

Les Clefs d'Or Japan

Key News



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Les Clefs d'Or Japan & Japan Concierge Association Joint Seminar 2025

By. Nozomi Sagasaki , Eiji Tanaka

First Day

On January 15 and 16, we held our annual joint seminar with the Japan Concierge Association in Hakone. The main theme of this year's seminar was "What we should do now for future generations, looking toward the future of concierges" and it was the first two-day seminar. On the first day, we had a guest speaker at the Prince Hakone Ashinoko banquet hall, and on the second day, we had a guided walk in Hakone in the morning and a group workshop at the POLA Museum in Hakone in the afternoon. This two-day program was designed to provide not only input but also output for future use.

As a main speaker on the first day of our seminar we welcomed Mr. Maurice Dancer, the Chief Concierge of The Pierre, A Taj Hotel in New York, who is also the Honorary President of Les Clefs d'Or USA and former Zone Director of the Americas Les Clefs d'Or.

On the first day of the seminar, we took a bus from Tokyo to Hakone and arrived at the venue, seeing beautiful Mt. Fuji on our way.

Mr. Dancer spoke at the seminar about his various experiences and training methods. As an ice-breaker, we were divided into groups and each group expressed each part of the body (eyes, ears, hands, mouth, feet, and mind) using the six necessary body parts for serving customers and to enhance service. By expressing the points, rather than just hearing them in words, we were able to put them more deeply into our own minds.

In the course of the talk, we were given hints to be aware of our own positions.

We were reminded of what is important in training and in dealing with subordinates who have been with us for a long time: attention to detail, clear evaluation, empathy, sharing of emotions, showing recognition, and always remember that we do it for the best of our guests.

It is also important to create a bond and build relationships with the management team. Think about recruiting and go to job fairs. As an ambassador of the lobby, Mr. Dancer mentioned how we should always conduct ourselves in a professional manner as Les Clefs d'Or concierge, so that everyone respects and to inspires others providing people with a memorable experience.

Through Mr. Maurice's seminar made us realize that we need to look at ourselves and be more proactive and flexible.



We also had inputs from Ms. Noguchi of the POLA Museum of Art which was the main seminar venue for the second day, and from Mr. Kishi, General Manager of Hyatt Regency Hakone. Mr. Kishi gave his opinion from the management side, saying that people think that concierges do not make profit, but this is not true, and that it is necessary to show management how to make the profit visible.

Ms. Noguchi spoke very clearly about how to deal with young people. First of all, do you push newcomers into the sea? She spoke in an easy-to-understand way, focusing on the training side of the issue. She also emphasized the importance of teaching that the ocean is not a scary place, and that it is important to teach young people how to swim in a way that suits each individual swimmer, and once they are able to swim, to teach them about the vastness and splendor of the ocean beyond.

Closing was made by Ms. Kay Abe, the Honorary member of Les Clefs d'Or Japan. Ms. Abe pushed us to reaffirm the importance of our role as a concierge in cooperation with other departments and management.

The seminar welcomed two other participants from overseas, Mr. Yoga, the President of Les Clefs d'Or Indonesia, and Mr. Tiki, a member of Les Clefs d'Or Indonesia. From Hakone, we welcomed more than 40 participants working in the hospitality industry. After the seminar, a networking get-together was held to end the first day of the seminar, allowing participants to deepen exchanges with Hakone tourism professionals, overseas members, and with each other.



Second Day

We had breakfast together while enjoying the beautiful lakeside view of Lake Ashi, and then split into two groups and left The Prince Hakone Ashinoko into 2 buses.



After a two-hour walking tour in the morning and lunch at the POLA Museum of Art, the group discussion was scheduled for the afternoon.

Each bus was accompanied by a local guide who gave an overview of Hakone Town and its attractions on the way to the starting point of the walking tour.

The walking tour was conducted under cloudy skies and bitter cold with occasional flakes of snow, but we were so captivated by the stories of our guides that we forgot about the conditions, and the two-hour tour went by in a blur.

Hakone Imperial Park is a former imperial villa that has been opened to the public and visitors can stroll through the park all year round. The beautifully landscaped Japanese garden offers seasonal flowers. From the balcony of the museum and the hill in the park, you can see the magnificent Lake Ashi and Mt. Fuji from Hakone for about 30% of the year, and it is more likely to be visible in winter.

The Tokaido Highway, which has continued since the Edo period, has been preserved in a state close to that of the Edo period. The guide showed us a photograph taken at the same place 120 years ago, showing a person in a hammock-like basket carried by two lightly dressed bearers, and it was easy to imagine how people in the Edo period used to travel between Edo and Kyoto.

In those days, it took an average person 15 days to travel between Edo and Kyoto, walking 30 km a day, but the hikyaku completed the journey in four days.

The Tokaido Highway is lined with cedar trees planted by the Tokugawa Shogunate. The rows of cedar trees, which have grown into giant trees, are still a sight to see after more than 400 years.

Once there, we took a walk around Moto Hakone on Lake Ashi and talked about how popular Hakone has become during the high season. Last year the number of tourists visiting Hakone reached 20 million, of which only 11,000 were locals. Our guide advised us not to visit during the cherry blossom and autumn foliage seasons, as the over-tourism season is very busy, with 90-minute waits to board public buses, long queues to board pirate boats that ply the lakeshore, and 45-minute waits to take pictures with the floating Torii Gate on the lakeshore in the background.



We visited Hakone Shrine, just a short walk from the lakeside. Hakone Shrine was established more than 1,200 years ago and has been visited by the royal family as well as by Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu. It is said that athletes now visit the shrine to pray for victory before a game. A cedar tree is still enshrined as a sacred tree.



After the walking tour the group moved to POLA Museum of Art. We had a course lunch at the museum's restaurant.

Afterwards, each visitor enjoyed the museum's wonderful art collection. The exhibition theme was "The Secret of Colors". We were first welcomed by contemporary artist Mr. Hiroshi Sugimoto, who used prisms to express light. The exhibition also allowed us to see how the Post-Impressionists Van Gogh, Seurat, Gauguin, Picasso, and Matisse inherited this, and in

contemporary art, we were able to experience artworks that used light as a motif, such as stained glass, fluorescent lights, and fashion. Among them, the "Infinite Room of Light," created by Yayoi Kusama, was an amazing work of art surrounded by mirrors on all four sides, allowing visitors to enter a world of colorful spheres spreading endlessly.

After enjoying the exhibition, group discussions were held in the museum's auditorium, continuing from the previous day. Seated in small groups, the participants were first greeted by Ms. Hiroko Noguchi, Director of the POLA Museum of Art, who spoke about her background and the museum. The POLA Museum of Art boasts the largest collection of artworks of any museum founded in Japan since the 21st century, including Impressionist works by Monet, Renoir, Cézanne, and others, Japanese paintings, and contemporary art. These works are not only displayed in the museum's galleries, but are also scattered throughout the Nature and Rail Museum's expansive grounds, and the forest surrounding the museum is also used as an exhibition space. The building itself is designed to be lower than the surrounding trees to blend in with the forest, and most of the exhibition rooms are located underground.



The museum also pays attention to the soft side of the museum, calling the receptionists and surveillance staff “guest relations” and specializing in hospitality to provide a comfortable space for visitors, including tourists who are not accustomed to visiting art museums.

After these introductions, yesterday’s speaker, Mr. Maurice Dancer, gave a recap of his presentation, followed by a session during which we asked him about the secrets of his more than 30 years as a concierge, how he spends his days off, the conditions of employment as a concierge, and how he trains new employees.

The seminar concluded with a group discussion on yesterday’s question, “What mindsets do you value as a team?” Each group shared their own style of working at their respective hotels, and each group made a presentation. The discussion was lively, with participants expressing their thoughts on a number of topics, including “Enjoying oneself to entertain guests and the team,” “Accepting and not rejecting different opinions,” “Expressing gratitude to team members,” “Valuing suppliers and other departments,” “Improving openness,” and “The importance of a work-life balance. The discussion was very lively.

Finally, Ms. Imaizumi, president of Les Clefs d’Or Japan, gave her impressions of the first overnight seminar, and the group left the POLA Museum of Art by bus and disbanded at Odawara Station.

This was the first overnight event for us. Spending longer time with each other than usually have deepen our relationship and knowledge as to what we need to do for our future.

We will like to express our special thanks to Hakone DMO, The Prince Hakone Ashinoko, and POLA Museum for their cooperation.



TOYOOKA CITY INSPECTION

From January 21st to 22nd, five members of Les Clefs d'Or Japan were invited by Toyooka Tourism Innovation to visit the city of Toyooka in Hyogo Prefecture



By Aiko Imaizumi

About two and a half hours from Kyoto by express train, we arrived at Toyooka Station, where our FAM (familiarization) trip began.

Our first stop was the Hyogo Park of the Oriental White Stork, where we learned about the progress of the stork reintroduction project. Once widespread across Japan, Oriental White Storks became extinct in the wild in 1971. Since then, long-term captive breeding efforts have continued, with successful breeding recorded every year for the past 43 years. Today, wild-born storks from the Tajima region are spreading throughout Japan, and sightings are becoming more common nationwide.

To support the storks' return, local people have worked together to maintain a healthy natural environment, avoiding the use of chemical fertilizers. Thanks to their dedicated efforts, we were able to spot storks from our bus during the visit.

Next, we visited San'in Kaigan National Park, also known as the Beautiful Rock Park or Geological Park. One of its highlights is the Genbudo Cave, designated a National Natural Monument, which was formed by volcanic activity about 1.6 million years ago. We were captivated by the park's stunning natural beauty and enriched our understanding through the enthusiastic explanations of our guide.



Afterwards, we took the Kinosaki Onsen Ropeway to Onsen-ji Temple, the sacred guardian temple of Kinosaki Onsen, with a history dating back 1,300 years. The temple houses a statue of the Eleven-Faced Kannon, a national treasure that is revealed to the public only once every 33 years.

Next, we visited Kamiya Mingeiten which is a straw craft store. Using brightly colored barley, we saw beautiful works of art carefully crafted over time by craftsman Mr. Toshiaki Kamiya.



After receiving an explanation of the production process, we were given the opportunity to try our hand at bookmark making, and while experiencing the delicacy and difficulty of the work, the bookmark we made ourselves became a precious memory of our trip. We had dinner at Sanpo Nishimuraya Honten located next to Nishimuraya Ryokan which was established in the Edo period. We spent time exchanging ideas with Toyooka Tourism Innovation while enjoying a beautiful meal featuring Tajima beef and seasonal ingredients and sake pairings.



At Kinosaki Onsen, the participants stayed at different Ryokans, and enjoyed the charm. The "MIKIYA," is a 300-year-old Ryokan which is registered as a National Tangible Cultural Property. The famous writer Naoya Shiga stayed when he wrote his works. The "AKAISHIYA," located by the river with swaying willows and easy access to the outside hot springs, where you can enjoy the sauna on the premises. The "Hatsuyado En," where you can enjoy Tajima beef raised without agricultural chemicals and rent a bicycle to enjoy the hot spring resort area. The "FUKAYAMA," where you can enjoy the atmosphere of Taisho Modernism with all the modern comforts of home. All of them have been recently renovated to provide a comfortable stay even for visitors from overseas. Kinosaki Onsen is a hot spring resort where you can enjoy the atmosphere of a good old-fashioned spa town, with many domestic and foreign guests coming and going to enjoy the outside baths in their yukata and geta (wooden clogs).





On the 2nd day we visited Izushi, Toyooka City, which is a castle town of the former Izushi clan. Guided by Mr. Koderu of the Izushi Promotion Bureau of Toyooka City Hall, we start from the oldest clock tower in Japan, "Shinko Tower," which is also a symbol of the city. Using an old map, we walked to the ruins of Izushi Castle, imagining the scenery of the Edo period.

Unfortunately, the tour started in the rain, but by the time we reached "Arikoyama Inari Shrine," which overlooks the castle town, the sunlight shone through the clouds and we experienced a mysterious atmosphere.

"Izushi Meiji-kan" and visited the "Izushi Sake Brewery" established in 1708. The "crane" in the name of the brewery's flagship brand, "Rakurakuzuru," is said to be named after a stork, which was once called a crane. After experiencing the hospitality of the owner, we all bought our favorite sake and original bags.

We then visited the Izushi Archives. This museum, which was renovated from the residence of a wealthy merchant in the Meiji era, offers a glimpse of people's lives in those days through its sukiya-style townhouses.

The last visit in the morning was to the oldest theater in the Kinki region, "Izushi Eirakukan". Opened in 1901, it was a center of popular culture. It was closed in the Showa period, but was reopened in the Heisei period and still hosts various performances, including Kabuki. At Eirakukan, the distance between the stage and the audience, which is different from that of modern theaters, and the old-fashioned stage sets give a sense of the atmosphere of the time when the building first opened. On a day when there was no performance, we were able to take a behind-the-scenes tour.

For lunch we had Izushi Sara Soba at Shokaku Tanakaya. This is a specialty of the area. Izushi soba is served on small plates made of traditional Izushi ware, and each set of five plates is a single serving. After that, we visited Takumi Kougei, a traditional handicraft workshop of Yanagi-Gyori, a traditional handicraft shop in the city of Toyooka.

Mr. Takumi Terauchi, a traditional craftsman of Toyooka kiryu-zaiku, showed us the production process and talked about the difficulty and importance of passing on traditional crafts. We were awestruck by all of his creations, from willow branches woven into hemp threads to bags and baskets that can be incorporated into modern life to beautiful lighting.

At the Izushi Pottery shop Eisawa, we were also dazzled by the beautiful white porcelain pieces. We saw the roots of the small plates used for the sara-soba dish we had just eaten.

We also visited 2 accommodation facilities: "Toyooka 1925," which uses the building of the Toyooka branch of the Hyogo Agricultural and Industrial Bank, built in 1934 and designated as a modernization and cultural heritage site; and "Willow," which uses a long-established bag shop and its warehouse in Toyooka, a bag production center in Japan. We believe that this new concept of accommodations, which can meet different needs from those of Kinosaki Onsen, will be popular with visitors to Japan in the future.

As we were guided by various local people during the two-day visit, everyone mentioned the "Great Kitatajima Earthquake" that devastated Toyooka in 1925, the Maruyama River that runs through the city, and the "storks" that are deeply involved in people's lives. With these backgrounds in mind, we felt that Toyooka City is evolving to welcome visitors from all over Japan and the world while preserving its good old culture and townscape.

Lastly, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to everyone at Toyooka Tourism Innovation and the local community for their warm hospitality.



Gaen Corporation 10th Anniversary Party

By: Miki Saito

On February 9, 2025, our business affiliate, Gaen Co., Ltd. celebrated their 10th anniversary at the Sakura Room of the Imperial Hotel.

Five members of the Les clefs d'Or Japan, four members from the Japan Concierge Association, and two former members attended.

Guests from various regions such as Kyushu, Fukui, and Ishikawa were present at the party, where many shared memorable stories about President Wada.

The atmosphere was warm and relaxed, and many guests spoke of being overwhelmed by President Wada's speed and determination. Following her appointment as the "Ishikawa Tourism Special Envoy," President Wada was also designated as the "Fukui Brand Ambassador" on that day.

For us hotel Concierges, we have been receiving support in many ways on daily basis including the dispatch of interpreter guides, planning on hands on programs, and opportunities to visit the local community.

What began as a company with just a dozen guides has now grown into a large organization with 160 members. President Wada passionately shared her achievements and prospects, leaving everyone deeply impressed by her powerful leadership.

We sincerely hope for continued growth and success for the company in the future.



MONTHLY MEETING

February

The February meeting was held at the Drawing Room of the Hyatt Regency Kyoto.

- The meeting was attended by two members of Les clefs d'Or International, Mr. Toru Machida from London and Mr. Jerome Uy from the Philippines, who were also in Japan this time.
- We received reports on the Toyooka visit on January 21 and 22, in which five members participated, and the Okinawa visit from February 5 to 7, in which four members participated.
- Two members who attended the gala dinner held at the Peninsula London on February 1 reported that the dinner was a great success and the atmosphere was magnificent.
- The results of the questionnaire survey for the seminar held in January were summarized, and the results were mostly positive, and the overnight seminar allowed for a more active interaction and exchange of ideas.
- President of The Society of the Golden Keys of the Philippines "Les Clefs d'Or" Mr. Jerome Uy gave a presentation on the upcoming Asian Congress to be held in October 2025 at Boracay Island of the Philippines.

