

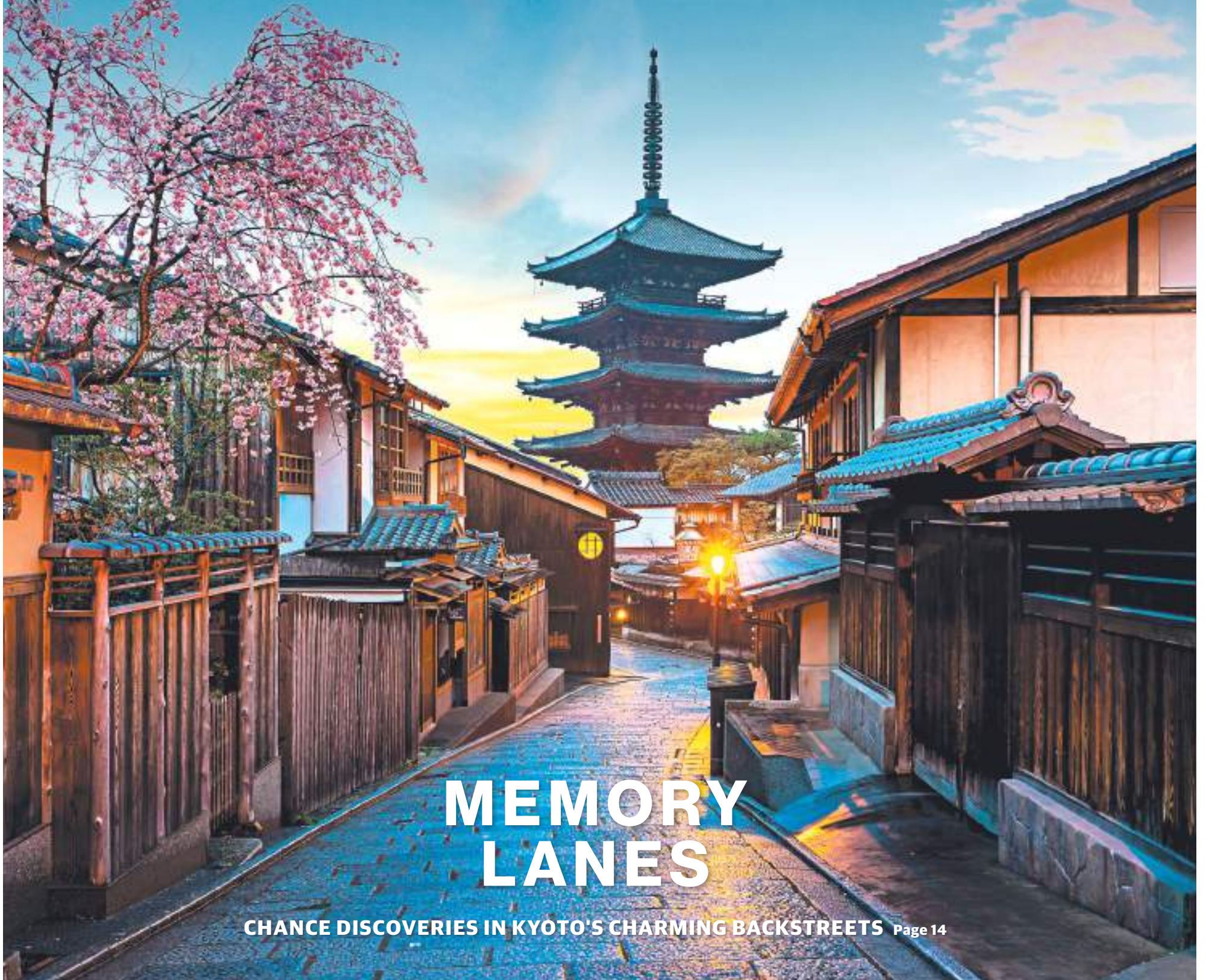
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Portals to the heritage heart of Japan's ancient capital

SUSAN KUROSAWA

DEEP in old Kyoto, with temples and inns all but on the dookey, I am tucked away on a crisp winter's eve at a remarkable new inn. The 23-room Sowaika ryokan, in its simplicity and seamless unification of old and new, sums up a lot of what the former imperial capital, Japan's repository of the golden era of craftsmanship, is all about.

The slatted timber street facade of Sowaika is sufficiently plain to almost recede, but beyond this modest portal lies a miniature wonderland of Japanese design and details. This is the Higashiyama area of the traditional Gion district, a nightlife and shopping quarter with webs of streets that lead, ever narrowing, to discoveries well beyond the expected tourist highlights. Kyoto is a city that rewards the off-the-track traveller with gems, both heritage and new, that are neither big-ticket nor over-touted. But when arriving at the narrow ryokan entrance, I wonder if I've made a terrible mistake. What lies within?

Sowaika's urbane general manager, Taisuke Yajima, smartly kitted up in a navy yukata gown, has the answers. The main wing has been carved from a famous teahouse named Minoko that fell out of fashion in recent years. New owners made the bold move to keep the bones of the classical *zuki-ya* building intact and create several storeys of 11 typical *ryokan* suites around, and looking over, an inner courtyard meticulously planted with flowering bushes and domed with stone lanterns. In an adjoining multi-floored annex, 12 contemporary guestrooms have been created, each is different and has unique structural features.

A boldy stark *benzene*, off-set of a well-regarded Tokyo brand, was added with a separate street entrance for non-guests. The one-time haunt of geisha and their moneyed guests this has become one of Japan's most talked-about new properties, replete with wow factors such as eye-wateringly expensive cutlery and camel-hair mattresses, mid-century furniture in the convivial lounge and valuable artworks. As much local content and creativity as possible has been used. "We want guests to touch Kyoto," says Taisuke.

Nonetheless, negotiation of the building, along unending low-lit corridors, is initially a puzzle which, again, reminds me of the maze of Kyoto away from its regulated boulevards. Apparently the buildings of the tea-house era were deliberately kept narrow to avoid a city tax based on width and became known as *onagi no nadoko*, or "an old's bed". Sowaika, conversely, is a *Sankon* word meaning "happiness".

My chamber, No 202, is in the annex, in the "courtyard view with tatami space" category and is a pleasing hybrid of Japanese and Scandinavian-style elements. The bed is on a raised tatami-stuffed platform, the contemporary grey-tiled ensuite has a deep *hisaki* eypress tub. Low chairs and a bench desk face a window slit framing a miniature garden, designed to be admired from floor level. Of course, there is a name for this usefully Japanese concept: it's *yukuni shoji*, or "window for seeing snow on the ground", cutting out the sky and other potential distractions. This wing of the ryokan feels like a reimagined *machiya*, or Kyoto townhouse, wedged between other buildings but with windows of tiled and gabled roofs and stretches of almost secretive passageways.

All meals are taken at La Bombasse, where black robes, from *dozen* to *uniforms*. A *kaisaki* dinner of seasonal bites includes dishes decorated with strips of gold leaf, intricate leaves and barely-there flowers. Tableware ranges from clam shell-like domes to rippled ceramic patterns. The cuisine is delicate, too, including a deceptively simple *chawan mushi* savoury custard elevated with fish grass and truffles. No wonder La Bombasse is widely expected to vault into the Michelin firmament alongside its one-star Tokyo sibling.

In my bathroom is a supply of *concha-otō*



Kazurami toilettes, made in Kyoto since 1805, and encased in a dainty floral-ruff pouch for Sowaika guests to keep. These products are so nourishing that I ask directions to the shop, a short stroll that leads, in turn, to discoveries of handcraft stores and cafes with just two or three tables. My promenade through this district rich in history lead me back to Kodai-ji temple, diagonally opposite Sowaika, where private after-hours tours are on offer with the inn's concierge staff.

I hurry, too, at Yasaka, the Shinto shrine on Shijo-dori, a few minutes from Sowaika. It's not a festival day but temple-goers are out in force, variously queuing for soft serves of matcha ice cream and warming treats such as parcels containing "vegetables and pickles of

the Kyoto tradition". Think white lanterns etched with calligraphy, red torii gates, ancient bronze bells, the pungent smell of incense. The shrine hosts the month-long Gion Matsuri every July and is extravagantly pink with cherry blossoms in spring. It's a Japanese postcard writ large, although most of the dressed-up maidens are Chinese tourists in rented kimono. How to tell? My friend Keiko says to check the way the women move in the tubular garb. "Only Japanese can walk properly in light kimono and wooden *geta* sandals," she sniffs as we watch a few interlopers tottering along in kitten heels.

On a more organised level, beyond my walks and serendipitous discoveries, I am in the hands of Kyoto Artisans Concierge, visit-

ing a small selection of master craftsmen. At Sawai Shoya, Hisateru Sawai, whose family has been making *sen* since for generations, dinks an ancient-looking ladder in a dim, earthen-floored shed with worn brick walls and removes the cover from a century-old cedar vat before stirring the fermented, salt-rich *sen* bean malt with a long pole. He wears a shower cap, padded jacket and sturdy gumboots and talks of the responsibilities of being born into a 140-year-old dynasty. "There are fewer than 10 places like this left around here," he tells me. And when will this patch of *sen* sauce be ready for bottling? He looks up at the vat and pauses. "It takes three summers but every one is different." Hisateru sells the packaged sauces on site, and tating notes suggest fragrances of rose, hyacinth and cacao in the sweet blends.

Then to Wataban, a *kimono* workshop constructed in 1930, when the water for dyeing was sourced from wells beneath, and re-launched as a foundation with museum and showroom in 1980. It still looks much like a merchant's house and an upstairs studio, created from lumber sourced from a disused primary school, hewn with the clutter of 34 hand-looms. Haruo Murai demonstrates classic weaving techniques on wooden apparatuses that look almost medieval in their simplicity. The speed at which his mostly female workers create intricately wrought, multi-colored brocades and jacquards is astonishing. There are complementary templates these days and a clear sense that the volume of production is no longer small and bespoke but the process is nonetheless riveting. I ask Haruo how many colours for one piece, and he replies, "As many as you wish." In the mu-

IN THE KNOW

The Kyoto Artisans Concierge service can facilitate guided visits to ateliers, studios and small factories where traditional crafts and professions are still carried out and the emphasis is on small scale and family-run. Inclusions could be shikon dyeing, pottery, lacquerware, toriko, paper craft or specialist producers. A recommended guide for individual itineraries is Rika Aoki of Mizuho Kyoto who has many Australian

clients and speaks excellent English; low-cost carrier Scoot flexion stop between Singapore and Kansai Osaka with a flight time of about six hours; *limousine* coaches leave from the airport arrivals concourse every 40 minutes for the 30-minute journey to Kyoto Station, where taxis are freely available.

- [kyoto-travel](#)
- [kyoto-artisans.jp/en](#)
- [hibiki-kyoto](#)
- [lee-kyoto.com](#)
- [lyscout.com](#)



MORE TO THE STORY

The most effective one-stop way to compile an itinerary in Japan using small accommodation with heritage and design credentials is to book a circuit with The Ryokan Collection, which has inns and boutique hotels on its 32-strong list, including Sowaka and four other Kyoto properties. Shinsen (pictured) is set in gardens beside Mt Aso on the southernmost island of Kyushu and features nine guestrooms and a restaurant serving seasonal kaiseki cuisine. The Ryokan Collection website also includes information on cultural protocols such as bathing rituals and the proper wearing of yukata gowns. ryokancollection.com

In bed that night at Sowaka, all is pin-drop quiet and the sweet smell of fresh tatami is almost soporific. At breakfast, a hipster dude who speaks several languages will whoosh me up a perfect cafe latte at La Bombance. Old meets new in Kyoto and rubs along just fine.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of *The Ryokan Collection, Kyoto City Tourism and Scoot.*

Sowaka ryokan, main; guestroom with a garden outlook, above; lounge at the property, above right; Oubai-in garden at Daitoku-ji temple complex, below far left; Camellia Garden teahouse, below left

seum wing is an extraordinary assemblage of centuries-old Noh theatre robes woven with kara-ori patterns in a relief style that looks like embroidery.

Then the afternoon ends at Camellia Garden teahouse where owner Atsuko Mori performs the cha-no-yu ceremony in a weathered century-old house within steps of the Zen gardens of Ryoan-ji temple. The performance, for it is indeed theatrical, makes me breathe deeply and concentrate on the elegance of her hands, the way she purifies and presents the ceramic cups, the fall of the wide sleeves on her peony and chrysanthemum-patterned kimono, her deep bows and reverence for age-old bamboo and iron utensils. Atsuko's movements are so minimal as to be fleeting. She teaches me how to turn my tea-cup using both hands so the "scenery pattern" faces my companions. I must slurp the dregs of the slightly bitter green brew to be rewarded with sweet potato and red bean paste candies that look like little dumplings.

"It took me more than a month to be taught just how to correctly pour the tea," she says. Then with a high, tinkling laugh, reveals her British husband is learning about Jap-

nese samurai armour and traditions in Kyoto. "That is taking him a lot longer."

There are still possibilities in Kyoto to avoid the crowds at the hit-list temples, such as the gold and silver showpieces, Kinkaku-ji and Ginkaku-ji. Just opt for smaller and slightly more remote sites with raked pebble gardens and glades of whispering bamboo. At the 16th-century Oubai-in hermitage and garden, within the broader Daitoku-ji temple complex, the maples are still ablaze in December, in such a flamboyance of red and orange as to seem artificial. At Shoden-ji, up in northern hills, I am the only visitor and the monk, nodding off at his ticket counter, is surprised to see me. Soon three elderly ladies in velvet hats arrive with sketchbooks and painting kits plus thermoses of green tea. They unpack and start ink-wash drawings of Shoden-ji's sacred azaleas. For one crazy moment in a city of close to 1.5 million residents and one of the world's most celebrated centres of culture, the only sounds are of swishing sumi-e horsehair brushes and the light sweeping of the keeper-monk, removing fallen leaves one by one with a small straw broom.



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