

# 京都の文化

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS GEORGINA WILSON-POWELL

Kyoto has distilled Japan's past and managed to preserve a fascinating cultural identity, completely distinct from the rest of the world



**H**EAVILY WOODED MOUNTAINS surround the plain on which Kyoto sits on three sides. From the city's tallest hotel, above the modern train station, the city unfolds below like a map, it is rigorously grid-like and curiously lacking in tall buildings. The only tall structure for miles around, the Kyoto Tower, was apparently built in reaction to Tokyo hosting the Olympics in 1940 and is locally hated. As a city, Kyoto then, feels gloriously gentle and old-fashioned. Residents ride around on bikes, which are seemingly never locked but jauntily left on the pavement on their stands without fear of being stolen. Small dark-wooden houses line each and every street and alleyway. These two story affairs seem rustic and monotonous to begin with, but after a day or two, each takes on a charm of its own, lit by the ubiquitous paper lanterns that act as menus for the thousands of local restaurants offering soba, tofu and kaiseki – the traditional Kyoto way of serving food in small, carefully balanced portions and beautifully prepared. The city's impressive architectural history was preserved by an act of fate, it was replaced last minute by Nagasaki as a target when America used the atom bomb at end of World War II.

Kyoto is the historic and cultural heart of this distinctive country. Gaudy, glitzy Tokyo only became the Japanese capital in 1869. Kyoto actually means 'capital city' in Japanese and it is here then that the defining discoveries, events and cultural practices that make Japan's history so fascinating, took place.

It is also home to over 2,000 temples and shrines. Both Buddhism and Shintoism are followed in Japan, the latter is a combination of folklore, history and myth which ties the country's past to its peoples' daily lives through a series of rituals and beliefs. While most people have small shrines at home, public shrines are often highly decorated and feature a distinctive Japanese gate called a torii.

The most popular temple, the Kiyomizu-Dera complex sits at the top of a pedestrianised hill lined with souvenir and pottery shops. Every day the street is filled with large school groups and young women in traditional kimonos as well as tourists working their way slowly up to the West Gate entrance. This temple has commanded the landscape here for 1,200 years, although most of the structures that exist today were built in the 17th century. A sprawling estate of gates, inner sanctuaries, shrines and statues it is a stunning example of Kyoto's grandeur in times gone by and one of the most loved temples in Japan.

While you can't move in Kyoto for tripping over a temple or two, you'll never find one exactly the same. The Kodaiji temple is another fascinating example across on the western side of the city. It was built in the 17th century by the wife of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a warrior and politician, who had a huge impact on Japanese life. He solidified the class system, banned slavery and created a legacy of respect for the elegant tea ceremony that now sits at the heart of so many social and cultural occasions in Japan. So beloved was making time for tea, that Hideyoshi had a mobile tea ceremony room made, covered in gold leaf, and took it with him everywhere he went. This remarkable contraption can be seen at the temple along with other remnants from his time.

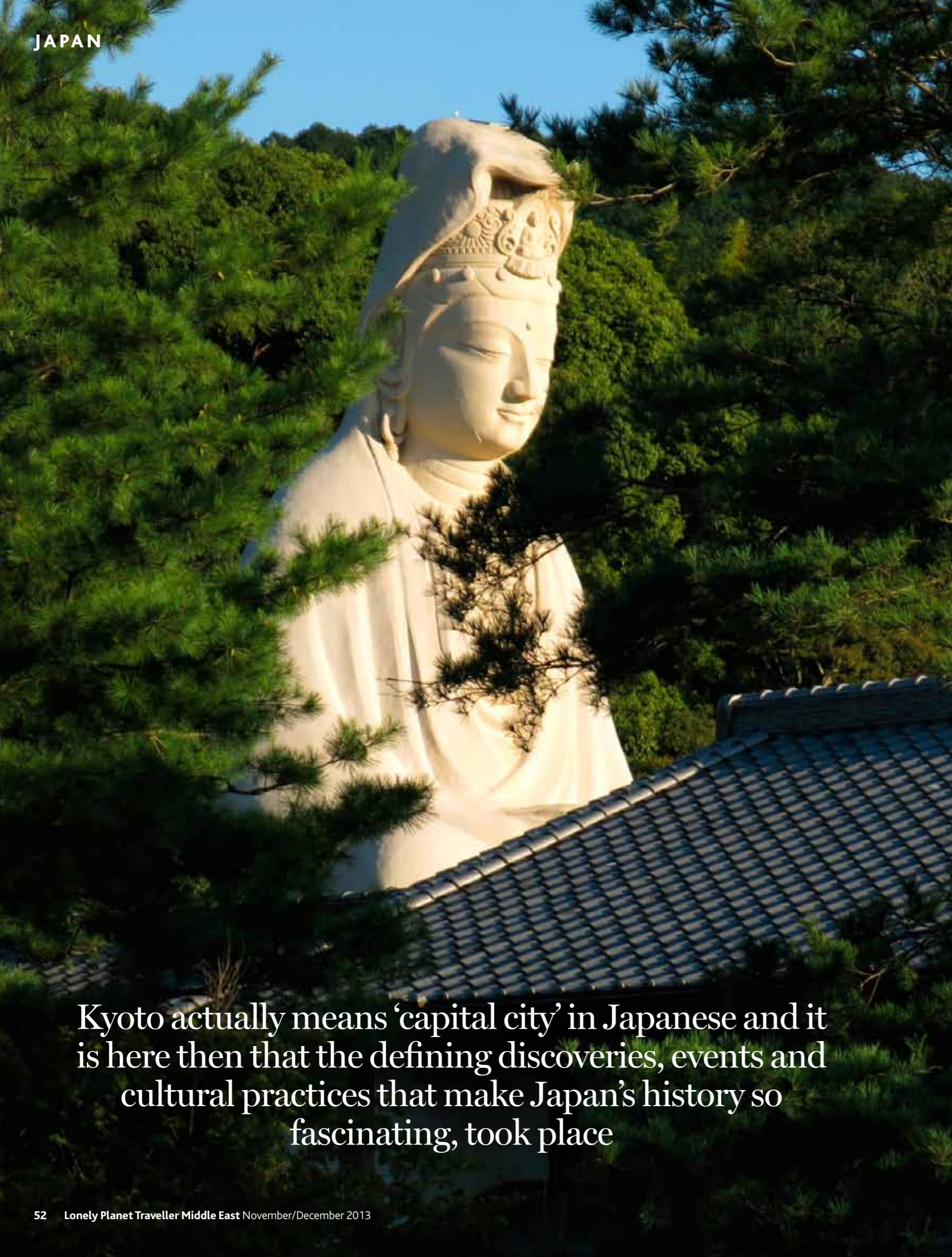
At the Tawaraya Yoshitomi sweet factory, the tea ceremony is still practiced reverently, overseen by a tea master, ten years in the making. Visitors can attend a ceremony and be enthralled by the gentle but complex ritual that goes into making a bowl of green tea. With rules covering the entire process from first gasp to last slurp, it's a fascinating insight into Japanese culture.

But it's not just tea ceremonies that still have a huge place in Kyoto. Many of the old Japanese traditions are still alive here, even though they seem to belong to a different age, such as geishas. There is no real Western equivalent to the career of a geisha. They are traditionally companions or hostesses who are trained in the arts, dancing and music and nowadays have become a rare species. Kyoto, the original home of the geisha, now has →

So beloved was making time for tea, that Hideyoshi had a mobile tea ceremony room made, covered in gold leaf, and took it with him everywhere he went



OPPOSITE PAGE FROM FAR LEFT The Kyoto Tower stands tall; the head monk at Kiyomizu-Dera temple; an actor hams up his samurai performance. THIS PAGE young girls in kimonos are a common sight in Kyoto



Kyoto actually means 'capital city' in Japanese and it is here then that the defining discoveries, events and cultural practices that make Japan's history so fascinating, took place



CLOCKWISE, FROM THIS IMAGE Maiko Tomi Tae; directions for a temple complex, a poster describes Toyotomi Hideyoshi; a pottery studio near Kiyomizu-Dera. OPPOSITE PAGE A statue of buddha at Kodaiji temple





FROM LEFT lantern menus at Toei Kyoto; schoolkids stop for snacks; a good luck totem

around only 180 geiko (fully trained geishas) and maiko (geishas in training). Visitors can arrange meetings with maikos to learn more about this tradition, such as Tomi Tae, a maiko who is being trained by the Tomikiku tea house. She will study for five years, earning her way with evening performances all over Japan before being able to make money independently once she becomes a fully fledged geiko. The richness of her kimono and obi belt, the contrasting whiteness of her face, the quietness with which she sits delicately on the floor, it's not hard to see why many generations of men have fallen for these ethereal, hyper-real muses. Those occurrences are all part and parcel of a geisha's life. Marriage is allowed but once married they have to give up their profession. Tomi Tae and her fellow courtesans work hard to keep this unique and fascinating culture alive, her life is a glimpse into old Japan, where notions of love, companionship and relationships were a great deal more complicated than they are now.

As Japan's intellectual and cultural centre for over 1,000 years, Kyoto's history is intertwined with the fate of the samurai as much as it is with the geishas. The head of the samurai, called a Shogun, was based in Kyoto at Nijo Castle, which was built in 1603. It was also here in 1867 that the fifteenth and last Shogun, Yoshinobu, succeeded his power back to the Emperor, where it has remained. The open plan, one level 'castle' is open to the public and visitors can see the original screen-printed murals that are beautiful examples of the famed Edo period. Whilst samurai and geishas' clothes were decadent and rich, the castle itself is sparsely decorated, an unknowing commitment to minimalism that continues in Japanese design today.

Although the samurai were abolished after the handover of power, their myth and legend has remained unstoppable. In Japan this translates to an entire genre of domestic films that recapture the heroic class' hey day called jidaigeki, often made in Kyoto at the Toei Kyoto movie studio. On the outskirts of the city, its fake old fashioned streets ring with the sound of excitable Japanese schoolkids who, once they spy me and other Western people, are more eager to practice their English than learn about the movie sets. 200 movies a year are shot here and visitors can pay to dress up as geisha or samurai in the studio's make up department. The studio is just one way in which the traditional city of Kyoto is reimagining its past and old skills to create new jobs and products. Another example is the House of Hosoo. An artisanal weaving studio, 100 years ago it only produced



**WHERE TO STAY**  
**Hotel Granvia**

The modern, five star Hotel Granvia sits on top of the sleek Kyoto train station. Rooms are well appointed and luxurious, while the busy lobby is a place to be seen in town. Choose from a range of restaurants including a decadent Italian and don't miss the huge Western and Japanese breakfast spreads (Dhs990; free Wi-fi; granviakyoto.com).

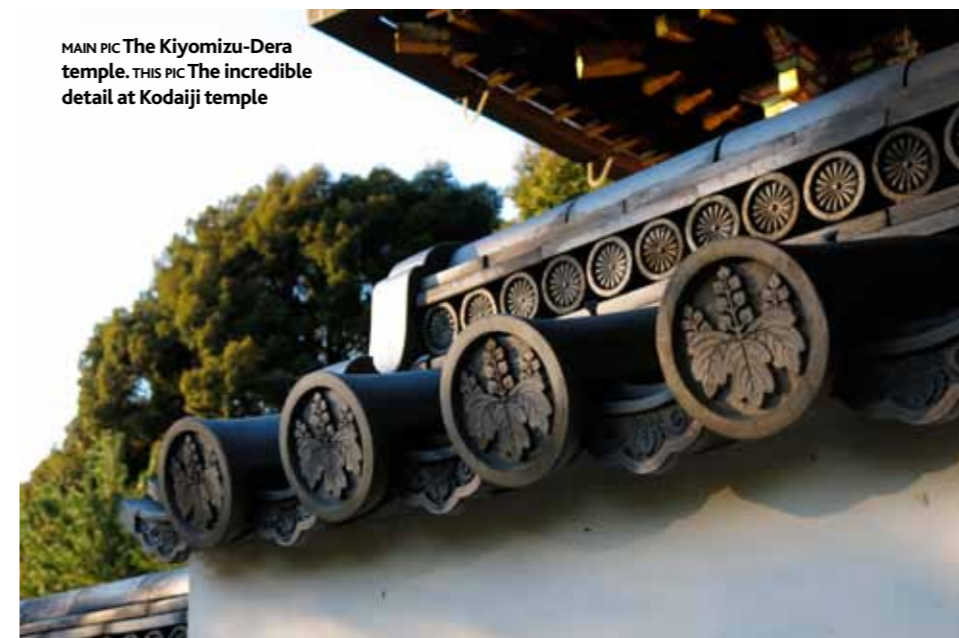
the obi belts that wrap and tie a kimono together. Fast forward to the 21st century and those same family techniques are being used for luxury global brands to create unique patterned linens and soft furnishings.

While visitors could spend weeks in Kyoto alone, discovering Japan's traditions amongst the narrow streets, colourful temples and zen gardens, no visit should be complete without a small time out at a traditional ryokan. Ryokans (a Japanese inn) sprung up in the 17th century as family homes with guestrooms, much like a western B&B. They are now difficult to find in larger cities, replaced by hotels, but in Kyoto a few remain. The most famous is Ryokan Yoshidasanso, which was built in the 1930s for the Emperor's uncle. Still alive, the uncle is now in a nearby home, and the beautiful building, complete with sliding doors, paper screen walls and futons for sleeping on, is open to a small number of visitors. Tomoko Nakamura runs the ryokan with her family and has opened a small artisanal café in the old garage next door. As long as people such as House of Hosoo and Tomoko exist, Kyoto's glorious past won't be forgotten. 📍



Visitors could spend weeks in Kyoto alone, discovering Japan's traditions amongst the narrow streets, colourful temples and zen gardens

MAIN PIC The Kiyomizu-Dera temple. THIS PIC The incredible detail at Kodaiji temple



**WHERE TO STAY**  
**Ryokan Yoshidasanso**

Sliding doors, futons and kimonos to wear to dinner, Ryokan Yoshidasanso is an absolute treat. Tomoko and her family serve up mouth watering kaiseki as pretty as a picture and sake so smooth you'll never want to leave. There is also a private house to rent for large groups (from Dhs1,574 free Wi-fi; yoshidasanso.com).

# MAKE IT HAPPEN

## Kyoto



Just over two hours from Tokyo on the bullet train, Kyoto is the calming antidote to the fast-paced neon future that Japan's capital can be. Calm doesn't equal boring, there's plenty to do here



Menus line the Pontocho restaurant district

### ESSENTIALS

#### ✉ Getting there

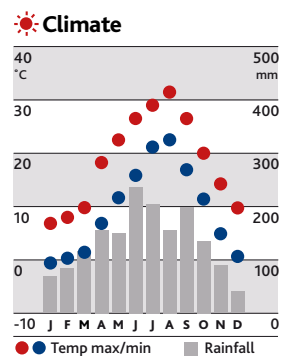
Singapore Airlines flies from Dubai to Osaka via Singapore daily. The airline has introduced next generation seating across its fleet, offering more personal space. While in transit take advantage of a free Singapore city tour from the airport and get out there (from Dhs3,525; singaporeairlines.com).

#### T Getting around

Kyoto has an efficient subway system with two lines running north/south and east/west. Bikes are the most popular local form of transport. Rent one from KyotoCycling Tour Project (Dhs37 per day; kctp.net/en).

#### 📖 Further reading

Download Lonely Planet's *Japan* (Dhs114; lonelyplanet.com) or the *Kyoto City Guide* (Dhs90; lonelyplanet.com).



### EATING AND DRINKING IN KYOTO

**1** Misogigawa is a lesson in fine dining (below). French food in the traditional Kyoto Kaiseki style in a former tea house, where Chef Teruo Inoue has made it his life's work to serve the best ingredients. (Pontocho District; +81752212270).



**2** For quick, cheap, veggie bite, **Café Proverbs** is a slick organic, modern affair, that you might find in any cosmopolitan western city. It serves generous salads, noodles and rice dishes and has a fine line of teas (Sakyo-ku; proverbs1517.com).

**3** Okabeya (right) is a stone's throw away from the famous Kiyomizu-dera temple and sits in a traditional Kyoto-style machiya (townhouse). It specialises in tofu and yuba (tofu skin). Try the sesame tofu (Kiyomizu Higashiyama-Ku; to-fu.co.jp).

**4** Minokichi restaurant was founded in 1716 making it one of the oldest restaurants in the city. It has several locations but is famed for its kaiseki style meals, it also serves up a delicious Muslim friendly menu (Minami-ku; japanese-kyoto-cuisine.com).

**5** For a dose of essential Japanese karaoke head to **Jumbo Karaoke** for private boxes which you can rent by the hour for as long as you like. Order drinks and select songs through electronic touch pads and get singing! (Kawaramachi and other locations).



**6** Sent James Club [sic] is a cocktail bar/club with a pretty terrace over the Kamogawa river, which is perfect in the spring and summer months for people watching. Allegedly a jazz bar its music is more background than anything (Ponto Cho).



**7** For a lesson in sake head to **Yoramu**, a tiny bar that can only fit a few people in at a time, that is an education in the different variations of Japanese rice wine that Kyoto is famous for. By day it's a well regarded soba restaurant (Nakagyo-ku).

**8** For more of a laid back bar vibe (think cushions on the floor) locate **Sama Sama** and its wide ranging drinks list that takes inspiration from plenty of different Asian countries. It's a little hard to find, head down an alley north of Sanjo (Kiyamachi).