

## 8: Kyoto

A casual visitor to Kyoto could be excused for leaving it after a day or two because of its ugliness, bustle and noise; it is a large, sprawling city of featureless modern buildings and seemingly endless suburbs; its streets are full of eyesores such as great tangles of electric and telephone cables, signs, neon lights and advertisements, along with cinemas, theatres, tea houses, cafés, restaurants and shops. There are newsagents that sell papers, as well as comics and magazines of questionable content (including explicit porn), public baths, *pachinko* saloons and amusement arcades, and bars and nightclubs (where you may be entertained by a *geisha*). Through these streets pass crowds of people, bicycles, motorbikes, cars, buses, trucks and lorries. A postman's job here – and in other cities – must be a nightmare, for houses and buildings are not numbered consecutively as they are at home, with even numbers on one side of the street and odd on the other (a practice begun by Napoleon in Paris), but numbered according to the order in which the houses have been built.

But hidden in the back streets and nestled in the surrounding hillsides are Kyoto's treasures – and there are many of them. Peep through an unremarkable gateway and you may catch a glimpse of an exquisite garden, a traditional house of wood and paper, or one of many fine Buddhist monasteries or Shinto shrines. Unlike the rich and famous in the West, the Japanese moneyed class hide themselves in such remote corners. Mindful of Kyoto's important treasures, the Americans spared the city during World War II as the Japanese had the good sense not to have military objectives here.

As well as these hidden gems, there are some prominent places of worship, such as the temples that I visited yesterday. Because there is so much to be seen here, I had made the decision to stay for about a fortnight in this culturally rich city. It had been the capital of Japan from AD 794 (when it was known as Heian-kyō, 'Peace and Tranquillity City') to 1869, when the capital was moved to Tokyo.

After a wonderfully solid sleep on the night of my arrival, I awoke the following morning to discover that Dee, her *futon* and blankets had disappeared. I felt a little like the guy in the movies who invariably wakes up the following morning and stretches out his arm, only to discover that the girl he has been sleeping with is no longer beside him. However, Dee was not far away and brought me a cup of iced tea once I had finished my morning ablutions and completed my diary entry for the previous day. She then went out to buy milk and shortly afterwards presented me with a bowl of breakfast cereal. Being in this traditional and rather flimsy house, which was almost nothing more than a two-storeyed shed, felt wonderful; doors and windows slid open in Japanese style. The other pleasant feature was that it was extremely quiet here, despite its proximity to a main street and the city centre.

Later that morning, I sauntered out and had a look at the nearby Kikokutei Garden: a pleasant enough place with a pathway, a pond, trees and a couple of tea houses. I then made my way to the Sanjūsangendō (Thirty-three Bays) temple, which although very touristy, was well worth visiting because of the contents of its extraordinary sixty-six-metre-long *hondō* (main hall): one thousand and thirty-two gilded statues, which I found quite astounding. Just as I had left the building, I heard chanting and drumming. Entering again, but this time through a door at the centre, I found a monk

and two assistants intoning a sacred text from books and another beating an insistent rhythm on a small drum.

I listened for a while, left and crossed the road to the National Museum, where I escaped from the heat and spent some hours examining the wonderful exhibits. The museum turned out to be a fine modern building with air conditioning, and the exhibits were well displayed and carefully lit. Everything was arranged in chronological order, beginning with the earliest examples of Japanese ceramics and artefacts. There was a large Chinese section, where the items (mostly ceramics) were of the highest order. For me, the most exciting exhibits were the first tea bowls to be brought from China to Japan, known here as *Tenmoku* ware. In addition, there were bowls and vases of the Ming dynasty, and a display of Korean ceramics.

In addition to all of this, there was a collection of Buddhist statues, and, upstairs, rooms containing wonderful paintings, including two monochrome inkwash depictions of mountains and hermits in huts by the famous Zen monk Sesson Shukei (1504–1589), and fine examples of calligraphy. In addition, there were collections of ornate writing boxes, swords, armour and costumes. As it was all too much to take in at one go, I vowed to return.

Dazed, I staggered out at about 2 p.m., and went off in search of food. In a cheap restaurant nearby I guzzled and slurped another bowl of *rāmen* noodles and vegetables that were hot, spicy and filling.

An hour later I was walking through the shady and quieter back streets, bowing and greeting old women bent over on sticks, who grinned and flashed mouthfuls of silver teeth at me. I made my way to the Tōfukuji, a Zen temple founded in 1236, but had difficulty in finding it thanks to an inaccurate map and bad signposting. When at last I arrived, I discovered that it was about to close and so only had enough time to take a quick look and snap a few photos.



Tōfukuji, Kyoto

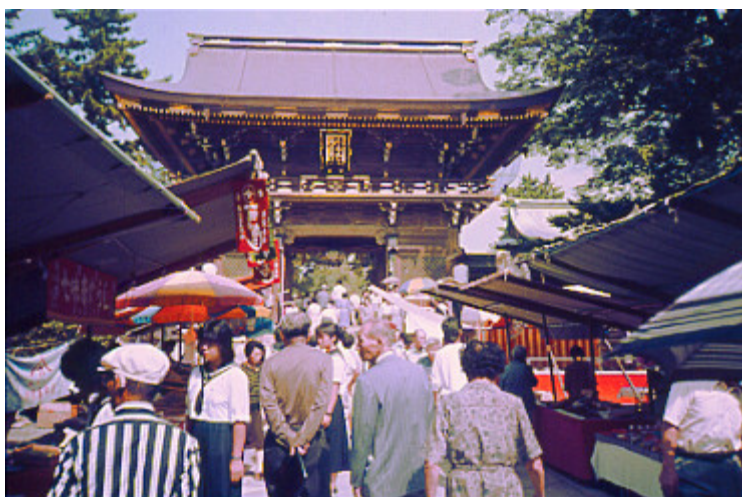
On my way back to Dee's place I made a detour in order to see if there were any Kabuki plays taking place in the Minamiza Theatre, but could not make much sense of the posters. No matter – I would ask about this at the Tourist Information Centre. I walked back from this busy area along the narrow streets, past many tea houses (some of them looked very posh), and saw a geisha girl in traditional dress stepping into a taxi, the back door of which was opened automatically for her by the driver.

I finally arrived back footsore and weary, and went to a nearby *sentō* or public bath, where I paid ¥220, disrobed and took a welcome shower. I discovered that there were various baths here, ranging from very hot to cold. What amused me was the way in which the old lady in charge wandered in and out of the men's section, cleaning and tidying. Some of the younger men had most of their torsos heavily tattooed. I relaxed in a moderately hot bath for a while, dried myself, dressed and left.

When I arrived back at the little house, I found Dee and her friend Elly there. When Elly left, I went upstairs to write my diary. At nine o'clock we all met again, walked down the road to a little restaurant and had an excellent meal. I tried *sashimi* (sliced raw fish) for the first time and found it delicious. I also had *tofu* (which was like eating soap), miso soup with clams (very tasty), rice and some beer. The girls discussed where I might find cheap lodgings, and what I should see and do. Afterwards, Dee went off for her bath and I returned to the house with Elly, who wrote down the address of a cheap *ryokan* (guesthouse). After she left, I retired upstairs, where I continued to write my diary before settling down to sleep.

On the following morning, which was sweltering, I set off early and headed for the Tourist Information Centre, but stopped at the great Higashi Honganji, which I had visited on my initial arrival in Kyoto, in between trying to telephone Dee. This time I was able to observe a Buddhist service attended by a large congregation, during which there was a great deal of chanting and beating of gongs. There were no tourists at this early hour.

After getting a fair amount of useful information from the tourist centre, I went on a long, boring bus journey through the ugly city centre to a market at the Kitano Shinto Shrine. The girls had encouraged me to go to this; Dee had mentioned the possibility of picking up fine second-hand kimonos at knock-down prices. I was not too surprised to discover that the market was like any other: it was full of rubbish. I found kimonos, but, because of the heat, I lacked the energy and interest to sift through them. Added to this, I had no idea of which of them were for men or women. I was more interested in buying another tee-shirt, but I could see none for sale.



Kitano Shrine, Kyoto

Mingling with the people, I walked to the shrine itself, which was far more interesting and photogenic. Here and there were elderly people ringing bells and

clapping their hands to attract the deities. One such deity seemed to be a pig; at one place women were ladling water over a stone statue of a pig and praying to it.

I stayed here for a while and just wandered around, for I was in no mood for sightseeing because of the heat. At midday I went into a tent and lunched on *tempura*: battered and deep-fried seafood, meat and vegetables, served with a bowl of noodles (which I was beginning to tire of). I relaxed in the shade, talked with a couple of English-speaking lads, looked around again and made for the bus stop. Near the exit I heard a group of elderly women and a man singing in one of the shrine buildings. I sat down for a while to listen to the harsh, cracked voices as they chanted and sang, ringing little bells or striking gongs as they did so.

I finally left and went to the Minamiza Theatre, where I bought a ticket to this afternoon's Kabuki performance and an English-language programme. I then returned to the tourist centre, as I had left some of my information there. Next I walked back to the area near Dee's house and tried to get accommodation in a cheap *ryokan*, but without any success. I tried another one, the Hiraiwa, where I was able to stay just one night for ¥2,800. I then collected my belongings from Deirdre's house, leaving some of my things and a note behind, checked into the *ryokan* and had a quick wash.

Another bus journey brought me back to the theatre for this afternoon's Kabuki play, *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura*, which began at 4.30 p.m. The play, which was first performed in 1747 as a *bunraku* or puppet play, was about the exploits of the warrior hero Yoshitsune, who defeated an enemy clan but, because he was suspected of disloyalty by his brother, had to flee with a handful of warriors. Because of my relatively cheap ticket, I was right up in the gods and therefore rather distant from the action. Although rather slow moving, the play was fascinating to watch. The makeup of the all-male cast was quite extraordinary, the acting very stylized and highly exaggerated, and the music harsh and strange. At certain moments there were strangled shouts and roars of approval from the official *omuko-san* ('honourable shouter of cries from the gallery'). One of the cries was '*Matte imashita!*' ('I was waiting for you!') and another was '*umai-zo!*' ('bravo!'). If an actor made a mistake or stumbled over his lines, the crier moaned '*daikon!*'\* Apparently the actors welcome these hollered words of encouragement and disappointment, and act better because of them. Everything on the stage was very colourful: the costumes were magnificent and the sets fascinating. I was also intrigued by the way the flats were moved in and out and the whole stage revolved for a different scene.

As I expected, the plot was complicated and rather difficult to follow, especially as this was the second half of a performance that had started in the morning. As the play was an adaptation of a puppet play, an ongoing narration was supplied by an elaborately costumed performer who stood in a small box on the right-hand side of the theatre and accompanied his highly dramatic commentary by strumming discordant chords on a *shamisen*: a three-stringed long lute with a square body and snakeskin soundboard, played using a large plectrum. Moody background music was performed by offstage musicians (*geza ongaku*).

After about an hour the first act finished, and the curtain was pulled across from behind to the accompaniment of loud clacks from a *hyōshigi* or clappers. I wandered down to the front seats, and when the sound of the clappers accelerated to signal the beginning of act two, I made a dash for a free seat and sat there for the rest of the play. As the plot progressed, the performance became livelier and more colourful. Samurai warriors marched down the *hanamichi* (a ramp extending from the stage)

---

\* Fosco Maraini, *Meeting with Japan*, p. 35.

with a train of retainers, and there were dramatic fighting scenes with fierce-looking soldiers tumbling about the place, all struck down by the hero. No blows were actually struck; the hero would make a rapid gesture and the victim, often quite a distance away, would do an astonishing somersault and run off the stage. The lighting was also very dramatic. Sitting so much closer to the stage, I became completely caught up in the action. From this vantage point, the fantastic costumes and strange makeup could be appreciated to the full.

There were a couple more short intervals, during which I could have eaten something in one of the little restaurants, but as there was nothing that I really wanted, I did without. The play finished at 8.30 p.m. As the last scene was rather tragic, with the hero dying on stage, many women were openly weeping and wiping tears from their eyes when the curtain closed for the last time. There was hardly any applause; it suddenly ended and that was that; applause seemed to be reserved for the end of a touching or amusing section, or for the entrance or exit of a favourite character.

So, that was Kabuki! Initially I had had reservations but by the end of the performance I had thoroughly enjoyed it all. At the exits, assistants bowed to the people leaving and thanked them, saying, '*Arigato gozaimashita... arigato gozaimashita... arigato gozaimashita...*'. I was constantly amazed at the politeness shown to everyone in this country; announcements on trains and buses always included the verb *gozaimasu* (the deferential form of 'to be') and the word *kudasai* ('please'). People were also extremely apologetic for any little inconvenience caused, and used expressions like *sumimasen* ('sorry'), *dōmo sumimasen* ('I'm very sorry'), *gomen nasai* ('please open the door'), *shitsurei shimasu* ('my mistake') and *dōmo shitsurei itashimashita* ('please excuse me') and so on.

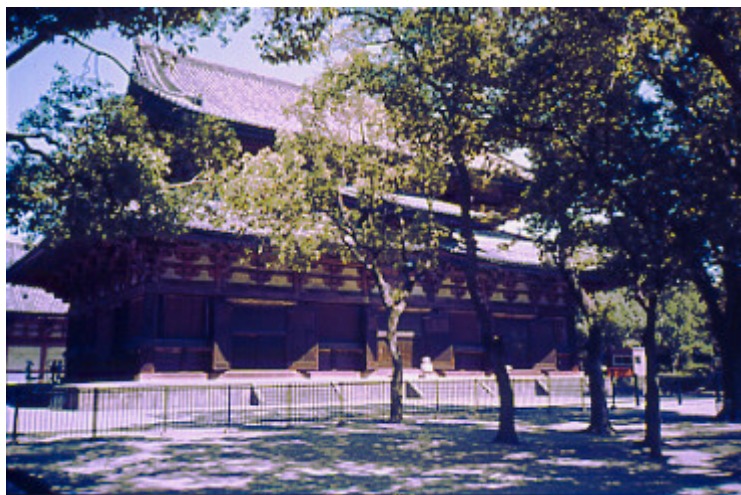
I now headed back to my spartan accommodation in the *ryokan*, walking down a quiet road by a little stream. At this time of the evening, with the lights of the many tea houses and little buildings all lit, the atmosphere was magical. I was hungry by now and looking for something to eat, but everything in this district was either too posh, too expensive or simply not to my taste. I ended up by dining in the same little rough-and-ready restaurant where I had eaten the previous evening, and ordering almost the same items: miso soup, *sashimi* and rice. A couple of men, who were obviously quite inebriated, cracked jokes and laughed boisterously while another lunged forward in a drunken stupor.

I then left and returned to the little *ryokan*, where I went up to my tiny claustrophobic room, donned a *yukata* (a light cotton kimono) and paid a visit to *o-furo*. After a relaxing wash and bath, I returned to my room and wrote most of my diary. Because of the stuffiness of the room, I had to throw open the window and sit almost naked. I eventually gave up because of exhaustion and rolled out a couple of *futon* on the floor, put the *kakebuton* (quilt) to one side and lay down. Soon I was fast asleep.

Mercifully it was much cooler when I woke the following morning. I rose, washed, filled out a questionnaire, left the *ryokan* at 8.30 and stepped out into the bright sunshine. Making my way to the Tourist Information Centre (for the last time, hopefully), I stopped at a tiny restaurant for a simple breakfast of noodles with egg, green tea and water. In the tourist centre I enquired about getting permission to visit certain temples. When I heard how much it would cost me to visit the Kokedera (the Moss Garden Temple), and the amount of rigmarole involved, I decided to forget about it. As before, the girl I spoke to was very pleasant and helpful.



I then returned to the Nishi-Honganji temple (the second one I had visited on Sunday, when I arrived in Kyoto), in order to see the parts that I had previously missed, but discovered that most of the complex was still closed to the public because of the special religious services being held all this week. Although I could hear a monk and a congregation chanting in the main hall, I did not go in, but instead set off for another temple nearby, the Tōji or East Temple, established in AD 823.

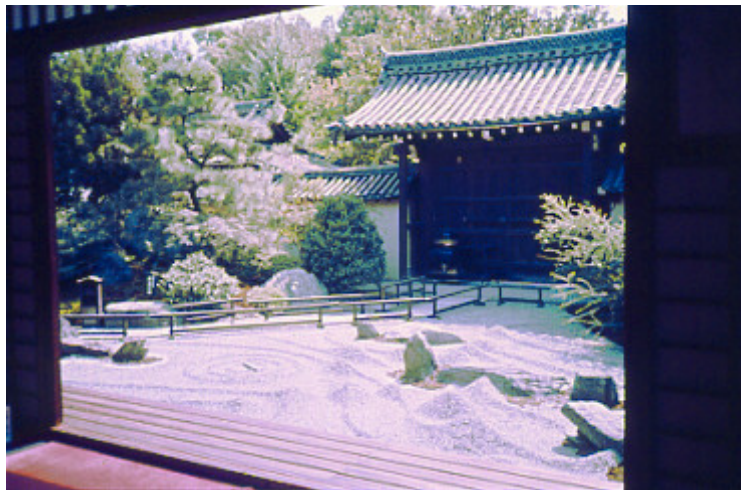


Kondō, Tōji, Kyoto

Walking at a brisk pace, I soon reached it. In addition to the general entrance fee, I paid to see the museum, where, I had read, there was an fine collection of treasures. Whilst the buildings here were impressive, they were not particularly beautiful. The dark five-storeyed pagoda was the tallest in Japan; the Kondō and Kōdō buildings were large and contained fine Buddhist statues. The best part was the famous museum, which I eventually found after a little confusion. Although only some of the treasures were on display, they were very impressive. Here there were more statues, a set of *gagaku* or imperial musical instruments (mostly ornamented drums), paintings and scrolls. One set of scrolls depicted the history of the sect's founder, Kōbō Daishi; I recognised a painting of him that I had seen reproduced in a book at home. In the last room was a large statue of the merciful Kannon (Guanyin), and two mighty mandalas; soft background music wafted from hidden loudspeakers. This dreamlike atmosphere was shattered by the shouts of young children playing in a school behind the building; I could hear an instructor blowing a whistle. The little lads were running about the place and doing exercises in the temple grounds when I left. Everything was done with great gusto, in a rather martial fashion.

Being a student in Japan must be tough. As well as grappling with the complications of the language, there is pressure on the student to perform well, achieve high marks, and, most importantly, to conform. Bullying exists here, but is dealt with in exactly the opposite way from our way of dealing with the problem. The bully is not punished, but the *victim* is. The thinking here is that the victim is at fault for not conforming with what is expected of him or her, and therefore must face the consequences: individualism is not encouraged and an old phrase, 'The nail that sticks out must be hammered down' is often quoted. It takes a very brave person, such as an artist, photographer, musician or writer, to break away from the norm and produce work that is thought-provoking or provocative.

I left the precincts and the boisterous young students, and found my way to a tiny sub-temple called the Kanchi-in, which I had read about in a magazine. Even though I knew that the best time to visit it was in the late afternoon when it was quiet, it suited me better to see it now. After a little difficulty in finding the entrance, I spoke to a young monk (who conversed with me in excellent English) and paid for a visit and an opportunity to experience the famous tea ceremony in one of the tea rooms. The monk loaned me a guidebook written in English; I thanked him and padded off in my stockinged feet.



Garden at Kanchi-in, Tōji, Kyoto

The atmosphere here was wonderful, and the place was very intimate and refined. At last I was experiencing the true Japanese spirit of restraint. Sitting on a veranda, I gazed out over a simple garden of pebbles, rocks and plants, representing Japan, China and the sea in between. Bathed in the morning sunshine it looked exquisite.

Donning special sandals, I wandered out into the garden and, reading the guidebook, examined the interesting architecture (an unusual transitional style) and its special features. Built in 1605, during times of trouble and intrigue involving the Samurai, there were deliberate gaps and openings to expose any intruders who might have been hiding under floorboards and the like.



Kyakuden in the Kanchi-in, Tōji, Kyoto

Having seen the garden, I entered the main building: the *kyakuden* or visitors' hall, where I found a suite of simple, restful rooms. There was a secret room in which the owner or his retainers could hide if attacked; beams were hollowed in order to hold stones – useful for defence in the days when swords were prohibited. I was the only visitor in this little gem of a building. The painted screens around the rooms were old and very fine; most of the pictures were painted using just black ink. In the main room was an incense burner that served as a clock, for it took seven hours for the incense, placed in a zigzag series of grooves, to burn.

While I was relaxing and contemplating everything around me, the monk, who no doubt was wondering why I was taking so long, appeared and invited me to partake in the little tea ceremony. I was thus forced to hurry, thereby foregoing the period of relaxation normally observed prior to such a ceremony. I stepped clumsily through the tea garden – a place for dallying – got lost in the confusion, and only with difficulty found the little tea house. The monk called to me, the awkward *gaijin*; I stumbled into the room and committed my first blunder by facing the wrong way. I was turned around and invited to eat a little cake while the monk made the tea. This he did quite rapidly, whipping the powdered green tea in the typically rough china bowl. Having read about this, I realized that what I was experiencing was a very abbreviated version of the more formal ceremony. I picked up the bowl, examined its chunky surface carefully and drank the bitter tea. It was an interesting experience and my first introduction to this very Japanese custom.

Afterwards, the monk and I fell to talking; the young man asked me about myself and I asked him about the tea utensils and the little room. Finally he rose to go, and invited me to take a closer look at this room and another tea room next door. The room in which I had drunk the tea was a nicely appointed and simply decorated affair, with important old painted screens. The other tea room was more impressive; it looked older and was more elaborate. Still, like the rest of the temple, it was pure and simple in concept.

I then retraced my steps to the main building, where I took another quick look around, this time including the sanctuary, which I had missed, and finally left. The visit had been a revelation; at last I was able to savour what seemed to be really good Japanese taste. Despite the noise of the schoolchildren, the atmosphere in the temple had been delightfully peaceful. Thanks to the freshness of the weather, I was able to appreciate everything so much better.



Fushimi Inari Shrine, Kyoto



I then stepped out into the noise and bustle of the city and walked to the Fushimi Inari Shintō Shrine, which was quite a distance away. En route, I stopped to buy a most attractive-looking packed lunch for a very reasonable sum. At last I arrived at the very colourful and famous shrine with its numerous vermilion buildings. Founded in AD 711, it was dedicated principally to the Goddess of Rice and Food. I paused to watch part of a Shintō ceremony, during which members of the public were given branches of a sacred tree by a priest in white robes, and heard some unusual music being played by young people in a nearby pavilion. The musicians played rattles and bells, drums, a flute, and a *koto*, and some of them sang.



Fushimi Inari Shrine, Kyoto

I then retired to a shady corner, where I quickly ate my tasty lunch, and then walked around the place, soaking up the wonderful atmosphere. I suddenly found myself walking along a pathway that brought me under hundreds of bright red *torii*. At last I emerged into the sunlight at another shrine building. From here I walked round in a circle and returned to my starting point.

Next, I left the shrine and made my way to the train station, where I discovered that my watch was showing the wrong time: it was now 3.20 p.m., not 2.10 p.m.! Having been advised to catch a bus, I jumped on one and travelled back to the Tōfukuji, the temple that I had tried to visit two days previously. Once again, I was

only able to have a very brief visit; this time I paid to see the garden of the Hōjō or Abbot's Hall.



Garden of Hōjō, Tōfukuji, Kyoto

I ambled inside and there, in front of me, was the first Zen garden of raked sand and stones that I had seen in Japan. It was so simple, yet so beautiful – an almost blank canvas on which the mind could decide what to see. I sat down, enchanted, and just let the shapes mesmerize me. The Japanese certainly understood the beauty of mystery. Laid out in 1938, the four rocks before me were supposed to symbolize Elysian islands in the Eight Rough Seas (Hakkai), which were suggested by the sand. While I sat gazing at the garden, a young man raked the sand, first in straight, parallel lines and then into ripples and circles – it was most interesting to watch him. After drinking in everything to the full, I went off to view the three other gardens, which were much simpler and smaller. One had a checkerboard pattern of moss and stone (most unusual) and another had a mixture of shrubs and stones. I could have stayed here forever, but had to leave because of the closing time at four o'clock. What a pity my watch had upset my plans!

Reluctantly I left this beautiful temple. I took a train back to the *ryokan*, collected my luggage, took another train, changed to another that travelled down the middle of a street, and hopped out at the stop for the Higashiyama Youth Hostel. This was a fine, big and modern building. I checked in, booked for three nights and then set about

washing a large amount of clothes. After a quick shower and bath, I sat down to dinner, chatted to some girls at the table, and then spent the rest of the evening writing my diary.