

# THE ROAD RAT

A THING FOR CARS

EDITION 17 SUMMER 2024

日本の物語

TALES FROM JAPAN

スカイライン R34

GT-R 進化物

トヨタ 2000GT 本来の美しさ

レクサス LFA 不合理な天才





Such displays of *monozukuri* are neither marketing stunts nor mere folklore, but an intrinsic aspect of contemporary Japanese culture. 'Japan is a country of *shokunin*, artisans who dedicate their lives to their craft', says Aiste Miseviciute, a connoisseur of Japanese gastronomic culture. 'Whether it's a ceramic piece or sushi made by a master in front of you, it's about knowing that its creation took hours, days and years to practise.'

This cultural appreciation of handicraft exists alongside a vivid appreciation of globalised consumerism in much of today's Japan. The popularity of Western luxury brands – from Rolls-Royce to Hermès to Alain Ducasse – hasn't greatly affected the stance towards domestic luxury. 'Just like a tea master during a tea ceremony,' says Miseviciute, 'at most high-end Japanese restaurants, chefs are cooking in front of you and it's their way of showing not only their skills, but also hospitality. Japanese hospitality is all about extreme attention to detail.'

This attention to detail is part of *omotenashi*, a modus operandi deep-rooted in Japanese society. 'Miseviciute translates the term as meaning 'selfless service without expecting anything in return'. She adds, 'It's important to emphasise that *omotenashi* is a two-way interaction. The customer is expected to show respect and "understand"'. Evidence of an absence of this respect and understanding might include speaking in anything but hushed tones or wearing perfume that could overwhelm the olfactory senses of others.

Similar concepts to *omotenashi* play a role in how a Toyota Century is supposed to make its way into customers' hands. Despite a brief attempt to offer the second-generation version abroad, sales have essentially been reserved for the Japanese domestic market. And there is a rumour that Toyota runs background checks on prospective buyers, particularly to ensure that no Century ends up in the hands of the criminal underworld – incidentally, there is a Japanese proverb along the lines of, 'While not every Mercedes owner is a *yakuza*, every *yakuza* owns a Mercedes.'

That the Century isn't for everybody is neither accident nor side effect. In a country where not just limousine chauffeurs but taxi drivers and even airplane pilots wear white gloves while performing their duties, anyone arriving on the backseat of a Century – likely hidden from view by its lace curtains – is communicating their respectability well before the door has opened.

Given how closely linked the traditional Japanese definition of luxury is with custom, it makes perfect sense to view the Toyota through that prism. For *omotenashi* also has an aesthetic component, as seen in traditional *ryokan* guesthouses and *chashitsu* tea rooms where elaborate *chadō* tea ceremonies are held. Both *ryokan* and *chashitsu* are ancient foundations of Japanese hospitality, and neither is luxurious in Western terms, instead seeming minimalist bordering on barren. Tradition combined with acute attention to detail is what makes them so appealing. As Miseviciute has learned, 'the very essence of Japanese aesthetics is finding beauty in nature and imperfection. You will of course find everything in Japan, but real luxury here is understated and in a way "subdued". Consider in that light the almost taxi-like ambience to the cabins of both earlier generations of the Century, with their grey wool upholstery and matter-of-fact plastic switchgear. By the Japanese definition, opulence doesn't equal luxury – while hospitality and quality do. This also

applies to the elaborate, multicourse *kaiseki* dinners that form another pillar of traditional Japanese luxury, and are as far removed from TikTok-friendly tomahawk steaks served in gold foil as Tokyo is from Dubai – aesthetically as well as philosophically.

AMONG THE FLEETS OF BLACK TOYOTA CENTURIES ROAMING JAPAN'S capital, one example subtly stands apart. It is painted Brewster Green, a Rolls-Royce shade, and belongs to The Peninsula Tokyo. While many luxury hotels focus on acquainting foreign guests with local food delicacies, The Peninsula Group also introduces them to local automotive culture – The Peninsula Paris has a Citroën 2CV among its fleet and The Peninsula Chicago a 1946 Packard Clipper. Fernando Bas Gil, The Peninsula Tokyo's Director of Rooms, points out that the Century is considered the pinnacle of the Tokyo hotel's fleet due to its status as 'a symbol of Japanese high quality', one exclusively available in Japan. Hirochika Iwasaki, Assistant Fleet Manager, emphasises the ability of the Century to cater to the sensitivities of Japanese visitors to Tokyo: 'Since noise can be distracting, the car has been equipped with Century-optimized noise-proof measures, including the seamless installation of noise-proofing materials.' There is an 'active noise control system' and guests can expect 'smooth acceleration and utmost serenity in the cabin.'

Fernando Bas Gil adds a host's perspective to such silence as a fundamental aspect of Japanese luxury: '*Omotenashi* is characterised by non-intrusive service, where guests are only spoken to when necessary. In Japanese culture, there is an understanding that one does not always need to speak to comprehend each other, known as "high context language". So, we strive to anticipate the needs of our Japanese guests, while adhering to the appropriate level of formality and politeness. We avoid being too casual.'

Bridging the chasm between Japanese and foreign guests' expectations of luxury, as is required from The Peninsula Tokyo's staff on a daily basis, has never been among the tasks any of the three generations of Century saloon have been expected to perform. This car always was resolutely Japan-only. And yet considerable change is arriving for Japan, against the backdrop of a dramatically ageing, shrinking population that has historically experienced very little immigration, as well as extreme levels of public debt. Tadashi Yanae, Japan's richest man and founder of the fashion brand Uniqlo, recently lamented in *Time* magazine: 'Unless we tap into the rest of the world, and become more active, there will be no future for the Japanese people.'

Given the Century's status, such concerns will affect its future. Rather than a continuing sense of contentment that it simply meets Japanese definitions of luxury, it has recently been tasked with conquering the rest of the world – in the form of the Century SUV. In contrast to its historic forebears, its design is defined by the application of select Century tropes on an otherwise unrelated set of proportions. And instead of accepting the philosophy of discreet ongoing change to create permanence, the Century SUV symbolises a desire to dramatically change the past into something relevant for the future. A car that used to be a local custom is in this way transforming into a global product. Just don't expect prospective buyers' backgrounds to be checked. 🇯🇵





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