

DISCOVER



modern, yet unashamedly traditional

The power centre of Japan for eleven centuries, Kyoto was also its conscience keeper where Japanese tradition developed and blossomed. A millennium of artistic refinement and religious devotion have left an indelible mark on the city's cultural fabric.

Text & photos: KEITH MUNDY





K

kyoto is the greatest repository of all things traditionally Japanese, a city of temples and gardens, geishas and monks. Most people know that image, but many

do not know that Kyoto is also a big modern city, Japan's sixth largest in fact.

If you know that, you expect to see ancient temples surrounded by office blocks and malls, the old dwarfed by the modern, and to have to cope with the jarring contrasts. Not much hope of serene experiences, you think. And you are wrong, wonderfully wrong, as was this writer.

Most of the finest temples are found in the hills that enfold the city, particularly those on the west and east sides. These wooded hills cloak the ancient temples and shrines in rich greenery. As you walk through their beautifully designed gardens, you have

no notion at all of being in a city of 1.5 million people, but feel transported into a dream world of calm and contemplation amid nature's bounty.

Only at a handful of sites do you feel caught up in a tourism maelstrom, walking the paths with thousands of other visitors. But since your fellow sightseers are 95 percent Japanese, which means polite and aware of where they are, you still feel comfortable among the crowds, and their enthusiasm rubs off on you.

POWER CENTRE

Kyoto was the official capital of Japan from 794 to 1868. Though political power was wielded by the warlords for much of that time, Kyoto remained the seat of the Imperial Court for those eleven centuries, and was the "Vatican" of Buddhism too. This is why so much Japanese tradition developed and blossomed there, and so much of it remains today, a millennium of artistic refinement and religious devotion leaving

its indelible mark.

The old Imperial Palace occupies a vast rectangle of land at the city's heart, most of its 91 hectares now a public park where people stroll, jog and pedal along the shaded paths. At the centre is the nine-hectare palace compound, which can be toured by the public. Destroyed by fire and rebuilt eight times in its history, the version currently standing was completed in 1855. Like most traditional Asian palaces, rather than consisting of one massive building, it is composed of several separate buildings serving distinct functions. A great cluster of large wooden structures with imposing gateways, they include the Hall for State Ceremonies, the Emperor's Habitual Residence, the Court Room and the Imperial Study or Library, plus a number of residences for the Empress, high-ranking nobles and top officials. On the east side are beautiful gardens set around carp-filled ponds, where the Emperor and his court would take their repose.

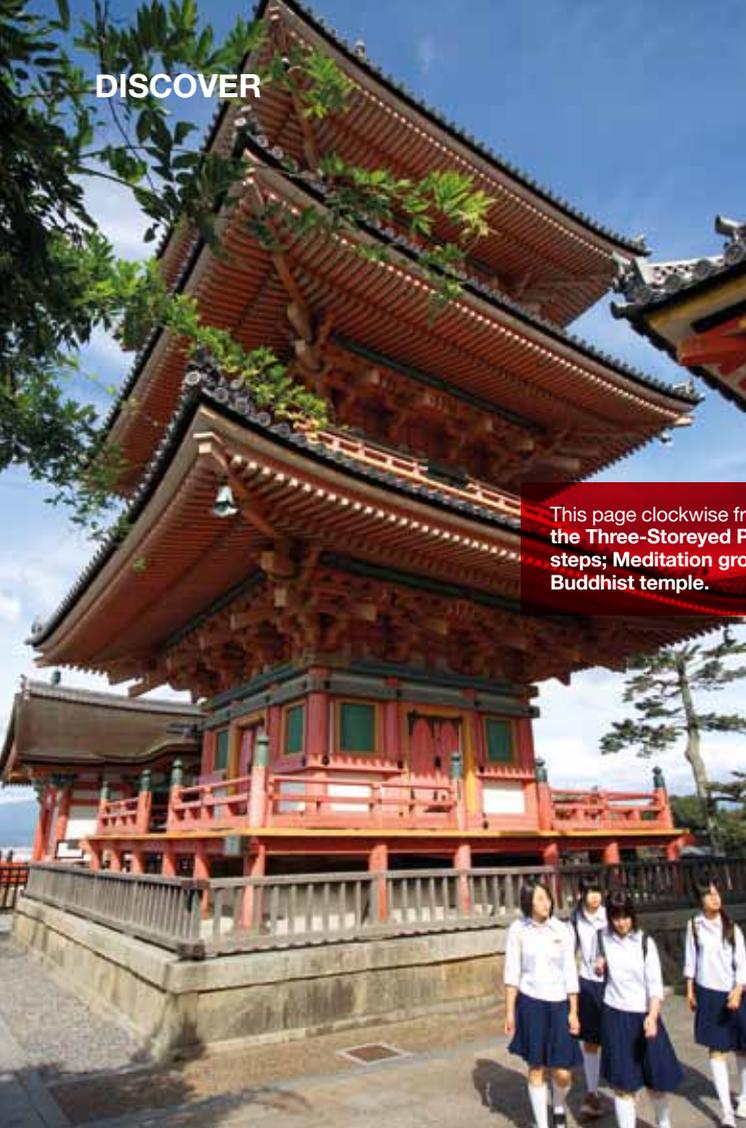


Opening page: Imperial Palace outer wall and main gate.

Facing page: Monks at Ninnaji Buddhist temple.

This page clockwise from top: The main hall of the Higashi-Honganji Buddhist temple perches on a steep hillside; Inside the main hall; Kinkakuji Buddhist temple: the Golden Pavilion set beside a lake; Buddhist pilgrims descending steps; Torii gate avenues are a major feature.





This page clockwise from left: Sanju-no-to, the Three-Storeyed Pagoda; The entrance steps; Meditation group at Kourin-in Zen Buddhist temple.



Meanwhile, a kilometre or so to the southwest, the real power resided at Nijo Castle during the Tokugawa Shogunate. Completed in 1626 as the Kyoto residence of the Shoguns (chief warlords), who used Edo (Tokyo) as their capital city, the castle now consists of two rings of fortifications, the Ninomaru Palace, the ruins of the Honmaru Palace, support buildings and several gardens. In 1867, here the Shogun returned authority to the Emperor, and in 1868 the Imperial Cabinet was installed, formally beginning the Meiji Restoration and the birth of modern Japan. Strolling around this complex after visiting the Imperial Palace prompts much thought about Japan's historical division of power, in which the Emperor was a remote and semi-divine figurehead, whilst the generalissimos actually ran the place.

WEST SIDE STORY

In the hills flanking Kyoto, many nobles of the imperial court built summer villas in the Heian period (794-1185 CE) and later. Followers of Buddhism, which had entered Japan around 550 CE and soon grown to be dominant, these nobles sometimes bequeathed their estates as Buddhist temples. Built in the western hills by a shogun, Kinkakuji, the Temple of the Golden Pavilion, is a glistening example, in which a gold-painted pavilion stands reflected in a lake and framed by verdant foliage which climbs the hillside beyond.

Kinkakuji is a visitor favourite, thronged with people, especially on sunny days when the pavilion's gold glows and casts a shimmering gilt image upon the water. In stark contrast to this glamour and spaciousness is the nearby

Daitokuji, a walled compound containing many small Zen temples which are islands of sobriety, their stone gardens of raked white gravel inviting silent contemplation. In a labyrinth of quietude, you pass from exquisite gem to exquisite gem.

Also in the western hills is the extensive Ryoanji temple, with a large lotus-covered lake and a highly prized Zen stone garden which is a magnet for school groups and their enthusiastic teachers, who cram onto the viewing platform running alongside the sea of white gravel with its three little islands formed by upstanding rocks. What does it mean? The teacher explains: this garden suggests the inner essence of nature and leads you to meditate on the meaning of life.

Another major temple on the west



This page clockwise from left: **Kimono-clad visitors before the entrance gate; The steps to Jishu-jinja, the Shinto match-making shrine.**



side is Ninnaji, where a soaring five-storeyed pagoda of dark brown wood and an orchard of dwarf cherry trees are remarkable sights in its huge, orderly grounds.

EAST SIDE STORY

All the way along the east side of the city run the steep Higashiyama hills, and into these have burrowed some of Kyoto's most impressive religious sites. At the northern end is Ginkakuji, the Temple of the Silver Pavilion, whose dense greenery climbs up a hillside above ponds and white gravel gardens, presided over by a simple two-storey house with a serene wooden exterior.

Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1435-90) commissioned it as a retirement villa for the pursuit of the good life, including moon-gazing and the tea ceremony.

Echoing his grandfather who built the Golden Pavilion, Yoshimasa intended to cover the house in silver and named it accordingly, but it never happened, and so a building meant to be showy became a fine example of Japanese restraint.

Yoshimasa counted many Zen monks among his teachers and friends and he designed his leafy estate with a Zen sensibility. He lived there from 1484 until his death in 1490, when his will turned the estate into a Zen Buddhist temple. Most of the features in the present complex date from the mid-17th century, but closely reflect the concept of the founder.

Further south in the eastern hills is a major sight, Kiyomizu-dera, the most visited of Kyoto's temples and a fixture in the minds of the Japanese people. Founded in 798, its impressive wooden

structures, some painted in vermilion, dating from 1633, the temple spreads over a forested hillside featuring many cherry trees giving soft pink springs and Japanese maples giving fiery red autumns.

Presiding over it all is the great main hall of plain wood with a platform, or veranda, that juts out over the hillside supported by a forest of tall wooden columns. From the veranda, there are fine views over the woods and the city of Kyoto. A common Japanese expression is "to jump off the platform at Kiyomizu", meaning "to take the plunge". There used to be a belief that if you did this and survived, you would have your wish granted. Many people did, and about 85 per cent survived, until the practice was banned.

Buildings deemed "national treasures" dot the grounds, as do wishing

modern, yet unashamedly traditional

เกียวโตเป็นศูนย์กลางวัฒนธรรมของญี่ปุ่น คือเมืองหลวงของญี่ปุ่นในช่วงปี 794-1868 แม้อำนาจทางการเมืองอยู่ในมือเหล่าผู้นำทหาร แต่ที่นี่ก็เป็นที่ตั้งของราชสำนักนานกว่าสิบเอ็ดศตวรรษ และเป็นเสมือนวัดถิ่นของพุทธศาสนา พื้นที่ส่วนใหญ่ของพระราชวังโบราณกลายเป็นสวนสาธารณะ พื้นที่ภายในราชฐานเปิดให้เข้าชมได้ ตัวพระราชวังเองถูกไฟไหม้และถูกบูรณะขึ้นมาใหม่กว่าแปดครั้ง โดยตัววังในปัจจุบันนี้เสร็จสมบูรณ์ในปี 1855 ที่นี้ประกอบไปด้วยอาคารหลายหลังแยกการใช้งานที่แตกต่างกัน

อำนาจที่แท้จริงนั้นอยู่ที่ปราสาทนijo ในยุคของโชกุนโทกุงะวะ สร้างเสร็จในปี 1626 เป็นที่พักของของโชกุนที่ใช้เอโดะ (โตเกียว) เป็นเมืองหลวงของพวกเขา ประกอบไปด้วยป้อมปราการที่เรียงตัวเป็นวงแหวนสองชั้น พระราชวังนี้โนะมะรุซึกะพระราชวังฮอนมะรุ และอาคารอื่นกับสวนอุทยานอีกหลายแห่ง ในปี 1867 โชกุนคืนอำนาจกลับสู่พระจักรพรรดิและในปี 1868 คณะรัฐมนตรีถูกแต่งตั้งอย่างเป็นทางการ เป็นการเริ่มต้นของญี่ปุ่นสมัยใหม่ ภูเขาที่ขนาบข้างเกียวโตทางด้านตะวันตกนั้นเป็นที่นิยมสร้างบ้านพักฤดูร้อนของเหล่าขุนนาง ซึ่งบางครั้งได้มอบที่ดินเพื่อสร้างวัด อย่างเช่นวัดคิงกะกุจิหรือวัดศาลาทองที่สาดแสงสีทองบนผืนทะเลสาบ ทางตะวันออกของเมืองคือเนินเขาซันฮิกายาม่า ที่ตั้งของวัดกินคะคุจิหรือวัดศาลาเงิน ซึ่งสร้างโดยโชกุนโยชิมาสะ เพื่อให้สะท้อนถึงวัดศาลาทองที่สร้างโดยปู่ของเขา อย่างไรก็ตามวัดนั้นกลับเรียบง่ายและไม่ได้ปิดด้วยเงินอย่างที่ตั้งใจไว้ เกียวโตยังเป็นศูนย์กลางของงานฝีมือซึ่งรวมถึงเครื่องปั้นดินเผา โคมไฟกระดาษ ภาพพิมพ์และชุดกิโมโน ถนนเก่าแก่ๆ ของย่านใจกลางเมืองใกล้แม่น้ำคาโม เป็นแหล่งรวมงานฝีมือชั้นดี ในเมืองที่มีวัดทางพุทธศาสนากว่า 1,600 แห่ง และศาลเจ้าชินโตอีกหลายร้อยแห่งนี้แน่นอนว่ามีอะไรให้ค้นหาอีกมากมาย



This page: A wedding couple posing before the karamon gate; Schoolgirls viewing the stone garden.
Facing page: Panoramic view of Kyoto. Busy shopping street leading down from Kiyomizu-dera temple.



places which have entered popular lore. Kiyomizu-dera is always teeming with visitors and has something of a festival atmosphere, with even the serious pilgrims dressed in white smiling and laughing, everybody falling under the spell of a great time-honoured temple in a spectacular setting.

DOWN SOUTH

In the southern suburbs, again climbing up a hillside, is a staggering phenomenon. Hundreds and hundreds of brilliant red torii gates, many only three metres tall, form tightly arched avenues through which you walk in dazzled amazement. This is the mesmerising highlight of Fushimi-Inari-Taisha Shinto

shrine, whose bright vermilion halls, gates and lantern-posts are already thrilling enough, not to mention the curious sitting fox figures, the messengers of Inari, the god of rice to whom the shrine is dedicated.

Closer to the city centre is the phenomenal 120-metre long hall of Sanjusangendo Buddhist temple, Japan's longest wooden structure. Its main deity is the Thousand-Armed Kannon, a national treasure, who – and this is an incredible sight – is accompanied by one thousand human-size statues of the Kannon standing in serried ranks to each side. These aged figures of Japanese cypress date from the 12th and 13th century and give the deepest feeling of



connection to the distant past that you can find in Kyoto.

DOWNTOWN TRADITIONS

Kyoto is a centre of traditional crafts which continue to be pursued here more than anywhere else in Japan. Amongst them are pottery, lacquerware, copperware, waxed-paper parasols, paper lanterns, woodblock prints and, of course, kimonos. The narrow old streets of the downtown area near the Kamo River are especially good hunting grounds for craft shops with workshops on the premises.

When the sun goes down, the lanterns light up in old Gion, across the river. Here in cobbled streets of old wooden houses are found dozens of restaurants,

bars and clubs that entice you to enter the antique world of “the water trade”, as Japan’s nightlife is traditionally called. Occasionally, geishas are seen clattering on their wooden sandals to a lucrative appointment in this shadowy district that has a special magic.

Only a weighty tome can begin to do justice to all the treasures that reside in Kyoto, said to include 1,600 Buddhist temples and hundreds of Shinto shrines, a galaxy of gorgeous gardens, as well as an immense and frequently intangible heritage of Japanese traditions. So this has been just a taste, a little sampler, of the delights to be found and relished in one of the world’s greatest cultural destinations. **B**

guide to kyoto



■ GETTING THERE



4 flights daily to Tokyo
Actual miles = 2,897 miles
Or double daily to Osaka
Actual miles = 2,593 miles

Haruka express trains run from Kansai airport direct to Kyoto throughout the day, departing at 30 minute intervals and taking just 75 minutes.

■ WHERE TO STAY

Kyoto Brighton Hotel, Shinmachi-Dori, Kamigyo-ku; +81 75 441 4411; www.kyotobrighton.com. A distinguished hotel located close to the Imperial Palace and its public park, fully renovated in 2010, offering highly attentive and efficient service. With spacious rooms ranging from 36 to 42 sq m surrounding a vast light-filled atrium, the Kyoto Brighton stands in a central yet quiet residential area, equidistant from most of the tourist sites. A calm and relaxing base for touring Kyoto, the Brighton offers promotional rates via its website.

Hyatt Regency Kyoto, 644-2 Sanjusangendo-mawari, Higashiyama-ku; +81 75 541 1234; <http://kyoto.regency.hyatt.com>. One of Kyoto’s top addresses, an elegant design hotel located in the traditional and historic area of Higashiyama Shichijo, close to the National Museum and Sanjusangendo Temple, plus the main station. Offering both business and leisure travellers the highest standards of service, the Hyatt Regency hosts French, Italian and Japanese restaurants, and Riraku Spa with treatments based on Eastern and Western techniques.

■ MAJOR SIGHTS

Imperial Palace (Kyoto Goshou), Kyoto-Gyoen, Kamigyo-ku; +81 75 211 1215. Tours run on weekdays only, except national holidays, at 10am and 2pm. You must apply at least 20 minutes in advance at the Imperial Household Agency Office outside the palace with your passport.

Kiyomizu-dera Temple, 1-294 Kiyomizu, Higashiyama-ku; +81 75 551 1234. Open daily 6am-6pm.
Adults 300 yen, children 200 yen.