

Destination:

# KYOTO

Words by Fiona Harper

IMBUED WITH A SENSORY CULTURE THAT HAS TENDRILS REACHING FAR INTO JAPAN'S HEIAN

Adashino Nenbutsu-ji Temple

→ Japanese cherry blossoms and leaves are edible and are used in traditional confectionery called *Wagashi*.

© Holger Mette/istockphoto



PERIOD MORE THAN 800 YEARS AGO, KYOTO OFFERS AN ENTICING ENGAGEMENT OF ALL THE SENSES.



Nishiki Market

→ When walking on *tatami*, it is considered respectful to step across the edging tape around each mat.



#### GOZAN FIRE FESTIVAL

Starting from 8pm on August 16, halfway up the surrounding mountains of Kyoto, beds of fire are prepared and lit for the most magnificent of Kyoto's **August Obon** festivities. It is said that the tradition originated when the monk **Kobo-Daishi**, praying for an end to plague, lit up the character **dai**, meaning 'large' in flame.



The three strokes of the **dai** character, can be seen from every part of the city. The five fires on Gozan – **Daimonji, Myoho, Funagata, Hidari-daimonji** and **Torii-gata** are lit simultaneously, painting the night sky a bright red, creating one of Kyoto's most breathtaking summer scenes.

### JAPAN'S FIRST CAPITAL CITY, KYOTO, IS WELL KNOWN AS A CUSTODIAN OF CULTURE IN A COUNTRY THAT HONOURS THE PAST

like a well-worn cloak draped across proud, resilient shoulders. A paradox of modernity, much of her charisma is concealed discreetly behind inconspicuous doorways, walls and façades.

Home to the Japanese imperial family for a thousand-odd years until the Meiji Restoration instigated moving power to the new capital of Tokyo in 1868, Kyoto is the quintessential Japan of your imagination. Left behind in the wake of this royal relocation were an abundance of traditional arts and crafts that flourished servicing the cultural desires of the Imperial court. Thanks to this former status as an imperial powerhouse, almost everything we associate with classic Japan – *kimono*, Zen temples, tea ceremonies, cherry blossoms, and *geisha* can still be found in Kyoto in alluring abundance.

Dubbed 'the City of Peace and

Tranquillity', today's Kyoto is a melting pot of cultural jewels. Like any self-respecting treasure, many of the city's delights are concealed behind social codes and nuances, discovered behind invisible wrappings and translucent screens. Lofty, robust timber doors adorned with decorative hinges reveal pebbled garden paths snaking beneath orderly trees. Fluttering monogrammed curtains that hang to hip height offer a tantalising glimpse of slippered feet brushing across a *tatami*. Opaque *shoji* screens emit a soft glow from within, casting dappled shadows onto cobbled streets come evening. Like a subtle aroma wafting across the air at dusk, Kyoto's charms are

subtle, yet powerful, leaving you certain that you are in the heart of Japan's culture capital.

Fusing ancient and modern, centuries-old Kyoto is a beguiling paradox. Jeans-clad men eating *sashimi*. *Kimono*-clad women sipping Coca-Cola. Office workers catching the train home, rolling out their *futon* on the *tatami* mat each evening. Home to hi-tech household names such as Kyocera and Nintendo, inventor of the ubiquitous Wii, it's no industrial slouch either. Indeed, Kyoto was the site for Japan's first film projection, first streetcars and its first hydropower station. Being a university city, it also has a youthful funky side that shrugs off tradition in favour of trendsetting. It's no surprise that one of the world's largest collections of *manga* (Japanese style of animation) items finds a well-respected home in Kyoto.

The charismatic district of **Arashiyama** at the base of the western mountains that skirt the city is designated (rather sombrely) a Historic Site and Place of Scenic Beauty by the Agency for Cultural Affairs. This is rather stating the obvious, given the abundance of assets Arashiyama has to work with. It's been a traditional vacation area since the Heian era (794–1185) so its narrow, twisting cobbled streets have good credentials when it comes to entertaining visitors. A lush swaying bamboo forest pokes above the shingled roofs of noodle houses that line slender lanes buzzing with rickshaws dashing hither and thither. Spring water is piped into an alfresco

→ Kimonos are always wrapped with the left side over the right, except when dressing the dead for burial when the

*onsen*-like foot bath on the platform at Arashiyama Station, the perfect antidote to weary feet while waiting for the electric rail service nicknamed the 'Randen streetcar'. Insignificant doorways conceal teeny restaurants serving exquisite dishes inspired by whatever takes the chef's fancy that day. Within the combined Arashiyama and **Saga** districts there are 21 Buddhist temples and Shintu shrines, including the famous three-storey gold-leaf coated **Kinkaku Ji** Temple. **Kitano Tenmangu Shrine** has extensive gardens containing more than 1,500 plum trees that burst into delicate blossoms each spring, scenting the air with heady sweet aromas that mingle enticingly with smoking incense.

Upstream from **Togetsu-kyo** (Moon Bridge), mostly concealed beneath Japanese cherry trees, a cluster of dwellings that were once the private residence of shipping merchant Ryoji Suminokura, who passed away in 1614, grace the banks of the **Oigawa River**. Breathing inspired elegance into traditional architecture which complements the grandeur of its Arashiyama gorge setting, Hoshinoya Kyoto resort was restored and enhanced three years ago. A traditional *ryokan* steeped in cultural traditions while indulging in 21<sup>st</sup> century opulence, one room (known as *Kosken*) has been given over to the traditional incense ceremony. Wonderfully delicate aromas of agarwood, sandalwood, frankincense and myrrh seep into the pores of this room, which is used to educate guests on the subtle nuances of incense and fragrance.

BY THE  
NUMBERS

17

One castle, three Shinto shrines and 13 Buddhist temples make up the 17 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Kyoto, each distinct for their gardens, architecture, or historical value.

1705

Incense master **Rokubei Moritsune Hata** started blending fragrances while engaged at the Imperial Palace. Twelve generations later, the Hata family continues to create fragrant incense worthy of royalty from their Shoyeido incense house in Kyoto.



300,000

The **Kyoto International Manga Museum** is

Japan's first comprehensive centre showcasing *manga* culture. Approximately 300,000 *manga* items, including comics from around the world, magazines, and animation-related materials, form part of the collection.



Golden Pavilion Temple



reverse is applied. An embroidered kimono can take up to three years to complete.



Incense has long been associated with Buddhism as it's utilised to purify the air, creating a sacred space for conducting religious rites and ceremonies. However, during the Muromachi Period (1336–1573) incense appreciation was cultivated as an art form when it became customary to indulge all the senses in an appreciation called *Koh-do*, still practised today. Tasting and listening to the incense requires immense concentration to distinguish the subtle differences inherent in each type of wood. *Tani* aloeswood, whose fragrance emanates from resin being gently heated rather than burnt, is the most expensive fragrant wood, costing around US\$3 for a 3mm square. *Koh-do* practitioners utilise incense to elevate higher thoughts, focusing the practice of spiritual elevation through all five senses.

For serious practitioners, the practice of *Mon-koh*, which translates as 'listening to incense' can take 30 years to perfect – compare that with the 15 years or so it takes to perfect the tea ceremony's rituals and customs.

Past incense masters engaged by royalty would be tasked with infusing individual *kimonos* with particular aromatics as a sort of status symbol denoting rank and personality. Amongst aristocrats, fragrance was used to identify the wearer after dark. Guests at Hoshinoya Kyoto can immerse themselves in the practice of *Mon-koh* with private sessions in the Kosken room. If you can't join a class, many of Kyoto's stores stock fine incense to take home, with Shoyeido and Yamada-Matsu stores highly recommended as quality purveyors.

## GEISHA

*Geisha* are skilled artisans in formal music and dance, following a rigorous training schedule throughout their careers. Traditionally starting their training at a very young age as *maiko*, it's more usual for modern *maiko* to serve a 12-month apprenticeship in their late teens before making their debut as *geisha*. *Maiko* will wear five different hairstyles, each one depicting the different stages of her training. While *geisha* are rarely seen in public, they are revered and treated with the highest respect if they do happen to be spotted discreetly moving between engagements.



*Maiko* on the other hand are often seen in the **Gion** district of Kyoto. Flitting about the streets offering formal greetings amid a complex social network embedded in ancient customs, it's an important part of their training. Numbers are rather vague, but it's said there are less than 2,000 practice *geisha* in Japan today.

Oozing 'Japaneseness' despite, or perhaps because of, being cast imperially aside a thousand odd years ago in favour of Tokyo, Kyoto offers a tantalising prospect that engages all the senses. Visually stunning, take your time to smell the blossoms in spring, feel the *tatami* beneath your feet, listen to the incense and allow your tastebuds to be tempted by green tea ice cream. You'll soon discover Kyoto's bewitching charm for yourself. ✨



Tools for creating personal incense

