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What's life like in the Old Capital as Japan recovers from the disastrous earthquake and tsunami of 2011?

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The capital of Japan for over 1000 years, Kyoto is *the* place to learn about Japanese history.

PEOPLE & CULTURE 164

From geisha to gardens, Kyoto is Japan's cultural storehouse. Even Japanese come here to learn about their own culture.

ARTS & CRAFTS 167

Home to the imperial household for most of its history, Kyoto has always attracted Japan's finest artists.

ARCHITECTURE & GARDENS 175

Shintō shrines, Buddhist temples, imperial villas, traditional townhouses and the finest gardens in Japan – it's all here in Kyoto.

THE TEA CEREMONY 180

This is no ordinary cuppa – this is caffeine-fuelled performance art.

Kyoto Today

For much of its history, Kyoto has been a microcosm of Japan: when Japan prospered, Kyoto prospered; when Japan struggled, Kyoto struggled. Now, as Japan works furiously to recover from the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011, the tourist city of Kyoto is reeling from a devastating drop in the number of both international and domestic visitors. And the disaster brought many long-simmering questions to the foreground. Most importantly, just what kind of city does Kyoto want to become?

Classic Kyoto Films

Rashomon (1950) Kurosawa Akira's classic uses the southern gate of Kyoto as the setting for a 12th-century rape and murder story told from several perspectives.

Sisters of Nishijin (1952) The father of a silk-weaving family kills himself as the family is caught between the old and the new.

Lost in Translation (2003) Most of this film takes place in Tokyo, but there's a lovely montage of shots of the heroine's trip to Kyoto.

Kyoto Novels

The Old Capital (Kawabata Yasunari; 1962) A young woman's past is disturbed by the discovery of a twin sister in another family.

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion (Mishima Yukio; 1956) A fictionalised account of a young Buddhist acolyte who burned down Kyoto's famous Golden Pavilion in 1950.

Memoirs of a Geisha (Arthur Golden; 1997) This account of the life of a Kyoto geisha was later turned into a successful movie (most of which was not filmed in Kyoto).

The Lady and the Monk (Pico Iyer; 1991) An account of the author's relationship with a Japanese woman against the backdrop of Kyoto.

Kyoto Suffers with Japan

In March 2011 northern Japan was struck by an earthquake and tsunami of almost apocalyptic proportions. The epicentre of the quake was over 600km northeast of the city and the city suffered no physical damage. Likewise, Kyoto was not affected by radiation fallout from the nuclear plants at Fukushima, which are located over 500km northeast of the city.

Despite the lack of immediate physical damage, Kyoto was economically devastated by the disaster. The quake could not have struck at a worse time: Kyoto was just gearing up for the annual rush of tourists who descend on the city to enjoy its famous cherry blossoms. Travellers, both domestic and foreign, cancelled their visits en masse. Residents of Kyoto were treated to the bizarre spectacle of famous cherry blossom spots almost totally free of tourists at the height of the cherry blossom season (ironically, spring 2011 was one of the best seasons for blossoms in recent years).

Early figures for 2011 showed tourism receipts down about 50% in Kyoto. For a city that depends very heavily on tourism, this is truly a frightening number. Despite slashing prices, the city's hotels and ryokans were barely able to attract customers. Many of those who did come were wealthy Tokyoites fleeing perceived radiation dangers in the capital.

As spring turned to summer in 2011, Kyoto residents were cheered to see tourists starting to trickle back. They did their best to attract even more visitors, stressing that the city is a long way from the affected areas and radiation levels in Kyoto never exceeded normal annual averages (indeed, the wind usually blows west to east here).

By any rational measure, the city of Kyoto, like the rest of Japan, is facing enormous challenges in the wake of the disaster. It is a sad reality that many worthy businesses will be forced to close their doors. Still,