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Manager for The Ritz-Carlton and Marriott values ‘service from the heart’

Carlos Tarrero leads luxury hospitality with respect

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Leaders & Readers

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The Ritz-Carlton name is synonymous with exceptional service the world over. Since June, Carlos Tarrero has been at the helm of The Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo while concurrently overseeing Marriott International's luxury hotel portfolio in Japan as area general manager.

Growing up in Spain, Tarrero knew he didn't want a job where he spent all day staring at a computer. Since he had done well in his English studies, his parents suggested hospitality management. "Once I started studying and then completed an internship at a luxury hotel, I discovered a world of opportunities," he said.



As someone who doesn't necessarily want to be in the spotlight, Tarrero appreciates the fact that the guest is always the focus in the hospitality industry. His career has taken him around the globe, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, before arriving in Japan in 2019.

Key to understanding

Japan had been on Tarrero's radar well before he moved here. Having been impressed during a business trip to Japan in 2015, he was delighted when the opportunity arose to take up a posting in Osaka. He quickly realized that the service culture was unlike anything he had experienced before, and illustrates this with an anecdote about buying a car for his family.

After choosing a model, he asked his assistant to check if a discount might be available, as had been customary in his previous experience. The car sales representative was initially worried, thinking there had been some major problem, but was reassured to learn that nothing was wrong. "He then came back and said, 'My boss says that if you buy the car we will give you a keyring!'" Tarrero recalled.

He was underwhelmed at first, but accepted the keyring and put it down to cultural differences. A few months later, the car picked up a small scratch. Tarrero didn't see the need to make an insurance claim.

However, someone at the hotel informed the dealership, and soon a representative arrived with a replacement vehicle so the scratch could be repaired — all at no additional cost. "That was when I really started understanding Japan," he said. "When you

buy something or make a deal here, things work well. People are true to their word and uphold their side of the agreement."

The art of caring

Prior to assuming leadership of Marriott's luxury hotels in Japan in July last year, Tarrero was the general manager of The Ritz-Carlton, Kyoto for four years. He stayed on in Kyoto until the opportunity arose to serve in his newest role at The Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo this year.

At the time of this interview, Tarrero had only been in Tokyo for two weeks, having swapped the brand's tranquil riverside property in Kyoto for the 53rd floor of Midtown Tower in Roppongi. "I'm still like the intern," he said with a smile.

He notes that The Ritz-Carlton's brand values are well suited to Japan, aligning naturally with the country's own tradition of top-class hospitality. While acknowledging that the meaning of "luxury" differs from person to person, he believes the common denominator is the desire to feel genuinely cared for, right down to the smallest gestures, which he calls "service from the heart."

He also extends this concept to taking ownership of the service one is providing — another core value in Japanese customer service, reflecting the pride that comes from excelling at one's role, whether as a chef, concierge, housekeeper or valet.

For Tarrero, respect is a key theme in his approach to hospitality and leadership, including the recognition of responsibility to the local community and culture. "It's interesting because, while it varies per market, we tend to have a larger footprint in the domes-



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tic market than the competition," he noted, adding that a luxury hotel is not only a destination for international travelers, but also a place used and valued by local people for dining, events and family celebrations.

Raising expectations

With the prevalence of social media and review platforms, guests have become far more vocal about their experiences in recent years. "It's not only about things such as 'the room was dirty' or 'the curtain is broken.' It's more about, 'I didn't feel welcome. I didn't

feel looked after.' So people are expressing their feelings much more," Tarrero said candidly.

He sees this growing openness as a positive thing. More feedback makes it easier to understand what guests are really thinking and identify where improvements can be made — provided a hotel is willing to listen and act on what it hears.

Guests are also becoming increasingly sophisticated and discerning in their expectations. Reflecting this shift, Marriott International offers the Good Travel with Marriott

Global hotelier, veteran traveler

After graduating with a degree in tourism and business management from the University of Deusto in Bilbao in 1998, Carlos Tarrero embarked on an international career in luxury hotel management. He began at Le Meridien Victoria & Albert in Manchester, England, before taking on roles in such diverse locations as New York, London and Bali. He joined Marriott International in 2012 at Phulay Bay, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve resort in Thailand.

Tarrero's initial posting to Japan was in 2019 with The St. Regis Osaka, and he remained in the Kansai region until assuming leadership of The Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo in June 2026. Outside work, he enjoys traveling with his wife and two sons, exploring Japan and skiing in Hokkaido together. He also has a keen interest in wine.

Bonvoy program, a collection of curated experiences to help travelers connect more deeply with local communities and environments, including selected properties in Japan.

The Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo is part of Marriott's Serve 360 sustainability program, which includes initiatives to improve energy efficiency, reduce water consumption and waste, and strengthen responsible sourcing in partnership with suppliers.

As a hotelier, Tarrero admits it can sometimes be hard to disconnect from work when he travels privately with his family, and that certain issues may trigger his professional instincts. "I'm picky about things that are easy to address, such as being kind to staff. It doesn't cost anything to be polite and respectful to others."

In closing, Tarrero expressed the wish for his team to genuinely enjoy what they do, not matter how hectic the job may be. "We have difficult days like everyone, but we do have a blast while working," he said. "I think we put in enough hours on the job that we should have fun!"

Preparing for entrance exams? Reading news is a good strategy

Education

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In Japan's 2026 university entrance examinations, Japan Times articles were used in 180 questions across schools nationwide. This highlights a shift in English education: testing not only students' command of the English language, but also their ability to understand the world through it.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of high school students compete for places at their chosen universities, often spending months or years preparing. They study in coffee shops, libraries and on crowded trains, working through *akahon* — the iconic red books containing previous years' entrance exams — alongside grammar exercises, vocabulary and reading passages.

Although there are several routes into higher education, most applicants take exams that include a substantial English component, including the nationwide Common Test for University Admissions. Traditionally, preparation has focused heavily on grammar, vocabulary and translation. However, recent exam trends suggest that this approach alone may no longer be enough.

2026 exam trends

The 2026 English entrance exams featured reading passages on subjects such as artificial intelligence, environmental sustainability, food loss, social media, immigration and disinformation. These are all complex issues that require readers to understand context, recognize different viewpoints and interpret arguments. Examinees encountering these topics for the first time during a test may struggle not because of the English itself, but because they lack necessary background knowledge about the topic.

The growing use of newspaper articles for exams is an ongoing trend. Rather than relying exclusively on passages written specifically for language learners, universities are increasingly drawing on authentic English articles that discuss contemporary issues. While the goal of English exams is primarily to check language proficiency, the choice of topics suggests that universities are also interested in whether students

can read critically, identify key ideas and engage with the kinds of content they will encounter both in their programs and beyond.

How to study for today's exams

According to entrance exam specialist Kenta Tokita, an English instructor at the prep-school chains Toshin High School, Toshin Satellite Preparatory School and Kawai Juku, students today need more than language proficiency alone. English should not be viewed merely as a puzzle to solve, but as a means of understanding different cultures, following global events and communicating ideas. As universities increasingly incorporate real-world issues into entrance exams, developing an awareness of those issues has become an important part of exam preparation itself.

This is one reason why regularly reading English-language news has become such an effective learning habit. Reading a news article requires far more than recognizing vocabulary. Readers must identify the author's argument, distinguish fact from opinion, recognize bias, evaluate evidence and consider multiple perspectives. These are precisely the analytical skills that universities increasingly expect from successful applicants.

Regular exposure to authentic news also makes unfamiliar topics feel less intimidating. When students encounter a reading passage about AI, climate change or immigration in an entrance exam, they are less likely to be distracted by the subject matter itself. Instead of spending valuable time trying to understand an unfamiliar issue, they can focus on reading the passage carefully and answering the questions. As Tokita notes, familiarity with contemporary issues gives students a practical advantage because they already possess the background knowledge needed to engage with the text.

Tokita also emphasizes that vocabulary study should move beyond simply memorizing out-of-context word definitions. Modern exams increasingly reward students who understand how words are used within real texts. Terms such as "paradox," "zero-sum game," "bias" and "generative AI" have become part of contemporary public discourse and frequently appear in academic writing and

entrance exams alike.

For the same reason, Tokita encourages students not to rely exclusively on previous years' exams. These remain invaluable for understanding question formats and time management, but the issues shaping society continue to evolve, and so too will the topics that appear on the exams. Reading English-language newspapers and other reliable sources helps students stay connected to those developments while simultaneously improving language proficiency.

Those already in university benefit too: Issues featured in the news are often the very ones explored in university classrooms. Regularly reading the news equips students to more confidently participate in university life.

Going beyond tests

This all extends beyond students preparing for exams. Parents, educators and anyone supporting young learners can encourage meaningful English learning simply by making current events part of everyday conversation. Reading a news article together and asking questions such as, "Why do you think this happened?" or "Do you agree with the author?" transforms English from a subject to be memorized into a language used to explore ideas. There may not always be a single correct answer, but the discussion itself develops curiosity, communication skills and confidence — traits that remain valuable assets throughout life.

Ultimately, the growing presence of English-language news in Japan's university entrance exams reflects a broader change in what English education is trying to achieve. Success today depends not only on mastering vocabulary and grammar, but also on understanding contemporary issues, evaluating information critically and engaging thoughtfully with different perspectives. Reading news in English therefore offers more than effective exam preparation; it helps develop the habits needed to participate confidently in an increasingly interconnected world.

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From Japan's mountains to world's top universities

Harrow International School Appi Japan, a British boarding school in Appi Kogen, Iwate Prefecture, was founded in 2022 and celebrated its first graduating class on June 19.

The 34 graduates received approximately 150 offers from 81 universities in nine countries. These include the University College London, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Toronto, Keio University, Hong Kong University and Tsinghua University.

At its core, Harrow Appi Japan is a full boarding school built on Harrow's globally reputed education. The school channels that holistic education into three pillars it says are central to its philosophy: academic excellence, high-quality pastoral care and outstanding extracurricular opportunities. Because students live on campus full time, they receive round-the-clock academic and pastoral support in a distraction-free learning environment among the mountains of northern Japan. The students have evenings and weekends free for activities such as sports, music, drama and art.

That combination is designed to foster holistic development beyond university offers alone, building character and shaping the self-discipline, resilience, independence and leadership skills that will serve graduates well beyond their exam results.

That spirit was on display at the ceremony itself, held outdoors in the school's courtyard and framed by the forested peaks of Appi Kogen — a backdrop that has come to embody the Harrow Appi experience: a clean, safe home away from home, where the sky is the limit, students can reach beyond what they once imagined and grow into healthy young adults. Graduates in caps and gowns passed beneath the open sky, ready for whatever adventure came next.

The head boy, a student from Malaysia and one of the four who delivered speeches to the graduates, said, "Stop waiting for the perfect plan to unfold," and encouraged himself and his friends to take risks because "that is the only way to find out how far one can go." He continued, "Let us be the ones who dare to cross the line and discover what we are capable of achieving." He received offers



The head boy delivers a speech to the graduating class.



Students toss their caps in the air at Harrow International School Appi Japan's first graduation ceremony on June 19.

from top-level universities including the University of Edinburgh and Carnegie Mellon University.

As each graduate was called by name and stepped onto the stage to receive their diploma from headmaster Stephen Tong, they were greeted with warm applause and cheers. In his speech, Tong called the graduates, "real pioneers prepared to do something different and do it well" and "the players in chapter one" of the school's history, who helped shape its culture.

"Make the world your own, good young people, by what you choose to do with your life, and more importantly, by how you go about it. Time to fly," he said.

Of the offers received so far, 64 are among the top 100 in the QS World University Rankings. Many graduates had just finished their A-level math exams the day before the ceremony and will decide which universities to enroll in once they receive their results in August.

During a press conference after the ceremony, Tong noted that the school had become more internationally diverse than he had imagined, with graduates hailing from 12 different countries, including Japan, Belize, Canada, France and Singapore.



Tong poses with new graduates.



Headmaster Stephen Tong (right) congratulates a graduating student.

He said, "The interesting thing is that their chosen destinations are also international." He explained that many students applied to universities outside of Japan and their home countries, and added, "It's almost as if they are now prepared to adopt a permanent adventuring spirit."

A Japanese student, who served as the head girl for the class of 2026, received offers from seven universities, including the University College London and Waseda University. "During my four years here, I learned how to manage my time, especially how to make time for myself," she said. She also feels that she gained confidence by constantly trying new things with her peers, both academically and in sports and the arts.

A student from Thailand received offers from six universities from three countries including the University of Toronto and Northeastern University. Speaking to future Harrow Appi Japan students, she said: "Do things outside your comfort zone. I think this is the perfect place for it. Don't be embarrassed. I had so many embarrassing moments, but you'll forget about them eventually. In the future, you'll reminisce and laugh about them."

For more information, please visit: <https://www.harrowappijp/> or contact: admissions@harrowappijp

