend at least one of your nights at the Ritz-Carlton.

RATING:

Hard Product:

-Location (How close is this to top attractions in the surrounding area?)

Mong Kok is nearby, but if you want to go to Hong Kong side it's only a short cab or MTA ride away

9/10

-Cleanliness (Is the grout in the bathroom clean? How good is maid service here?)

When the maid service noticed I had left the "busy" sign up but thought I was out of the room, they went as far as emailing me to ask if I needed service

10/10

-Upkeep (Is the hotel in need of a remodel, or is it being constantly kept up?)

Still a relatively new property, it is being kept in tip top shape

10/10

-Public Spaces (How unique/inventive/useful are the public spaces?)

Stunning property, with the added advantage of being so high up that the views are incredible from every public space available, including the club lounge, the pool, and all of the restaurants

10/10

Soft Product:

-Service (How good is the service here?)

From in-room check in to personalized greetings for every guest, this Ritz-Carlton is being run like a VERY tight ship

10/10

-Restaurants On-Site (Are the restaurants on site somewhere even the locals would go to?)

It's tough competition in Hong Kong, but the restaurants on site left almost nothing wanting. Only 1 point deducted for the price

9/10

-Concierge (Specifically, how effective is the Concierge at helping you with a new locale?)

Other than some minor language gaps, the concierge service was accommodating and extremely helpful. They planned my short trip in Hong Kong perfectly.

9/10

TOTAL: 67/70

(35/70 is average)

PROS:

- The views are absolutely breathtaking
- The restaurants at the establishment cannot be beat
- The service is top notch and impeccable

CONS:

- This is really nitpicking, but it does take two elevators to get to your room – however they make it as seamless as possible, and come on – you're in the tallest hotel in the world!

SECRETS:

- Do take the time to make a reservation ahead of time for the restaurants on property as they get booked up VERY quickly

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

Check out the Hong Kong guide!

HOTEL REVIEW: The Peninsula Tokyo – Near Perfect?

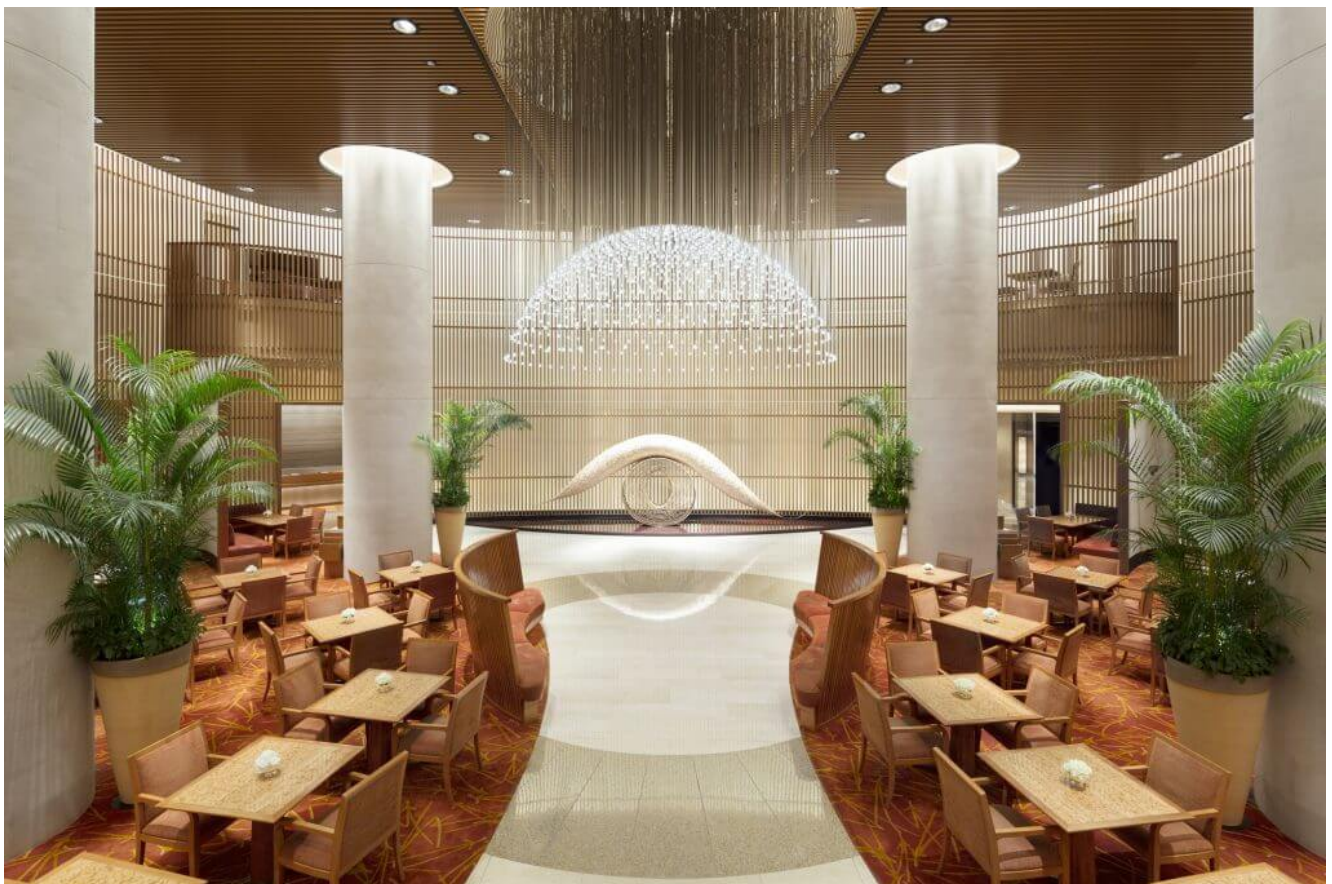
Let me preface this review with my opinion that there is NO modern place in the world currently like Japan (I'm writing in 2017 here folks). The country itself provides such a shell shock of an adventure in cultural amalgams, assaulting every one of the senses, and provides any traveler with stories to tell for days.

The Peninsula is a chain that prides itself on service and class. I would argue that in those regards, it stands at parity with the Four Seasons, the Ritz-Carlton or even the St. Regis. However, with only ten hotels in its chain as of this writing, it is relatively tough to find a Peninsula when traveling. If you're in Tokyo, however, I recommend you book here.

Lets start off with the physical details. The hotel is gorgeous with large suites, beautifully decorated and elegant public spaces, and impeccable attention to cleanliness and detail.



Right in the heart of Ginza!



The lobby is absolutely stunning

It's tough to find sizable rooms in Japan, and especially in a great area with good value. Surprisingly, if you book far enough ahead, the Peninsula does so. As of this writing, the average prices about 30-50 days ahead are sub-\$500 per night.

Service is impeccable – one of my tests that I perform when at a hotel, is the purposeful littering of my socks, in order to test the efficacy of housekeeping. Not only did the staff at the Peninsula fold up my belongings during housekeeping service, but they also left a note with a pre-filled laundry service ticket, asking in a polite manner if I would like my laundry done.

There is also the added bonus of the house cars, one of which is a vintage Rolls Royce.



That's the awesome vintage vehicle you can ride in

The location couldn't be any better if you were trying to see

some action in the city. Ginza district is next to the Imperial palace and is known for its shopping. Japanese consumerism is unlike anything else in the world, there's stores in Ginza where you can create your own CD's, have custom decorated deserts made for you, buy luxury charcoal products, or pretty much find anything your consumerist heart desires.

There's tons of great options in Tokyo, but I cannot recommend more wholeheartedly – The Peninsula.



Did I mention the heated floors in the bathrooms?

PROS:

- Service here is bar-none
- Absolutely stunning bathrooms with heated floors and electronic bidets
- Location is great, walk everywhere in the Ginza district

CONS:

- Its so nice you don't want to leave (I know, that's not really a con)

SECRETS:

- There are often specials run at this hotel due to intense competition amongst the luxury chains in Japan and declining tourism. Make sure to do google searches when planning your trip for 4th night frees, or seasonal specials

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- Timeout has a great article on local shopping.