

Made in Japan

On the traditional artisan trail in Kyoto

SUSAN KUROSAWA

Shoes off, provided slippers on, we climb a timber staircase of ladder-like height and slope to a big, sunlit room atop a traditional Japanese wooden home. My guide, Rika Araki, a certified Kyoto Visitors Host, and I are at the residence of Koichi Morimoto and his wife in a side street off the grounds of the Kandaijin shrine in central Kyoto.

The Morimotos are of mature age but theirs is no retirement existence. The ground-floor space is an unfathomable clutter of semi-industrial equipment but the indigo-stained vats and stacked buckets offer a clue to what lies above. Morimoto is a master shibori dyer who opens his atelier to visitors as part of a terrific initiative known as Kyoto Artisans Concierge, operated by the Kyoto Museum of Traditional Crafts to highlight art forms in potential decline and to “create a bridge that connects people in search of genuine experiences with artisans”.

Visitors can choose to spend time with renowned makers of pottery, lacquerware, calligraphy, textiles, crafts and other forms of art dating back to the early days of the city's role as Japan's capital, from 794 to 1868. Kyoto remains the country's reliquary of culture, home to its most decorative shrines and temples and authentic ryokan and teahouses.

Morimoto's father established the business in this family home in the 1930s and the concept of artistic dynasty can be found throughout Kyoto, although there are some disciplines that have succumbed due to lack of interest from the present generation or the persistent swamping of more affordable variations from manufacturing giants such as China.

Atelier Morimoto is known for its beautifully decorative wedding futon covers, one of which hangs upstairs in the laboratory-like studio, where I am being shown how to tie-dye a square of raw silk that will be mine to keep and use as a neckerchief or *furoshiki* (Japanese bundle cloth), if it passes the master's scrutiny.

I choose green and gold and explain that these are the colours of Australia, which leads to a discussion of the Socceros' loss to Japan earlier that week. Suddenly things are more jovial and Mrs Morimoto is dispensing cool tea from a tall pot. The rubber-gloved master stirs my square of fabric in and out of pots of dye over a gas fire; he says his father used charcoal and the chimney had to be cleaned all the time.

He then explains the process for the futon covers, which involves painting a sketch with liquid extracted from the blue aobana flower and then cutting a stencil. He shows me the tools that expert seamstresses use to painstakingly knot and bind the pattern. The threads are tight and tiny and that unfinished futon cover, idly hanging behind me, will have taken six months to complete, including the duo-dyeing, drying, removal of thread and steaming. Closer inspection reveals cranes in long-legged flight, formations of wispy clouds, waves and mountains, all depicted in plums and russets and blue-greys. He says the seamstresses train for about 12 years to a professional level and he is worried about the future, when such expertise could be lost.

And now, here is my amateur attempt, as gleaming green as a bowling lawn, quickly buzzed by Mrs Morimoto with a nifty hair dryer, and now ready for me to choose clips and small wooden batons to form the pattern. Mrs Morimoto passes me a handful of thin but strong elastic bands, which I use to bind the batons after pushing through multiple folds of material. The clips are of varying sizes and I am also given plastic laundry pegs, with square or round openings at the tips to add variation. It is classic tie-dyeing, without the tying, if that makes sense, with the patterns forming under the spaces covered by the clamps.

The more elemental technique of shibori means to wring or squeeze and there is a lovely organic unpredictability about the results, as evidenced by the recent trend



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Apprentice geisha in traditional ceremonial dress in the Gion district of Kyoto, above; master dyer Koichi Morimoto, far left; and a detail from one of his wedding futon covers, left

IN SAFE HANDS

An insider escort is a brilliant way to get around Kyoto. While the city is geared to international visitors, and English-speaking taxi drivers display Tourist Friendly signs on their cab doors, it is busy year-round and a lot of time can be wasted in queues and crowds. I am blessed to be guided by Rika Araki of Hibikore Co, whose English is excellent and her love of Australia evident. After our Atelier Morimoto visit, we take off on our own unscripted artisan trail, slipping into stores that sell handmade fans, gorgeous washi-paper stationery, brocade kimono fabric and pottery old and new. There are heritage textiles, including Noh costumes and obi sashes, at Konjaku Nishimura, a two-roomed treasure trove; and contemporary homewares and men's, women's and children's clothing, including yukata-style tops, at Sou-Sou's collection of neighbouring backstreet boutiques.



Tessai-do Co specialises in antiques and scrolls; Izawayaya in kimono accessories such as silk drawstring pouches and tiny handbags. In the heart of the old Gion nightlife quarter, Pagong sells good-value zippered purses made from vintage textiles and lined with contrasting fabrics. Araki also leads more structured half-day and full-day tours, with themes of cuisine, arts and culture, for groups of about five visitors.

Afternoon's end is at the edge of Gion, at green tea headquarters Saryo Tsujiri, established 1860, where brown rice tea is a specialty, prettily packaged boxes of tea make the best souvenirs imaginable, and scoops of matcha or roasted sencha ice-cream come twirled high, nestling in lacy paper cones that are, like Kyoto itself, an immutable work of art.

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• hibikore-kyoto/en/

in Australia for indigo and white smudgy swirls in soft furnishings.

The scarf emerges after further mysterious stirrings and dippings and now Mrs Morimoto is on her knees atop the tatami matting for more drying and a quick iron on a padded plank not much bigger or higher than a skateboard. The background is criss-crossed with the yellow, blue and white diamond shapes I made with the batons and the clip effects are of circles and the two opposing lines that form the hiragana character for the “i” sound. This alphabet artistry is unintentional but the Morimotos seem genuinely amazed. My scarf has passed the test. Mrs Morimoto takes a photograph.

That evening, at Kyoto Four Seasons, a friend and I repair to the hotel's teahouse set by a koi-filled pond.

Aside from the storybook setting and the soft glow from stone lanterns, what really fascinates are the light fixtures, shaped like the bamboo-ribbed Japanese washi-paper umbrellas associated with geisha and garden ceremonies. I am told they are from a much-revered maker, the house of Hiyoshiya, which has saved itself from possible extinction by moving into home decor with Kyo-wagasa umbrella lighting in various shapes as its centrepiece product. The new generation is intent on preserving the craft but has also adopted advanced technology and robust fabrics suitable for outdoors use. Hiyoshiya welcomes students to learn the craft and visitors to its shop and studio through Kyoto Artisans Concierge.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of All Nippon Airways.

Checklist

Bookings are essential at Atelier Morimoto; from ¥2000 (\$23) a person for a 90-minute demonstration and hands-on scarf dyeing. Kyoto Artisans Concierge will arrange an interpreter-guide. More: kyotoartisans.jp. The Kyoto Museum of Traditional Crafts celebrates the city's classic art forms and holds regular hands-on craft classes. More: kmtc.jp/en/. ANA flies direct from Sydney to Tokyo Haneda, the original international terminal, superseded by Narita in 1978. Haneda is substantially closer to central Tokyo, with regular monorail and train connections. The airline has recently appointed Adam Liaw as its culinary ambassador (T&I Loves, P18). More: ana.co.jp. Be armed with a pre-purchased Japan Rail Pass (seven, 14 or 21 consecutive days), valid for most bullet train and limited-express services; it can be activated upon arrival at Haneda or Tokyo stations. More: railplus.com.au. • wagasa.com • fourseasons.com • kyoto.travel • jnto.org.au