

Significance of Capsule Hotels

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ABSTRACT

Capsule hotels are accommodation facilities that originated in Japan and offer capsule-shaped bedrooms equipped with simple beds. As accommodation costs are relatively low, they are frequented by foreign and domestic tourists alike. This article will elucidate the history of capsule hotels and discuss the characteristics (advantages and disadvantages) of capsule hotels as a form of lodging. Furthermore, we will consider the future prospects of capsule hotels.

Keywords: Capsule hotel, Reducing accommodation costs, Communication between users

INTRODUCTION

A capsule hotel is an accommodation facility that originated in Japan,¹⁾ featuring capsule-shaped bedrooms (box-shaped or equivalent private rooms, sometimes called cabins) equipped with simple beds. These rooms are sometimes described in English as resembling a beehive. Similar to business hotels, they are often located in downtown urban areas and offer inexpensive lodging. Capsule hotels are not always standalone facilities; many are attached to saunas or manga cafes²⁾.

There are many areas outside Japan where hotels of this type do not exist; therefore, these attract tourists, mainly from Europe and the United States, who seek the experience. In recent years, these affordable lodging options have been expanding internationally, such as the LCC terminal at Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

For a long time, these facilities were seen as lodging facilities for men only; however, as of 2012, facilities that accommodate women (in some cases, they only accept women or have floors exclusively for women) have started to appear³⁾. Despite this diversity, the cost of lodging remains relatively low making these hotels popular with both Japanese and foreign tourists²⁾.

This study elucidates the history of capsule hotels and discusses the characteristics (advantages and disadvantages) of capsule hotels as a form of lodging. Furthermore, it explores the future prospects of capsule hotels.

.History of capsule hotels

The world's first capsule hotel opened in Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture in 1979⁴⁾. The concept was conceived by Nakano, who was involved in managing saunas and business hotels, and Fukunishi, a furniture manufacturer who also applied for a patent. The hotel was designed by the world-famous architect Kurokawa, who was approached about its design after exhibiting a capsule house at the 1970 Osaka Expo. Their connection likely influenced by Nakano's involvement in the Expo as well. Initially, furniture from Fukunishi's manufacturer was used in a capsule hotel.

The popularity of capsule hotels grew rapidly after their opening. Around 1980, Japan experienced a rapid economic growth. Many office workers, after working late and drinking in downtown areas, would miss the last train home. Capsule hotels provided a convenient and cost-effective alternative to expensive taxi rides, offering a place to sleep and shower.³⁾. Located near train stations,

these hotels were convenient for many users to stay overnight when there was a railway strike or when public transportation was suspended because of a typhoon.

Capsule hotels are legally classified as simple lodgings and are distinguished from hotels and inns (Table 1)⁵. Obtaining a business permit for a capsule hotel is easier than for regular hotels, and visitors share many facilities like sinks, toilets, and bathrooms. This shared infrastructure allows for lower costs in water supply and drainage, enabling more guests to be accommodated within the same space, which reduces accommodation costs. Capsule hotels are often chosen by those who need a place to sleep at short notice or prefer a low-cost option without requiring extensive amenities⁴.

Recently, the number of foreign tourists in Japan has increased because of the declining value of the yen and Japan's efforts to attract international visitors. In addition, the number of Japanese travelers has increased due to the eased COVID-19 measures⁶. New capsule hotels are also opening as potential lodging facilities. While some tourists prefer traditional hotels and ryokan inns that provide detailed Japanese services even if they are expensive, capsule hotels offer the advantage of affordability and facilitate easy communication with each other¹. There are often places where it is easy to interact with other users, such as eating, drinking, and co-working spaces. This situation is considered to be related to the characteristics described in the next section.

Features of capsule hotels

An overview of this process is presented in Table 2. Generally, simple capsule-shaped beds are piled up in two tiers in a large room and users sleep inside these capsules. In addition, a capsule is equipped with lighting, a ventilation fan, an alarm clock, a radio, and a small TV (suspended from the ceiling). These are functionally arranged such that they can be operated while lying down.

Compared with a hotel room, the private space in a capsule hotel is confined to the capsule itself rather than an entire room¹. Bathrooms often have only showers, and toilets and sinks are shared among guests. Unlike traditional dormitory rooms, capsule hotels offer a private space where beds are enclosed by walls, providing a level of separation from other guests. In addition, similar to dormitory settings, capsule hotels often have dining and coworking spaces (unlike hotels, there are fewer private spaces, so there are many shared spaces). Generally, eating and drinking inside the capsules are strictly prohibited.

There are two types of capsules: vertical, where the entrance is on the short side of the room (foot side), and horizontal, where the entrance is on the long side. The capsules can be separated from the outside using blinds or curtains. There is no sound insulation; therefore, there may be concerns about footsteps in the hallway, alarm clocks in other capsules, and snoring by other capsule users (the sound of the television inside the capsule can usually only be heard through headphones)³. In addition, capsules equivalent to guest rooms cannot be locked because they are legally treated as furniture rather than rooms. Separately locked lockers are usually provided for the variables. Capsules have the capacity for one person, and children cannot sleep with their parents.

The users have access to shared washrooms, toilets, large baths, and shower booths. Some facilities have an attached sauna shop, allowing bathing 24 hours a day. In some cases, on-site restaurants and massage parlors are available 24 hours a day. Capsule hotels were originally created because of the high land prices and security conditions in Japan's big cities. Sleeping outdoors can be dangerous due to potential threats from criminals, and spending the night in a restaurant, like a coffee shop, can be tiring and uncomfortable. Capsule hotels offer a safer and more comfortable alternative, providing secure accommodation at a minimal cost.

Because the rates are cheaper than those of business hotels, they are often used by company employees, young students, and working adults on individual trips to save expenses and travel costs. This flexibility is particularly advantageous if they miss the last train or late-night bus. Depending on the distance to their home, staying at a capsule hotel can be more affordable than taking a taxi, leading many to make last-minute decisions to stay in these hotels.².

There has been an increase in luxury capsule hotels that are well-equipped to ensure a comfortable stay and sleep, as well as those that offer multiple types of bedrooms with different grades and prices depending on factors such as size, even within the same facility (for example, some capsule hotels are ranked as first class and business class, analogous to airplane classes)³. Some capsule hotels have tables inside the capsule other than beds, manga like those found in Internet cafés, and all-you-can-eat meals for a set period. Some facilities also have both capsules and regular private rooms. In addition to double-tiered capsules, there is a growing trend of single-tiered capsule hotels featuring higher ceilings, larger floor spaces, and in-capsule desks and chairs. Many high-end

capsule hotels charge the same price as cheaper business hotels. There are also capsule hotels exclusively for women. Some customers find these features appealing and choose these hotels over traditional ones.

Future prospects

From the guest's perspective, capsule hotels offer more private space for individual use than traditional hotels or guesthouses while ensuring affordability. They also provide opportunities to exchange travel information with other users in a shared space, potentially enriching the travel experience at a lower cost. From the manager's perspective, capsule hotels maximize the use of available land, allowing more guests to be accommodated with the same amount of land, and they can reduce construction and maintenance costs. With the influx of foreign tourists and an increasing number of Japanese travelers, this could be one way to alleviate the slight shortage of accommodation. However, this method has certain disadvantages.

Capsule hotels offer limited private space, which may not be ideal for users concerned about privacy or being observed by others. Although the inside of the capsule may be considered a private space, it is not legally recognized as a guest room and cannot be locked,³⁾ leading to potential theft issues if secure storage is not used. Separating sleeping spaces for women and men into separate sections has made it easier for women to use them; however, people of the same sex continue to sleep in the same section³⁾. Thereby, although sexual assault between men and women can be deterred, same-sex crimes may prevail. Countermeasures included installing surveillance cameras in hallways and regularly patrolling employees. Furthermore, there is a risk of shoes and other outdoor footwear being stolen. Shoes must often be removed immediately before entering the capsule. There is not always a place for shoe users to take off inside the capsule, so users are forced to store them in a space inside the capsule or leave them outside.

Considering these characteristics, the era of choosing a capsule hotel simply because of its affordability has changed to an era of choosing them for its special facilities and unique experiences. As the demand for accommodation grows, more capsule hotels are likely to be built. However, only those that offer distinctive services may thrive if user numbers decline.

Manga cafés and Internet cafés are also used as simple lodging options, even though they are not accommodation facilities. The boundary with a capsule hotel is vague for users, and manga cafés and Internet cafés are sometimes divided into booths for long-term use or private spaces, where users can take a nap (there are no rules that require users to continue reading comics, and users will not be monitored). Because prices are often the same or cheaper, there is the possibility of future competition. Regarding sleeping locations, it is generally easier for capsule hotels to ensure a comfortable night's sleep with bed facilities and other amenities. Manga cafés and Internet cafés are superior in that users can read manga and use the PCs provided, perform work or other tasks without having to bring in any special tools, drink, and take a break. Manga and Internet cafés also have more detailed pricing structures and are more accommodating to short-term stays³⁾. Some capsule hotels rent PCs and have manga cafés and saunas; therefore, it is not possible to completely distinguish capsule hotels from others. Users must understand these features before selecting them.

CONCLUSION

As of July 2024, the weak yen in Japan has led to a rise in lodging costs, with demand exceeding available facilities. Capsule hotels, which were once priced similarly to business hotels, now offer a more cost-effective option compared to traditional hotels, which have become approximately twice as expensive. When traveling long distances for business, users must use accommodation facilities, and for convenience, users will inevitably use a hotel, even if it is expensive. Furthermore, if users want to visit tourist attractions, purchase local specialties, or eat local foods and famous dishes, they will want to save on lodging costs. There may be cases where people choose to cancel sightseeing trips because of the high cost of lodging. Capsule hotels may provide the opportunity to go on a trip without choosing to cancel it.

Capsule hotels may continue to become popular, at least as long as they are relatively inexpensive³⁾. Given the current situation in which there are many users, we can expect further development. This is because, in addition to people who like capsule hotels and stay there, there are also people who choose capsule hotels because they are cheap. However, if the number of users decreases, it is likely that unique services, and not just prices, will be valued. Because hotel prices are thought to fluctuate depending on the number of users, people may not opt for capsule hotels if the cost of staying in hotels and inns decreases. If this happens, many capsule hotels that exist today will have to compete for users, and may eventually be differentiated and selected.

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Table 1 Type of accommodation

Type of lodging	Hotel	Inn	Capsule hotel	Youth hostel	Guesthouse	Private lodging
Legal basis	Hotel Business Act					Private Lodging Business Act
Classification by law	Hotel business	Inn business	Simple lodging business			Private lodging business
Overview	Inns and hotels are lodging facilities that are fully equipped. Inns primarily refer to Japanese-style lodging facilities (as opposed to Western-style hotels). Inns typically provide one night's stay with two meals, dinner, and breakfast (hotels provide no meals or only breakfast). They are equipped with large public baths, karaoke lounges, and games corners, and users are permitted to walk around the building in yukata robes. Inns also offer distinctive services, with maids helping users with their futons and hostesses greeting users, which is different from hotels.		Compared to inns and hotels, it is characterized by its ease of use and affordability. Youth hostels are accommodations for young people, and have established networks all over the world. Self-service is the norm, and one must prepare their own meals and carry bedding (although they may be provided for an additional fee). Depending on the facility, there are shared rooms and private rooms, so you can choose according to your travel budget, number of people, and style. Guesthouses are accommodations that emphasize interaction with others. They have little privacy and people interact with others in shared spaces. One of its appeals is that you can easily mingle with others at the attached cafe and bar.			This is a system in which residences such as apartments, condominiums, and single-family houses owned by the general public are rented out as lodging facilities. Since these are residences, the number of days that they can be operated per year is limited to 180 days.
Differences from others	There is little shared space, and users have to use each room individually (unless the inn has additional recreational facilities).		Multiple groups or individuals use the facility jointly. The room has only the minimum facilities such as a bed.			One group (individuals to large groups) can exclusively use the facility.

Based on data from references 1), 5), 7).

Table 2 Facilities and services in the accommodation

Type of lodging	Hotel	Inn	Capsule hotel	Youth hostel	Guesthouse	Private lodging
Provision of sleeping facilities	Always prepared	Prepared by facility staff	Always prepared	Always prepared	Prepared by guest	Prepared by guest
Type of sleeping facilities	Bed or futon	Mainly futon	Bed (2-tiered)	Mainly 2-tier or 3-tiered bed	Mainly futon	Mainly futon
Air conditioning	+	+	+	±	±	±
Personal outlets	+	+	+	±	±	+
Locked valuables safe	±	±	+	-	-	-
TV	+	±	+	shared	shared	shared
Desk	+	+	±	shared	shared	shared
Shower/bath	+	± (Sometimes shared)	shared	shared	shared	shared
Toilet/sink	+	+	shared	shared	shared	shared
Refrigerator	±	±	-	shared	shared	shared
Separate room	+	+	±*1 (Lock not possible)	-	-	-
Breakfast	±	+	±	±	±	-
Dinner	-	+	-	±	±	-
Lounge space	-	± (For extra entertainment facilities)	+	+	+	-
Indoor wear provided	+	± (Mainly yukata)	+	-	-	-
Amenities	+	+	+	±	±	-
Lodging fee	High	High	Low	Low	Low	Low

The contents shown in this table are the characteristics of accommodation facilities that were confirmed or believed to be by the author.

It mainly indicates items that users can have exclusive use during their stay.

Items marked "shared" are available in the accommodation facility but cannot be used exclusively by individual users.



Amenities refer to toothbrushes, towels, etc.

Soap, shampoo, etc., may be provided in the bathroom, on the sink, or may be available at the front desk, but this distinction cannot be made depending on the type of accommodation.

+ indicates facilities available in the majority of facilities, ± indicates facilities available in some facilities, and - indicates facilities not available in most facilities.

*1: Capsules are separated by walls or roller curtains.

Based on data from References 1), 3), 5), and 7).

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