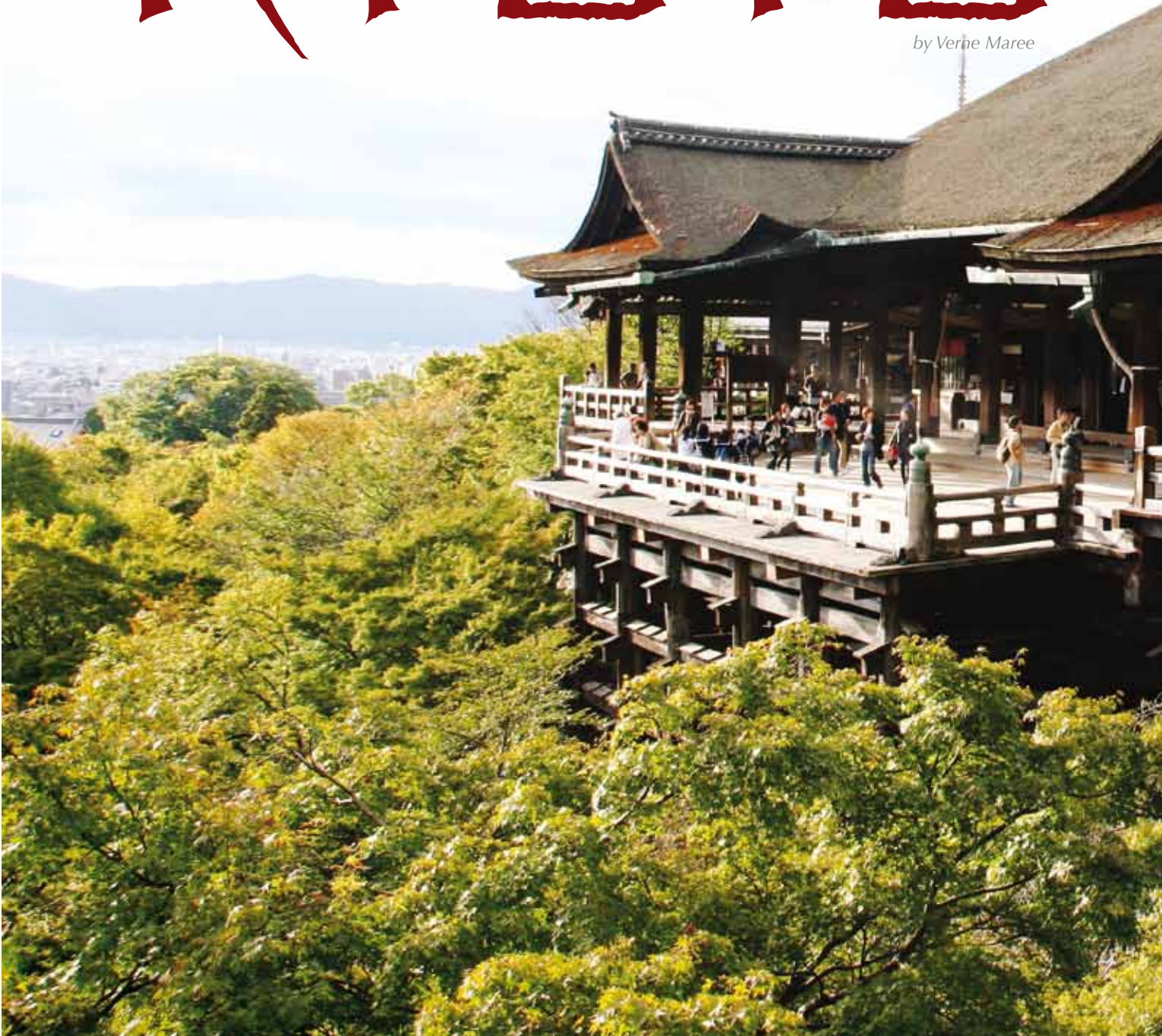


TRAVEL FOCUS

Cultural

# KYOTO

*by Verne Maree*







**W**e went to Kyoto for its ancient architecture, glorious temples and working geisha district, but were equally seduced by its great natural beauty, distinctive food culture and warm, friendly people.

It's been fairly said that if you had time to visit just one Japanese city, that city should be Kyoto. Bounded by mountains to the west, north and east and bifurcated by the Kamo River, it's a manageable size and easy to navigate by public transport and by foot.

Arriving at the strikingly futuristic Kyoto Station, we're met by our tireless guide, Miyazaki-san, a Kyotoite herself, whose first task is to get us to our hotel, The Westin Miyako. After that, she's at our service for the afternoon and the next two days. It's a great treat to get your nose out of the guidebook and listen to a real person. What's more, nothing is too much trouble for Miya-san. Each morning, she presents us with a detailed itinerary of what we saw and did the day before, including the price of taxis and entry to sites, which – be warned – tend to mount up





### Three Temples, Two Shrines and a Castle

Situated on the lower slope of a mountain to the east of the city, our hotel is perfect for a leisurely walking tour of some of Kyoto's most important sights.

**Kiyomizu Temple** is most famous for the terrace off its main hall, supported by 139 wooden pillars and constructed without nails – a marvel of joinery. The endless school groups that climb up to and descend from the temple along a picturesque lane are well catered to by shops selling traditional sweets and ice-cream cones in green tea or black sesame flavours.

Right next to the temple is the jolly **Jishu Shrine**, a huge hit with young people as it's dedicated to love and the God of Matchmaking – a sort of 15th-century Cupid. Contrary to The Beatles' opinion on the matter, it seems that money *can* buy love; or at least a lucky love charm. Interesting that it costs just 500 yen for a charm to "find a partner", but 2,000 yen to "bind your love closer".

It's a pleasant hike from the hotel to the massive gates of **Nanzenji Temple**. We're startled by the

anachronistic appearance of an enormous and authentic-looking **Roman aqueduct** near the gates, until Miya-san explains that it was built in the late 19th century, after scholars visited Europe at the end of Japan's self-imposed Isolation Period (1625 to 1968). Other ideas they brought back with them included British-style school uniforms and – more up-to-date, certainly, and perhaps a tad more useful – driving on the left side of the road, the steam engine and the railway.

From here, the pleasant mile-long **Philosopher's Walk** winds across the mountain, past cosy-looking traditional houses and along a pretty little canal. It leads to **Ginkakuji Temple**, also known as the Silver Pavilion, which boasts a fine garden and steep stone steps up to a lovely view of Kyoto.

At the bright-orange-painted Chinese-style **Heian Shrine**, a little girl glorious in kimono is celebrating her seventh birthday with proud parents and grandparents; apparently, this is traditionally done on the third, fifth and seventh birthday.

**Nijo Castle** is a highlight of Kyoto. In the reception rooms of the stunning palace within its fortress walls are exquisite murals and tableaux of the shogun, with his female attendants or receiving the homage of feudal lords. We enjoy its "nightingale floors", specially constructed so as to squeak and chirrup under the weight of a tiptoeing ninja spy, and evidence of the shogun's paranoia.

### Arts and Crafts

Also a walk from our hotel, the **Kyoto Museum of Traditional Crafts** has extensive displays of kimono-dyeing, fan-making, stone lantern-carving, Buddha altar-gilding, pottery glazing and other skills indispensable to the creature comforts of the shoguns of yore.

For more cultural immersion and souvenir shopping, head for **Nishijin Textile Centre**. One venerable craftsman hand-weaves his gorgeous versions of famous traditional paintings; each one takes a year to complete. And, half-a-dozen times a day, you can watch a charming, 15-minute fashion show featuring a series of exquisitely hand-woven kimonos.

## Geisha Nights

After dark is the time to visit **Hanamikoji Gion Kobi** and **Gion Shinbashi**, genuine working geisha districts. Miya-san explains the signs nailed next to the doors of the traditional geisha houses: licence plates, the names of the geishas past and present, and other vital statistics. Entrance to them, or to the Ichiriki Tea House or Geisha Party House, is strictly by invitation only. She also points out a couple of geisha schools, which display their curricula on signs at the front.

All day, we've seen plenty of Japanese tourists dressed in kimonos hired for the day, but tonight we're delighted to almost bump into just one apprentice geisha, or *maiko*, whose three-inch *geita* clatter along the cobbled lane as she hurries along.

## Soul Food

For a break from temple-gazing, head for **Nishiki Food Market**, near Shinkyogoku Arcade in the central shopping district. Dried herring, salted fish and Kyoto pickles are star attractions, along with the prohibitively expensive autumnal *mattake* mushrooms that are now in season.

**Ozawa Tempura** on beautiful Shirakawa Street in the Gion district is on the canal; sit at the counter and indulge in a generous flow of piping hot tidbits for about 4,000 yen (about S\$66), washed down with draft beer and cold *sake*.

**Kushi Kyura**, a yakitori in Takakuri Dori off Oike Dori in the centre of town, does a good set meal for 2,800 yen, and the house *sake* is cheap and wonderful.

The cosy **Kunugi Teppan-yaki** at the Westin Miyako serves an upmarket feast featuring delights such as seasonal mushrooms with fresh fish blow-torched in your

presence for the ultimate crispy skin, succulent lobster awash in butter seasoned with soy sauce, a thick slab of prime beef cooked to a turn and presented with vegetables, and ice cream with chestnuts and persimmon. It's seriously good, but first check the limit on your credit card.

On our last night, we find tiny **Hinaka** at number 214-1 on atmospheric Pontocho, which runs parallel to the river; 4,500 yen each for a nine-course kaiseki-style procession of seasonal, local food produced by the sonorous chef as you watch, and served on rustically crumpled pottery. It's one of dozens of bars and restaurants that you're not sure you can enter; we say, just take the plunge and ask.

Miya-san recommends **Okutan Tofu Restaurant** (near Nanzenji Temple gate) for the vegetarian tofu cuisine that Kyoto is famous for; we didn't have time to try it.







### Nara Side-trip

It's been 1,300 years since Nara became the capital of Japan – before the capital was moved to Kyoto – and the place is heaving with tourists visiting a special exhibition of historical treasures in honour of the anniversary. That, together with suddenly wet, cold weather, turns what we thought would be a highlight of our trip into something of a damp squib.

It's a 75-minute train ride from Kyoto to Nara. **Kasuga Grand Shrine** is most notable for its 1,800 stone lanterns; but the main site is **Todaiji Temple**, home to the Great Buddha Hall, which alone makes

Nara worth visiting.

Memorable, it must be said, and wonderful for children, are the more than one thousand deer that live in the **Deer Park** in which the temple is situated. School-going and even younger kids squeal in terrified delight as the creatures snuffle specially provided rice crackers from their hands. It's not unadulterated pleasure for grownups, however, as the slippery slime of deer droppings melting in the drizzle coat the pathways.

Don't let that put *you* off; despite being a tourist trap, Nara is a must.



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## Where to Stay

Our choice of **The Westin Miyako Kyoto**, a two-minute walk from Keage Station, proved a perfect complement to Kyoto's cultural attractions. Though she by no means looks her 120 years, this grand old lady has hosted a slew of famous guests over the decades: in the 1920s Albert Einstein, the Rockefellers and Anna Pavlova; in the 1930s Charles Lindbergh, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford; later Helen Keller, John Wayne, Twiggy and Andy Warhol, to name but a few; and of course more presidents, prime ministers and royalty than you can shake a sceptre at.

In a country where small hotel bedrooms are the norm, our spacious Superior King is the exception. The Westin's Heavenly Bed is of course sumptuous; so is its Heavenly Shower, separate from the bathtub.

Charming general manager Richard Suter, who is Swiss, runs a tight ship. A touch of the multi-

purpose Service Express button gets a bucket of ice to us in record time; it's amazingly efficient.

This is a huge, rambling hotel with great facilities, including a gym and an indoor and outdoor lap pool with a wonderfully bubbly spa bath; a variety of restaurants and bars including café restaurant **Aquablu** (for an excellent Japanese and international breakfast buffet), the Grand View for contemporary Japanese, the Chinese **Shisen**, **Kacho** for Japanese hot-pot, **Kunugi** for teppan-yaki, and the **Moonlight Bar** for cocktails and live music.

Best of all, behind The Westin Miyako's main edifice is its **Kasui-en** traditional Japanese guesthouse. Most visitors to Kyoto fancy the idea of spending at least one night in a traditional-style *ryokan* and this has to be the most painless way. We did it on our last night.

It's the real deal. In your private lobby, you slip off your shoes; in the tatami-covered living room, you recline on legless chairs and sip



green tea, looking out at a traditional garden, soothed by birdcalls and the soporific sounds of the stream that passes below your window. Bath-time is traditional, too: after a soapy scrub under the shower and thorough rinsing, you poach your body in a square, wooden tub until it's lobster-pink, perhaps sipping a Suntory Yamazaki single malt for medicinal purposes. Returning from dinner, we find that the legless chairs and low table have been moved and replaced by a genuinely Heavenly Futon. We sleep like traditional babes.

The bird trail and sanctuary that starts next to Kasui-en guesthouse is an 850-metre loop around the mountain that forms the backdrop to the hotel. I have it and the view to myself, and it's delightful.





### When to Visit:

Spring cherry-blossom time is the favourite season for visiting Japan; the red-and-yellow maple leaves of Autumn make November a close second. Our late-October trip was just too early for the full glory, but in retrospect that was perhaps a good thing: popular sites were less crowded – apart from the continuous stream of school groups who visit Kyoto to learn about their cultural heritage.

### Getting There:

It's an 80-minute train trip to Kyoto Station from Osaka's Kansai Airport, or – if you're coming from Tokyo – take the high-speed Shinkansen train from Tokyo Station to Kyoto Station, which leaves at frequent intervals. It's so much more convenient than flying! Treat yourself to a pre-booked seat in a super-comfortable first class Green Car; 18,000 yen (about S\$300) per person for a trip that takes about two hours and 10 minutes.

Note: The Westin Miyako has a half-hourly shuttle to and from Kyoto Station, but its departure point

from the station is nigh-impossible to find first time out, more so when you're impeded by luggage. Take a 1,500-yen, 15-minute cab-ride to the hotel when you first arrive, and deal with the very useful shuttle later. 🚗

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Country Holidays\*** for travel arrangements in Japan, including guides. Country Holidays caters for off-the-beaten path travel to Indochina, China, the Indian sub-continent and the Himalayas, Japan and Northeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Russia and Eastern Europe, Latin America and Antarctica. Trips are planned with the utmost flexibility, according to your own departure dates, needs and interests, with a minimum of two to go.

[www.countryholidays.com.sg](http://www.countryholidays.com.sg)

**The Westin Miyako Kyoto\***

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The author was hosted by both Country Holidays and The Westin Miyako Kyoto.

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