

PICS: GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI



Take a coffin break

Confined in a space that you just about fit in, with an alarm that does not ring, and a nickname that reminds you of graveyards, the capsule hotels in Kyoto, Japan, are a must-visit even if they sound deadly

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As acts of sheer self-indulgence, we stayed in a number of stylish Japanese inns during our week-long sweep across the main island of the country, dipped in private onsens or hot springs and soaked in steaming waters with snowflakes fluttering around us. And in stark contrast, there it was in our itinerary: Kyoto - 2200 hrs: Capsule Hotel.

The capsule hotel concept is a Japanese solution to a budget traveller's basic needs: cheap accommodation even if it is a hotel that offered a place to sleep and little else. These hotels are used by business travellers on a budget, people who plan to party late into the night and have no idea when they will check in, travellers on a tight budget and those who have to catch a few hours sleep before a flight, train or bus journey. Visitors too inebriated to go home to a hopping mad spouse also seek shelter here.

The very first capsule hotel opened in Osaka in 1979 and was designed by Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa who pioneered capsule architecture. Kurokawa built Tokyo's Nakagin Capsule Tower in 1972, an apartment block complex for salaried bachelors looking for basic facilities in an



overcrowded city.

Keen on experiencing a night in one, on the last leg of our trip, we found ourselves at the check-in desk of a capsule hotel. But first we had to store our shoes in lockers that lined the walls of the foyer and pad down the spotless white-tiled floor to the reception desk.

The fact that we were 12 hours early and had a full day ahead of us to explore Kyoto, had us a little worried: how to store our luggage in 'rooms' that were capsules? Might get a bit cramped. Our concern was misplaced as the man behind the desk rolled our bags into the left luggage area.

KYOTO

Having retrieved our footwear, we were soon pounding the streets of a city that is touted as the cultural capital of the country. It turned out to be an eventful day crammed with a tea ceremony at a samurai temple, an Italian lunch served with traditional Japanese flair, a stroll down narrow little streets lined with quaint wooden houses, time out in a bamboo forest garden, browsing through Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines... We topped off the day with dinner in the company of a Maiko or apprentice geisha in a back alley tea house followed by a cup that cheers at a plush tea bar.

TRAVEL

Going off track

Those who go off the beaten track, write for us.

THE NINE-HOUR STAY

It was with a sense of trepidation that we drove through lamp-lit streets that night to our hotel and our capsule room. Once more we stored our footwear in lockers and put on the slippers that were placed there (it was reassuring to see an attendant give a batch of used slippers a thorough dip in a disinfectant). Since we were first-time users, a briefing was necessary. The name of the hotel - 9h - was the first clue: guests could check in any time of the day - most do at night - and the basic charge would be for a nine-hour stay: every additional hour would cost more. The 9h concept revolves around 1 + 7 + 1 - one hour to shower, seven hours of sleep and one hour rest.

All the 'rooms' were single occupancy capsules measuring approximately 6.5ft x 4ft, laid out in two double-deck rows. Access to the top row was via a small set of vertical steps. In all, the hotel had 125 capsules divided into two separate sets of dormitories for men and women. In fact, there were separate lifts for men and women, clearly marked with gender symbols and they transported guests only to their respective floors. The two male and female

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The common toilet



The lockers



The reception



Tea at the capsule hotel

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sections comprised three floors of capsule units and one floor of lockers with common showers and wash basins.

We were surprised when the receptionist handed us a set of keys: do we lock ourselves inside a small capsule? No, they are for the locker to store your bags, he explained. And in the locker we also found crisply pressed pyjamas, Turkish bath and hand towels, toothbrush and toothpaste, sachets of soap, shampoo and conditioner and a bottle of mineral water.

Bags and clothes stored in the locker, teeth brushed and dressed in baggy cotton pyjamas, we descend-

ed to the sleeping area: the heart of the hotel. We strolled down a hallway, past a row of sleeping pods, some were occupied and others vacant, to the unit assigned to us: the number along with an arrow pointing to it was painted, large and clear, on the floor. Crazy as it might seem - bedding down for a night in what many have referred to as a coffin - we were committed and there was no going back. We willed ourselves to climb in head first and crawled all the way in. We took comfort in the fact that the sheets and pillow cases were crisp and clean. Then reaching over our feet, we pulled the blinds down over the mouth of the capsule and claimed whatever privacy it offered.

FACT FILE

CAPSULE HOTEL rates start at Japanese Yen 4,600 or Rs 3,000; including tax and service charges. For more information, visit Japan National Tourism Organisation: www.jnto.go.jp



THE SILENT ALARM CLOCK

Referring to the instruction sheet, we set the morning alarm on the control panel over our heads (oversleeping would mean paying more and - worse - missing our flight back home). We switched off the lights and darkness enveloped the pod... slowly. Yes, the slow dimming of lights induces deeper sleep than plunging the capsule into darkness, or so the instruction sheet noted. And it seemed to work for we were soon in dreamland, free of the confines of our sleeping pod. The only time we were conscious of our cubicles was when we were disturbed by the knocking around of people, checking into neighbouring units. But that was brief and we soon

dropped off to sleep again.

And then the lights switched on automatically; and they got brighter by the second, making sure that we were awake. It was the silent alarm at work which ensured that those in the other capsules were not disturbed.

A quick shower and we were down in the lobby with our bags. While we sipped machine coffee and waited in the free Wi-Fi lounge for our taxi, we realized that we had not only survived a night in a capsule hotel but also emerged from it rather refreshed. Indeed, it was quite an adventure: like spending a night in a sleeping pod similar to those we see in space ships that cruise across galaxies in science fiction movies.