

Welcome to Kyoto

*Kyoto is old Japan writ large:
quiet temples, sublime gardens,
colourful shrines and geisha
scurrying to secret liaisons.*

Temples, Shrines & Gardens

There are said to be over 1000 Buddhist temples in Kyoto. You'll find true masterpieces of religious architecture, such as the retina-burning splendour of Kinkaku-ji (the famed Golden Pavilion) and the cavernous expanse of Higashi Hongan-ji. Within the temple precincts are some of the world's most sublime gardens, from the Zen masterpiece at Ryōan-ji to the riotous paradise of moss and blossoms at Saihō-ji. And then there are the Shintō shrines, monuments to Japan's indigenous faith. The mother of all shrines, Fushimi-Inari-Taisha, has mesmerising arcades of vermilion *torii* (shrine gates) spread across a mountainside.

Cuisine

Few cities of this size offer such a range of excellent restaurants. Work your way through the entire spectrum of Japanese food, from impossibly refined cuisine known as *kaiseki* to hearty plebeian fare like *rāmen*. There's also a wide range of French, Italian and Chinese restaurants, where the famed Japanese attention to detail is paired with local ingredients to yield fantastic results. Best of all, many of Kyoto's restaurants are in traditional wooden buildings, where you can gaze over intimate private gardens while you eat.

The Japanese Way of Life

While the rest of Japan has adopted modernity with abandon, the old ways are hanging on in Kyoto. Take a morning stroll through the textile district of Nishijin and watch the old Kyoto ladies emerge from their *machiya* (traditional townhouses) to ladle water onto their stoops. Visit an old *shōtengai* (shopping street) and admire the ancient speciality shops: tofu sellers, fishmongers, pickle vendors and tea merchants. Then join the locals at a local *sentō* (public bath) to soak away the cares of the day.

The Changing Seasons

No educated Kyotoite would dare send a letter without making a reference to the season. The city's geisha change their hair ornaments 12 times a year to celebrate the natural world. And Kyoto's confectioners create seasonal sweets that reflect whatever is in bloom. Starting in February and lasting through the summer, a series of blossoms burst open like a string of firecrackers: plums, daphnes, cherries, camellias, azaleas and wisteria, among many others. And don't forget the *shinryoku* (the new green of April) and the brilliant autumn foliage of November.



Why I Love Kyoto

By Chris Rowthorn, Author

I love Kyoto because it's rich, deep and incredibly liveable. I've spent almost 20 years in the city and I still make new discoveries every day. If I vary my daily walking route just a bit, I am bound to find something new: a secret temple, an interesting shop or a great place to eat. The city is surrounded by mountains on three sides and the hiking is excellent. It's also one of the most bike-friendly cities on earth. I love the people and the dialect they speak. Finally, it's just the right size: not too big and not too small.

For more about Chris Rowthorn, see p232