



# KYOTO

## calling

By Cassidy Hazelbaker

Today Tokyo is Japan's vibrant and bustling capital, but for more than one thousand years, Kyoto was the country's imperial capital. The city remains the cultural heart of contemporary Japan, and its residents are fiercely proud of their city's history and traditions. Cassidy Hazelbaker reports.



Sleepy and jet-lagged, I arrived in Kyoto to find a crisp autumn breeze and a woman in a kimono awaiting me. "Welcome to Kyoto," she said as she performed a respectful bow, the first of many I was to see in the coming days and an act that I later learned to execute myself. This dainty woman was called Tomoko and had a short haircut, sweet smile and a heart as big as Japan. Any trace of trepidation I faced towards being in a foreign culture surrounded by a language I knew nothing of was quickly erased by this woman's kindness and reinforced by the many personalities with whom I subsequently interacted.

After a 90 minute car ride from Osaka airport, I arrived to the Hotel Granvia, which is located directly in front of Kyoto Central station, making it an ideal sleeping spot for those taking the bullet train to or from Tokyo. Unlike many large cities around the world, the area around the station is clean, pleasant and energetic. The ten-story Isetan department store is next to the

hotel, while the iconic Kyoto Tower is across the street. Sleek and modern, Hotel Granvia is a shiny glass structure, reflecting the high rises which surround it. A glass atrium covers the communal walkway connecting the hotel, department store and train station, providing light and a sense of space to the packed walkway underneath.

The hotel lobby echoes traditional minimalistic elements of Japanese design while maintaining a comfortable atmosphere. My room's décor is mostly composed of neutrals and warm beiges while the white fluffy bedding is a welcome sight after my long flight. My room offers a beautiful vista of the cityscape and the Toji temple (the tallest pagoda in Japan) with majestic mountains in the background.

Hotel Granvia contains a plethora of dining options with cuisines from all around the world, near and far. My favorite is the authentic bento box served in Le Temps Restaurant, containing

small bites of a variety of Japanese dishes such as shrimp tempura, fresh vegetables, baked fish, Kobe beef, glutinous rice, salad, and miso soup. After dinner I retire to the Sky Lounge at the top of the hotel. With live music in the background, it is a great place to enjoy an after-dinner drink and watch the twinkling lights of this ancient and still vibrant city.

First stop on my list is one of the myriad of temples found in Kyoto. I am greeted at the entrance of Kiyomizu Dera Temple by the resident Buddhist monk. He is tall and quite striking, wearing white garments topped by a black robe complete with a golden sash. Exuding an air of tranquility, he accompanies the tour around the temple complex. The temple was first built in the 8th century halfway up the Otowa Mountain, but faced several fires and was thus rebuilt in the early 17th century. The construction was orchestrated by the Shogun (lead Samurai) Tokugawa Iemitsu, and was built using a special method that doesn't use a single



nail to hold all the boards and pillars in place. Instead, all the building components fit together like a puzzle. Designated by UNESCO in 1994 as a historic monument of Kyoto, the main hall is an open room that leads onto an enormous terrace which juts out over a hillside and offers panoramic views of the city. Popular legend during the Edo period said that if you jump from the terrace, which stands at a height of 13 meters, your wishes will come true. The practice is now prohibited but the ancient legend has inspired a modern-day Japanese idiom - to ‘jump over the veranda of Kiyomizu Temple’ means to undertake a daring adventure. Wrapping back around to the entrance, I bid goodbye to the monk. I admire the three-tiered pagoda and the niomon gate that stand guard to the temple, and turn around for one last glimpse of the monk, only to see that, in the blink of an eye, he has vanished into the bright colors and intricate details of Kiyomizu.

Omnipresent in Kyoto is green tea - whether flavoring various dessert items or being consumed by locals in cafes. In order to truly grasp the significance of the beverage to Japanese tradition, I meet with a tea ceremony master. An occupation open to men and women, masters study and train between 10 to 15 years before achieving certification. I observe the complex process of brewing and filtering the tea, which involves quite a line-up of pottery, ladles, bowls, napkins and a bamboo whisk. The final result is a neon-green foamy tea, with a thick consistency and a surprisingly smooth taste. Drinking the tea involves a precise rotation of the tea bowl, which must be turned halfway before consumption and then returned to its original position after completion. Tea is accompanied by namakashi sweets, which usually are composed of a semi-sweet dough with a red bean filling.

Of the many delicious meals I enjoyed during my stay in Kyoto, one stood out: a lovely lunch created by Chef Patron Inoué Têruo of the Restaurant Pontocho Misoguigawa. Chef Têruo studied with a three star Michelin chef in France and subsequently fuses French Belle Époque cuisine with the Japanese Kaiseki style. Têruo uses fresh, local ingredients and fine French imports to produce course after course of innovative gourmet delights. Among the highlights is aubergine mousse with caviar and poached shrimp, lightly-grilled Kobe beef in a demi-glace sauce, langoustine au gratin, and a

pistachio-nougat dessert topped with a tender fig. Even after living five years in Paris, I can safely say I rarely have eaten so well.

One of the highlights of Kyoto is a visit to an okiya - a Geisha boarding house. I am granted the opportunity to speak with a maiko- geisha in training- which allows me a glimpse into what is traditionally a private and quite secretive element of Japanese society. The boarding house ‘mother’ greets us, explaining that the teenage maiko is under her sponsorship, taking classes to master the great Japanese traditional arts, while as the sponsor she provides food, lodging and exquisite kimonos- a very expensive part of a geisha’s life.

As the maiko enters, one cannot help but to stare. White face, pursed red lips, and elaborate coiffeur, she is captivating. But a girl of 18, her poise and confidence are those of a distinguished lady. She glides rather than moves; not once does she make a sudden, swift movement. Every turn of her head or twirl of her feet is deliberate and measured as she expertly performs a traditional dance and plays a song on the koto, a large stringed instrument.

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After, she sits to speak to us about her life path. I grappled to fully comprehend how it must be to grow up in contemporary Japanese society, attending school, laughing with friends, shopping in malls, and then to break away from it all at 15 to pursue the very structured, mature and private life of a geisha. Was she still able to keep in touch with her former classmates? Was she able to see her family? Did she ever wear western clothes and go into the city? I wanted to know how it is to exist in a traditional way in such a modern world. Her eyes twinkle as she explains her profession. The only time she can be truly anonymous is once every few weeks, when she undoes the elaborate coiffeur to wash her hair. Like any teen, she dons jeans and a top and heads to the cinema. She sees her family

twice a year, during holiday times, and speaks to her friends occasionally though they’re very busy with exams at the moment, she explains. Asked if she had seen the film *Memoirs of a Geisha*, she giggles that she watched it on Youtube. Perhaps the biggest surprise is seeing her eyes light up at the mention of Justin Bieber and the girly giggle that she cannot suppress. Perfectly at home in the classic world of a geisha, there is also room for modernity within her - symbolic of the historical city in which she resides.

To have a more traditional and authentic Japanese experience, I checked into the Ryokan Yoshida Sanso. The *ryokan* (traditional inn) was constructed in 1932 as a residence for the Emperor of Japan’s uncle and was transformed into an inn 16 years later. Built from beautiful cypress wood, the ryokan contains six bedrooms, each comprising elegant futons and furniture. All the rooms have full-length windows looking onto the beautiful garden that surrounds the house, and one even has a terrace overlooking the surrounding hills and a nearby pagoda. The tatami floor is smooth and silky to touch, and the embossed wall coverings shimmer in the sunlight. A chrysanthemum motif, allowed only to decorate royal residences, is prevalent throughout the house and is a reminder of the ryokan’s imperial connections. The entire space is the definition of tranquility.

Reputed to be one of the most luxurious ryokans, Yoshida Sanso is as respected for its accommodation as for its gourmet kaiseki-style cuisine. Sitting down to a candle-lit table, I am treated to multiple courses of traditional Japanese dishes such as pumpkin soup, grilled barracuda with chestnut, and scallops with sweet petit potatoes. The presentation is impeccable - mini bites arranged artistically on handmade pottery plates, while rice and soup are served in traditional Japanese lacquered bowls. Tomoko, who had greeted me at the airport, is the daughter of the owners of Yoshida Sanso and is our hostess for the evening. Her warm hospitality makes the dinner and the entire stay very personal. Wearing the flower-patterned kimono that is provided in my room, I feel right at home.

Kyoto is a destination worth many weeks of a traveler’s time. Whether in search of high culture, cuisine, hospitality or history, the city has it all and more. Unlike so many cities grappling to preserve the old while embracing the new, in Kyoto the comforts and conveniences of modernity coexist harmoniously with some of the world’s most regimented and respected cultural traditions. The most important product of my visit to Kyoto, however, is the desire to return- to experience more of the city’s wonder. ♦  
All images courtesy the Author.



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