

Stay Amid Architectural Masterpieces in Harmony with Nature

Shishi-Iwa House, Karuizawa

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Since the Meiji era, Karuizawa has been known as a summer retreat, and to this day, it continues to attract many visitors. Amid a landscape filled with a variety of architectural styles, one building stands out in particular. That is Shishi-Iwa House—a retreat composed of three distinct structures where guests can immerse themselves in contemporary architecture by master architects while enjoying design, art, and exquisite cuisine. It is a retreat experience that engages all five senses.

Just about an hour from Tokyo by Shinkansen, Karuizawa has recently regained attention thanks to its accessibility. About ten minutes by car northeast of JR Karuizawa Station appears a wooden architectural structure. Its gabled roof features a column-free truss structure (based on triangular units), and a curving elevated walkway wraps gently around the building. This is *Shishi-Iwa House No. 2*, designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Shigeru Ban. SSH No. 02 houses public spaces like the reception and restaurant on the second floor, and 12 guest rooms on the first floor. At the end of a corridor adorned with artwork and photography, one finds the restaurant. Three large windows open up at the front, with the west side leading to a terrace, where open windows allow the interior and exterior to merge seamlessly. The same wooden flooring pattern extends from the interior to the exterior, and the windows slide into the wall, reinforcing the sense of spatial continuity. The outdoor slope also functions as a buffer zone between the road and the guest rooms. As a considerate design element, this passage is only open from 10am to 6pm to ensure guest privacy from outside view.

The founder and director of Shishi-Iwa House is Mr. Huy Hoang (Representative Partner of HDHP GK, based in Minato, Tokyo), a veteran in the finance industry who held various executive positions in financial institutions. In 2018, he created Shishi-Iwa House as a gathering place for his family, who are spread across the world. This first building, now SSH No. 01, was commissioned to Shigeru Ban, who was asked to design a structure that harmonizes with Karuizawa's natural surroundings. The result is a gently curving structure that winds between trees. When Ban visited the site, he considered how to make this concept a reality by marking the position and height of each of the 260 trees on a site plan and sketching a building that followed their natural layout. The construction also utilized a local approach: during Karuizawa's one-month summer construction moratorium, prefabricated PHP panels (honeycomb paperboard reinforced with plywood) were manufactured and transported to the site. These panels were assembled to follow the S-curve dictated by the trees, resulting in the building's distinctive form.

Driven by a desire to create a space for intellectual and creative retreat away from urban noise, Ms. Hoang opened Shishi-Iwa House to the public in 2019 as a resort. The property now comprises three buildings—No. 01, No. 02, and No. 03—each with its own unique design.

SSH No. 01 functions as a guest room complex and features a unique layout. There are two shared spaces: one is called the Library, where books on art, architecture, and even comics are available for leisurely reading. The other, the Grand Room, is furnished with a large dining table and sofas, fostering interaction among guests. The Grand Room leads to three

smaller living rooms, each serving as a foyer to the guest rooms beyond. These living rooms are equipped with mini kitchens, small dining tables, and sofas, and each connects to 3–4 private guest rooms. This layout gradually transitions from shared spaces to private areas. The guest rooms themselves use natural wood extensively, with high ceilings and large windows opening to terraces, creating a sense of openness.

SSH No. 03 was designed by architect Ryue Nishizawa. It consists of ten square buildings connected by corridors. The entrance is styled like a traditional Japanese entryway and serves as the reception. Beyond it lies a corridor of blackened cedar boards and verandas that pass through courtyards and lead to the guest rooms. The design seeks to dissolve the boundary between people and nature. The guest rooms feature interior finishes of Japanese cypress (hinoki), with openings that frame seasonal views. "The contrast between the blackened cedar and the white hinoki highlights the interior space even more. Hinoki, often used in shrines and temples, carries a sacred symbolism. By incorporating it, we believe the space is imbued with spiritual tranquility, drawing closer to the essence of a retreat," explains Assistant Front Manager Junko Oyamada. The black tones also allow the building to quietly blend into the ever-changing natural scenery of Karuizawa.

This building also includes a tearoom, a private bath, a wellness room, and a tea house, allowing guests to enjoy various relaxing experiences. Furthermore, Nishizawa personally selected iconic furniture pieces for the space, including teak easy chairs by Swiss architect Pierre Jeanneret and bentwood stools by Michael Thonet—making it a delight for design enthusiasts.

All three buildings feature curated art collections. These include works collected by Mr. Hoang himself and pieces curated by specialists, ranging from crafts and paintings to photography, which can be encountered throughout the interiors.

Shishi-Iwa House also offers a wide range of activities. From architectural tours within the premises to organic farm visits and trekking programs, the retreat invites guests to connect with nature. "By staying here, we hope guests can escape the chaos of daily life and rediscover calm through wellness, quality sleep, and meaningful activities," says Mr. Hoang.

Going forward, the vision is to collaborate with more architects, integrate the presence of nature, and propose a new lifestyle. We look forward to seeing what innovations come next.