

# A WORLD AWAY

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## Now and Zen

With its temples and shrines, serene gardens and time-honoured traditions, Kyoto is a captivating blend of old and new that inspires repeat visits.

**MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH KYOTO** is deep and abiding. Since a first encounter as a student, the city has stayed with me, occupying a corner of my mind that is all calm, cleansed and still, stripped of competing distractions. In those early days, I could afford only the most humble of lodgings. I would book into

### JAPAN

a cheap, tiny inn and enter a universe of decluttering, way before Marie Kondo had arrived with her clean broom. "The room would be small and bare, perhaps save for an origami arrangement of scant stems and, as with all great Japanese design, it was about a studied absence, not a presence, of things," I wrote some years ago. "More than any other nationality, the Japanese do not fiddle about with decor. They let surfaces, finishes and textures just be themselves."

My encounters with this former imperial capital now number more than 20 and still I'm eager for more. Whether visiting with my Nagoya-born daughter-in-law, Sanae, or my favourite guide, Rika, new experiences inevitably unfurl. Not "new new", as Rika would say, "but new old". Because no matter how much may change in this reliquary city of Japan's golden era of craftsmanship and endeavour, it somehow stays the same. Except the traffic, adds my usual driver, Kazuhiko, as he smooths his white gloves, readjusts his black cap, and off we bound. "Like kangaroos!" he announces every time, and without fail we laugh as one.

The right base camp has to be at the heart of a Kyoto story, and the more authentic the better. Traditional ryokan, or inns, offer a privileged taste of service and age-old practices, but the "new old" model is different and more culturally accessible.

The 23-room Sowaka, barely a year in operation, is a fine example of an integration of old teahouse and modern ryokan – guests still get tatami-mat floors and rice-paper shoji screens that slide as though on skates, but with a contemporary design and dining twist that enhances rather than dilutes the experience. Sowaka is in the Higashiyama area of the Gion nightlife and shopping quarter, a maze of narrowing streets leading to ever more specialised stores selling, say, incense that smells as musty as time itself or tiny soaps made from the oil of perfect camellias.

Kyoto is home to 17 UNESCO World Heritage sites and an unknowable number of small treasures that surely deserve similar status. Serendipitous meanders off the straight and narrow main boulevards can lead, too, to less-visited Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, which no matter how humble will be entered via red torii gates, decked out with ribbed white lanterns and bronze bells and sometimes set amid raked pebble gardens or whispering stands of bamboo. Moments of utter quiet in a city of 1.5 million residents might seem impossible. But one northern autumn, I was the only visitor one morning at Shoden-ji, a small temple in the northern hills that's been keeping things quiet and tidy since 1282. The keeper-monk paused from his duties of removing fallen leaves one by one with a little straw broom, bowed deeply and waved away my attempt to pay the entry fee.

A similar sense of solitude is possible in the Arashiyama hills, on the western edge of the city. This area was the summer retreat of the nobility when Kyoto was home to the imperial court of Japan. The air is famously clear and it's a treat to be poled along on a flat-bottomed boat on the Hozugawa River through corridors of hard old trees standing in perfectly serried rows. World Heritage-listed Tenryu-ji

temple is the star turn, but less visited is neighbouring Hogon-in, set amid a botanic garden where maples arch over pathways. Consider staying locally at Suiran, a newish hotel on the site of an imperial villa, once complete with riverside poetry pavilions and strolling grounds. Its hushed spa offers therapies based on "lunar cycles" and the Saryo Hassui cafe, overlooking the Hozugawa, serves sublime mochi cakes filled with green tea paste inspired by the greenery of the hills beyond.

Tradition is everything, in fact, when it comes to tea, especially knowing the ceremonial rules. There could be no better sensei (teacher) than Atsuko Mori of Camellia Garden teahouse near Ryoan-ji temple. She has excellent English and conducts tastings while demystifying age-old practices and revealing priceless snippets of protocol, such as turning a decorated bowl-like cup using both hands so the "scenery pattern" faces your companions. I pass her rigorous training and am rewarded with sweet potato

and red bean paste candies that look like little dumplings.

In the top-luxury category of lodgings, the Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons blend heritage features with immaculate style, but Aman Kyoto, opened in late 2019, occupies a realm of stellar beauty. A tribute stone to its Australian architect, Kerry Hill, who passed away in 2018, stands in a glade that's named in his honour amid cedars, camellias and cypresses covering three hectares within a broader reach of

29 hectares of permanent forest. Although it's a new build, time-honoured design principles apply in the restaurant and public areas plus across 24 guestrooms and a pair of villas of an almost monastic simplicity elevated with all the expected 21st-century comforts and technology.

Nature-based activities for guests include joining a gardener to source slender branches, moss and pebbles to create a miniature bonsai-style creation. Follow up such exertion, I say, by soaking in a hinoki cypress tub sprinkled with yuzu crystals. Breathe deeply and plot your next visit. ▀

**OUT OF THE WOODS** Opposite, from top: Aman Kyoto's Living Pavilion dining space specialises in obanzai-ryori, Japanese home-style cooking with a Kyoto flavour. A ground floor room with batten detailing, floor-to-ceiling windows and tatami flooring.

## TEA AND TOURS

**1 ARTISANS**  
Book a tour with Kyoto Artisans Concierge and visit the ateliers of master craftsmen, from ceramicists and shibori-dyers to paper-makers. For afternoon tea, Aman Kyoto puts on a spread that includes tiny cakes, savoury treats and creamy parfaits served in a pavilion with garden views.

**2 MATCHA**  
Ready for matcha made in heaven? Green tea or roasted sencha ice-cream is a Kyoto speciality; soft serves at the Uji-cha Gion Tsujiri store are sublime.

**3 SHRINES**  
Fushimi Inari Taisha, with its arcades of torii arches, is one of Japan's most photographed shrines; get in early, before the coaches.

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