

Global Adviser

■ CITY GUIDE: KYOTO



Past Perfect. Be transported by Kyoto's imperial history, timelessness and grace

JAPAN'S CAPITAL FOR OVER 1,000 YEARS, UNTIL THE MEIJI Restoration in 1868, Kyoto remains awash with remnants of its past glory. The city's stunning collection of UNESCO World Heritage sites alone would be enough to set it apart, but Kyoto also boasts a still working geisha district, some of the country's most exquisite cuisine and a whole lot of Zen. Not that it's all temples and tradition—the city also has its share of hip cafés and modern art. Think of it as the cultural yin to Tokyo's contemporary yang, but with a sprinkling of modernity. Here's how to get a taste of it all. —BY ROB GOSS

10 Things to Do

1 Kinkaku-Ji (Golden Pavilion)

Be it capped by snow in winter or set against a lush green background in summer, nothing is as symbolic of Kyoto as Kinkaku-ji's golden reflection shimmering across the rippled surface of the pond before it. Not even the tourists—and they come in the thousands—can detract from its splendor. The gilded, three-story building received UNESCO World Heritage status in 1994, but you might be surprised to learn that while it looks venerable, in fact it is a 1955 reconstruction. The 14th century original was torched by one of the temple's monks in 1950. See www.shokoku-ji.or.jp.

2 Ginkaku-Ji (Silver Pavilion)

Here's an oddity: the Silver Pavilion, www.shokoku-ji.or.jp, doesn't have a trace of silver on it, a 15th century plan to coat it in silver leaf having never materialized. Not that visitors seem bothered. Ginkaku-ji itself is a small and unassuming structure, like a spartan version of its illustrious golden cousin. But it's the big picture that matters: the reflective pond and manicured trees in front of it, the raked sand garden to one side and the wooded hillside just to the east all combine to make a meditative whole.

3 Ryoan-Ji

The rock garden at this temple, www.ryoanji.jp, is a puzzle. Nobody knows who designed it, nor the meaning of the 15 rocks scattered across its raked white gravel. Some academics say they represent a tiger carrying a cub across

a stream, others believe they depict an ocean dotted with small islands. There's even a theory that the rocks form a map of Chinese Zen monasteries. The only thing scholars agree on is that Ryoan-ji is one of the finest examples of Zen landscaping anywhere. Like them, you could stay for years contemplating its riddles and get no nearer to an answer. But maybe that's the point.

4 Toei Kyoto Studio Park

Yes, it's touristy and tacky, but dressing up as a samurai and watching actors hamming it up is also fun. Toei Kyoto Studio Park, or Eigamura, www.toei-eigamura.com, is a working TV and film studio cum theme park, where besides donning period costume you can wander around a mock-up Edo town and take in live performances, with extravagant sword fights and pantomime dialogue constituting Japanese kitsch at its finest.

5 Gion

It's not the only geisha district left in Japan, but the old wooden buildings, teahouses and exclusive restaurants

of Gion make it by far the most famous. Spend an hour wandering these narrow streets and chances are you'll glimpse a geisha or two shuffling between teahouses in cumbersome zori sandals and exquisite kimonos (and being annoyed by the amateur photographers that invariably stalk them). Visit in July, and you may catch the spectacular Gion Matsuri, a festival that attracts in excess of 1 million visitors with its procession and musical performances.

6 Kyo-Ryori

A waitress in a kimono kneels on a tatami-mat floor and places small, exquisitely presented dishes on the low dining table. Clear soup garnished with a sprig of *sanshou*, slices of raw

sea bream specked with tiny flowers, and a simmering silver pot of tofu. Japanese cuisine doesn't get more refined than *Kyo-ryori* (Kyoto cuisine). One of the best places to experience it is the 100-year-old Minokou restaurant in Gion, tel: (81-75) 561 0328, where an 11-course dinner costs about \$185. Too steep? The lunch-time *bento* is also superb and is less than \$50.

7 Tea Ceremony

The cleansing of the tea utensils, the bow as you receive your cup, the three clockwise turns before you take a sip: it's not difficult to see the connection between the tea ceremony and Zen Buddhism. The ceremony is by no means limited to Kyoto, but with the city's rich Zen heritage it is the perfect place to experience it. Try En, a small teahouse in Gion with tatami tea-rooms and English-speaking, kimono-clad servers. See www.teaceremonyen.com.

8 Kyoto International Manga Museum

Few museums are as hands-on as this old elementary school



Getting Around. Here's what you need to know

ARRIVING

Buses run from Kansai International Airport to Kyoto's central train station at least hourly, taking 90 minutes, and cost about \$30. A

slightly quicker option (75 minutes) is to take the JR Haruka Express train, which goes direct between the airport and Kyoto Station every 30 minutes for around \$44.

GETTING AROUND

Buy a \$6 one-day bus pass and grab an English-language copy of the city's bus map, which has color-coded routes spanning the main attractions. If

you want to avoid crowded rides, however, try cycling. J-Cycle, www.j-cycle.com, lies a few blocks south of Shijo Station and rents out bikes from about \$10 a day.

TIPPING

In one word: don't. It isn't the custom and you risk embarrassing or even offending the intended recipient if you try. The one possible exception is at a

turned shrine to *manga* (comic books). Its collection of some 300,000 comics is housed on dark wooden bookcases that line every wall, and visitors can read any item they fancy, anywhere. Some read propped up against the walls or cross-legged on the floor, others on the stools dotted about the place or with a coffee at the museum's outdoor café. You don't need to read Japanese to join them: there are works in English, French, Italian, Vietnamese and other languages. Visit www.kyotomm.jp for details.

9 Shopping on Shijo-Dori

Kyoto isn't just about the past, and its brand-name-adorned central shopping precinct is proof of that. The huge Daimaru and Takashimaya department stores anchor each end. In between, you'll find designer boutiques like Louis Vuitton and Armani, plus an array of craft and high-end-souvenir shops. If it weren't for the wooded hills in the distance, you'd think you were in Tokyo.

10 The Arty East End

Head east of the Kamo River, toward Ginkaku-ji and Kyoto University, and the city begins to reveal its artistic side. There's the extremely worthwhile National Museum of Modern Art, www.momak.go.jp, and the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, www.city.kyoto.jp/bunshi/kmma. But the area is also home to alternative venues like the Tranq Room, tel: (81-75) 762 4888—a small contemporary-art gallery and café-bar that sometimes offers live music—and the laid-back A Womb, tel: (81-75) 721 1357, an even more fashionably understated place for a drink.

Side Trip Osaka

For a modern antidote to Kyoto's 2,000 temples and shrines, make the 30-minute train journey to Osaka, the country's second city, and a place known for its sociable locals and lively nightlife. Start with its most famous attraction, the 16th century Osaka Castle, tel: (81-6) 6941 3044, which showcases numerous feudal artifacts in its refurbished interior. Then head to the city's outskirts for something a little more lively: Universal Studios Japan, tel: (81-6) 6465 3000, an almost carbon copy of Universal's main Orlando resort. Finish the day off with dinner and a few drinks in the neon-drenched Dotonbori entertainment district, where you can try a couple of local favorites in often raucous company: *okonomiyaki*, a savory pancake, and battered chunks of octopus, or *takoyaki*.



Finding the Perfect Souvenir Yatsushashi

The Japanese love returning from a trip with tasty treats for colleagues and loved ones—so do as they do and pick up a few boxes of yatsushashi. Nothing screams “I’ve been to Kyoto” quite like these cinnamon-flavored cookies made from glutinous rice flour. If you want to be kinder to your teeth (yatsushashi are rock hard), try nama yatsushashi—a floppy version, typically flavored with cinnamon, green tea or sesame (and often wrapped around red-bean paste). Both are perfect matches for a cup of green tea. They can be picked up at souvenir shops in Kyoto Station and at major tourist attractions, but

if you're in Gion, go to the source and visit the Izutsu Yatsushashi store, www.yatsushashi.co.jp, which has been in business since 1805.



Where to Stay Hyatt Regency and Hotel Mume

The Hyatt Regency Kyoto (pictured) is the modern face of Kyoto's hotel scene. The 189 rooms, created by Japanese design house Super Potato, combine sleek, understated contemporary interiors with traditional Japanese design elements (think *washi*-paper fittings and kimono-fabric headboards) and all the usual amenities one would expect to find in a luxury hotel. With highly rated Japanese, French and Italian restaurants, it doesn't do too badly on the dining front either. Likewise for the location. It's in a quiet part of east Kyoto but within easy striking distance of Kyoto Station, Gion, Shijo-dori and other attractions. Visit kyoto.regency.hyatt.com for details.

Kyoto's other designer beds are to be found at the Hotel Mume. Hidden in a slim, four-story building that at first glance looks more like a modern apartment block than a hotel, the handful of rooms at the intimate Hotel Mume near Gion have all been designed around the traditional nature-inspired concept of *ka-cho-fu-getsu* (bird, butterfly, wind, moon). The Wind rooms are bright, spacious and accented with Asian motifs; Butterfly rooms are defined by black walls and rich red Chinese furnishings; Moon rooms are based around golden tones and dark woods. The one constant is the blending of antiques and modern design sensibilities to create an atmosphere that is very much boutique chic. See www.hotelmume.com.

high-end *ryokan* (traditional inn) where some guests give a small gratuity to the staff or to the manager. But if you don't leave one, there's absolutely no need to feel guilty.

INTERNET ACCESS

For all Japan's technological advancements, there is still a relative lack of public places to get connected. You can, however, get free wi-fi access at some

cafés around town, including the branch of Seattle's Best Coffee, tel: (81-75) 342 3654, at the Apa Villa Hotel building, a couple of blocks northeast of Kyoto

Station. The smart tourist-information office in the station, tel: (81-75) 343 0548, has several Internet-connected PCs available at \$1 per 10 minutes.

SHOES AND SLIPPERS

Always remove your shoes and change into slippers (they will be provided for you) whenever you enter a *ryokan*, someone's house, certain

temples, restaurants and even some offices. If you're going to be setting foot on tatami flooring, though, take off your slippers and enter only in bare feet or socks.