

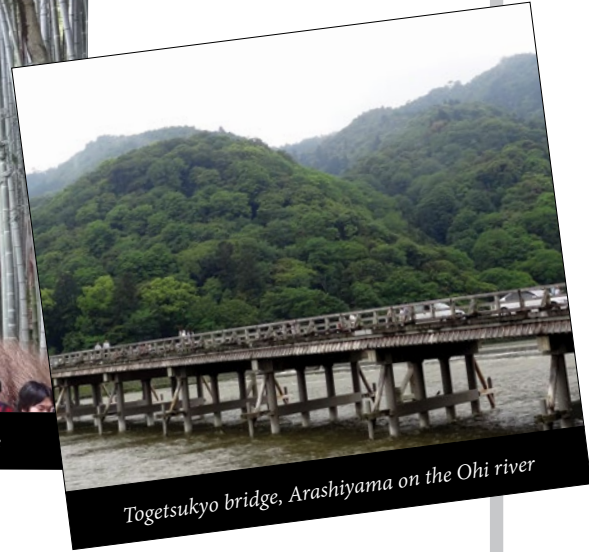
THE BEST OF KYOTO IN 7 DAYS



Inari Shrine Inari, located in Fushimi-ku, Kyoto. It's a tough 2 hour walk up the mountain with thousands of red gates



Arashiyama's fascinating Bamboo Grove



Togetsukyo bridge, Arashiyama on the Ohi river

Japan's beautiful old capital Kyoto is surrounded by green mountains protecting three sides of the quaint and modern city. Mysterious geishas, 13 picturesque rivers, thousands of ancient shrines, festivals, tea ceremony masters, cherished traditions and centuries-old crafts, excellent public transport, and great food and affordable accommodation to suit all tastes, make it a not to be missed place for a holiday. *(Photos by Erik Hadden & Frank Raj)*

I know where Prime Minister Modi got the idea for his clean India, 'Swachh Bharat' campaign – it was probably on his visit to Kyoto. In Japan cleanliness has spiritual origins, and many purification rituals stress good hygiene. Indians however are obsessed with the ritual aspects alone – with little priority for community hygiene as seen even in India's filthy, posh neighbourhoods. Japan's obsession with hygiene started with a systematic national campaign in the Meiji era (1868-1912), which linked hygiene to nationalism.

The PM should do a survey: 'Does India need more hygiene or more religion?' Then delink religion from nationalism, and put all the emphasis on 'Swachh Bharat.' In Japan, for character building, students and teachers together clean and mop up toilets. Tokyo is the largest urban area in the world, with approximately 37 million people, and its population density matches our Indian cities, which proves that sanitation standards can be achieved even in a megacity.

The visit to Japan must have been a humbling experience for our Prime Minister; my own recent Kyoto trip filled me with envy and admiration – for its amazing people and the character of a city where posters and billboards are discouraged from public display.

Kyoto Mayor Daisaku Kadokawa briefed Modi about how the "green, smart and modern yet historic Kyoto" was cleaned up by its citizens. He told Modi that local students actively participated in cleaning up the city, reducing the garbage to 40 per cent.

India has signed an MoU with Japan to develop Varanasi, Modi's parliamentary seat in Uttar Pradesh, on the lines of Kyoto. I can't wait to see our PM develop India's sacred destination into a 'smart city' by learning from Kyoto.

I know, I know, this is meant to be a travel article and I must tell you more about Kyoto and why you should go there. So let me straightaway dispel a myth – comparatively Tokyo maybe expensive, Kyoto is not.

That, as far as prudent Indian sensibilities go is probably the best aspect of the city and the reason why in your travels from the Gulf, Kyoto must figure high on your bucket list of places to travel to.

MYSTIFIED BY GEISHAS?

In Gion district Geisha shuffle between teahouses in their cumbersome zori sandals and exquisite kimono, stalked by camera wielding tourists. Kyoto's Geisha have to deal with the hordes of camera wielding "geisha spotters" who prowl around trying to get a photo of them. On their way to work, kimono clad Geisha will not stop for tourists and do not appreciate being mobbed by strangers so be considerate when you spot them. There are 68 Maiko in Kyoto, and 180 Geiko – as Geisha are named in Kyoto. Maiko are five year apprentices attached to a tea house with no salary but with everything else provided. These are highly respected professions in Japan with nothing sleazy involved.

Exclusive Geisha entertainment with dinner for two including one Maiko, one Geiko and one Jikata (shamisen player) can cost around US\$1,000 or more, depending upon the restaurant and drinks consumed. To experience Geisha entertainment you need a personal introduction from an existing client of a particular Geisha house. Some travel agents can arrange this.

Cheaper options are available in Kyoto like the Kyoto Cuisine and Maiko Evening, which is offered by Gion Hatanaka Ryokan. A small group is dined and entertained by several Geisha, who dance and engage in conversation during the meal. There is a height restriction for Geishas: to join the revered ranks of the flower and willow world, women must be under 5ft 3in. Gion is not just about Geisha, every July the Gion Matsuri festival attracts more than a million



Nijo Castle built in 1603 as the Kyoto residence of the Tokugawa Shogun, noted for the stark contrast between its solemn appearance and beautiful interior



Bicycles are very popular in Kyoto even executives in business suits can be seen going to work



Festival Goryosai Kami-goryo shrine monks



Le Temp restaurant- Hotel Granvia



Geiko (Kyoto Geisha) on the run from tourists in the Gion district-click but don't intrude.

visitors for its festival floats and traditional musical performances.

There are Zen gardens beautifully landscaped with Haiku-inspiring plant formations. Perhaps few city names are as evocative as "Kyoto," a city with a heartbeat that moves to an altogether different rhythm than the neon-lit urban vastness of Tokyo. Compact Kyoto is home to about a million and a half people, and synonymous with ancient temples, tea ceremonies, traditional ryokan inns and centuries-old craftsmanship that is still evident in its unique handicrafts you will want to take home as souvenirs.

Kyoto's inheritance as Japan's imperial capital for more than 1,000 years is tangible in the pageantry of its heritage. Although ravaged by wars, fires, and earthquakes during its eleven centuries as the imperial capital, Kyoto during World War II was removed from the atomic bomb target list (which it had headed) by the personal intervention of Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson who knew Japan's cultural relic from his honeymoon and later diplomatic visits to Kyoto. Nonetheless, despite its well-preserved heritage, Kyoto is not just about the past, its modern cityscape confidently embraces the future, with strikingly modern buildings, a high concentration of universities and a thriving technology industry (it's the birthplace of Nintendo).

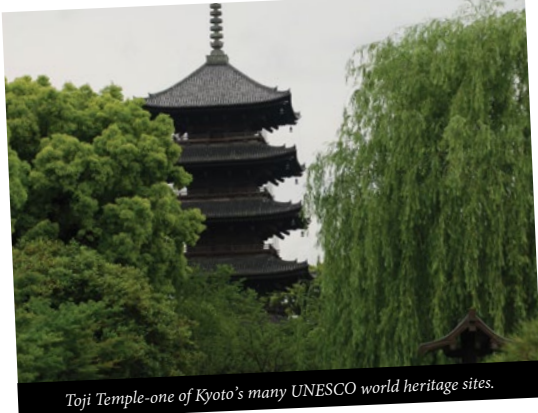
The city's 2000 religious places-1600 Buddhist temples and 400 Shinto shrines, besides palaces, gardens and architecture, make Kyoto one of the best preserved cities in Japan. Among the most famous temples in Japan are Kiyomizu-dera, a magnificent wooden temple supported by pillars off the slope of a mountain; Kinkaku-ji, the Temple of the Golden Pavilion; Ginkaku-ji, the Temple of the



Festival Goryosai at Kami-goryo shrine procession



Coffret d'Amitie restaurant - great value.



Toji Temple-one of Kyoto's many UNESCO world heritage sites.



Old and the new-East & West- traditional kimono clad women

Silver Pavilion; and Ryōan-ji, famous for its rock garden. The Heian Jingu is a Shinto shrine, built in 1895, celebrating the Imperial family and commemorating the first and last emperors to reside in Kyoto. Three special sites have connections to the imperial family: the Kyoto Gyoen area including the Kyoto Imperial Palace and Sento Imperial Palace, homes of the Emperors of Japan for many centuries; Katsura Imperial Villa, one of the nation's finest architectural treasures; and the Shugaku-in Imperial Villa.

The "Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto" are listed by the UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. These include the Kamo Shrines (Kami and Shimo), Kyo-o-Gokokuji (To-ji), Kiyomizu-dera, Daigo-ji, Ninna-ji, Saiho-ji (Kokedera), Tenryu-ji, Rokuon-ji (Kinkaku-ji), Jisho-ji (Ginkaku-ji), Ryoan-ji, Hongan-ji, Kozan-ji and the Nijo Castle, primarily built by the Tokugawa shoguns who ruled for over two centuries.

Instead of Kansai International Airport near Osaka it's probably best to arrive from Tokyo on the amazing bullet train; dozens depart daily from Tokyo Station, taking around two hours and 20 minutes. The roundtrip fare for a reserved seat on the Shinkansen (bullet train) from Tokyo to Kyoto is ¥27,820. The most important thing to remember is that you must purchase the pass outside Japan. On arrival you will straightway notice the fabulous ultra-modern glass-and-metal Kyoto Station and a McDonalds and Starbucks just across the street.

To do Kyoto in style there are plenty of options. One option is to stay at the plush Hotel Granvia Kyoto, (www.granviakyoto.com) which is located right inside the JR Kyoto Station Building Complex.

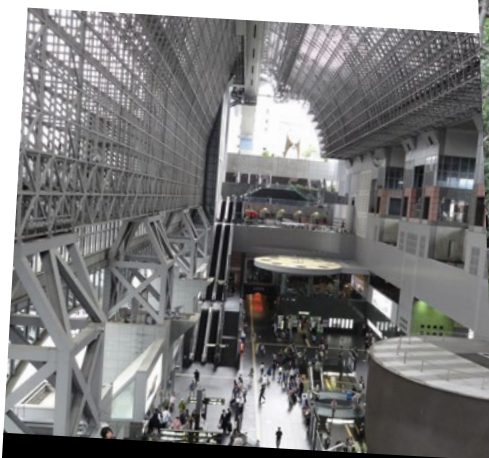
Kyoto Station is a visually striking architectural masterpiece and includes a department store, museum, musical theater, and a vast underground shopping mall. From this convenient location, you have direct and easy access to and from Kansai International Airport and major metropolitan destinations across Japan including Osaka, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagoya, and Fukuoka.

There are comfortable business hotels like the Smile Hotel (www.smile-hotels.com) that offer good value in the US\$100 range with pleasant, clean rooms and friendly staff in a great location like Shijo Dori, near the subway, adjacent to convenience stores. Smile Hotel is within a 10 minute walk of Karasuma railway station and about 15 minutes to major departmental stores.

The rooms are a bit small, but with so much to see and do in Kyoto, you mainly need it for sleeping. No cupboard space seems to be normal in Japan, so you can't unpack your suitcase. Skip their breakfast to go to coffee shops like Tullys, Prinz, Lugol, Inoda etc. where you can have a nice breakfast for less than US \$10.

There are also fine independent hotels like Kyoto Traveler's Inn (www.k-travelersinn.com) which like most hotels in Kyoto or Japan, use seasonal rates in





Kyoto Station has a vast underground shopping mall, museum, theater and the impressive Hotel Granvia.



Kyoto has 13 rivers- how do they keep their waterways so clean?



Yukihide Hirata-Owner of 28 year old Mughal restaurant serves no beef or pork and uses only Halal meat

the price range of US\$ 50-90 depending on the room, or numbers of occupancy. Izumi Nagakawa the owner returned to Kyoto after a long stint in the U.S. and she is someone worth getting to know in Kyoto.

Budget accommodation in various categories is also available, just google and checkout options at <http://www.hostelworld.com/hostels/Kyoto/Japan> and the popular online hotel booking sites and you will find something to suit your pocket.

SHOPPING

Takashimaya is the doyen of department stores in Kyoto, take your passport to avail of tax free shopping by foreign tourists for purchases of over US\$ 85 (¥10,000) on one calendar day. In case of consumable goods, such as foods, medicines and cosmetics, the consumption tax is waived for purchases of over ¥5,000, but the package of such goods must be kept unbroken until after departure from Japan. If you want to see how the locals shop for their needs go to the famous Nishiki Market for Japanese delicacies and much more. The Kyoto Art Museum at Okazaki sells a good range of Japanese arts and crafts such as wood-block prints, Japanese dolls, damascene crafts, pearls, clothing etc. Kyoto being the cultural capital of Japan you can find traditional goods like lacquerware, washi (traditional Japanese paper), incense, ceramics, green tea, kimono, yukata (light summer robes), martial arts goods, antiques, scrolls, etc.

EATING OUT

Dining out is an absolute pleasure in Kyoto, and my son-in-law Erik Hadden and I being avid foodies were not in the least disappointed for Kyoto is nirvana for food-lovers. Research shows the Japanese are eight times less likely to die from coronary heart disease, seven times less likely to die from prostate cancer, six and a half times less likely to die from breast cancer

and two and half times less likely to die from colon cancer. The International Obesity Task Force claims the Japanese have the lowest rates of obesity (only 2.9%) in the world, versus 11% for the French and 32% for Americans. Evidence indicates they live leaner and age slower than the rest of the world. In fact, they are more likely to reach 100 years than anyone else in the world, a fact that most researchers attribute to their diet.

According to Trip Advisor there are about 30 Indian restaurants in Kyoto and probably the best is Mughal owned by the intrepid Japanese entrepreneur chef Yukihide Hirata who launched Mughal 28 years ago. He has hosted many dignitaries including (believe it or not) Bandit Queen Phoolan Devi, whose photo he displays in his restaurant gallery. An authentic non vegetarian meal for two at Mughal will cost about US\$ 100 (¥12,000) but the portions are good and there are plenty of options for all tastes.

For Teppanyaki aficionados, Kenji Mita is the 3rd generation owner of Mikaku and a master of the Teppan



Japanese "Thali". Obansai Ryori is the traditional home cooking cuisine of Kyoto -about US\$ 16-20 per person

(the iron plate where food is artistically cooked before your eyes). An expert in beef and how to choose it, he serves perfectly marbled, mouth wateringly succulent "Kobe beef" steak at Mikaku. Kenji uses only virgin cows only and when you eat at Mikaku, you will know the difference. (Meal for two: US\$ 40) (¥4,500)

Our love of experimentation led us to Coffret d'Amitie, (075 212 5203) a restaurant with Horigotatsu seating where the floor is dug out under the table for leg space. Rural French cuisine is lovingly prepared by the owner Ms. Nakamura. Full of natural light this is a cosy place to enjoy a relaxing French meal... with chopsticks! The menu is laden with whole vegetables, the butter roasted Sea Bream, for example, comes in a sauce made from Kujonegi scallions and Kamo tomatoes. Many of the delectable homemade desserts, and even beverages, are also vegetable-based. US\$ 42 (About ¥5,000 for two).

Kyoto is famous for its Tofu, its sublime Kaiseki cuisine and its Buddhist vegetarian fare. It's also a great place to sample all the main classics of Japanese cuisine. Yuba (tofu skim), Kaiseki (Japanese haute cuisine), Shojin ryori (Japanese Buddhist vegetarian cuisine), Kyo-wagashi (Kyoto sweets), Yudofu (tofu cooked in hot broth) Of course, Kyoto is also a great place to work your way right through the whole Japanese gastronomy including teppanyaki, sushi, tempura, soba, udon, ramen, unagi and okonomiyaki.

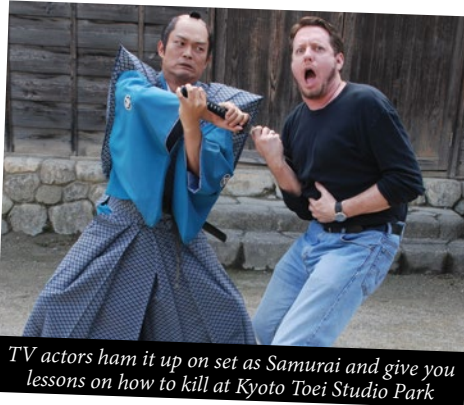
Vegetarian restaurants in Kyoto include: Falafel Garden, Café Proverbs 15:17, Biotei, and Tosuiro.

SUMO WRESTLING

Our big disappointment was



Craftsman at the Kyoto Museum of Traditional Crafts



TV actors ham it up on set as Samurai and give you lessons on how to kill at Kyoto Toei Studio Park



Nishiji Market for local delicacies



Mikaku Teppanyaki restaurant for the finest Kobe steaks

to discover there are no sumo tournaments held in Kyoto, only in Osaka (11 minutes away by bullet train) and Nagoya (40 minutes away by bullet train) and Tokyo; but since these are held only at certain times of the year we missed the opportunity.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Potentially a year-round destination, Kyoto's summer months are rainy, hot and humid with cold winters and the occasional snowfall. Spring and autumn are the most beautiful times of year for the glorious cherry blossom (early April) and the fiery red changing of the leaves (early November) when Kyoto is at its busiest.

Kyoto's charm is its past glory as Japan's former capital, and its self-assured forward mindset. The Kyoto Protocol that requires industrialized countries to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases was adopted at the third session of the Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC (COP 3) held in Kyoto in 1997.

Kyoto's remarkable collection of UNESCO World Heritage sites alone is distinctive, but the city of ten thousand shrines also boasts a still-working Geisha district in Gion, exquisite cuisine, and sightseeing that will take your breath away. It's not all temples and tradition either: the city has its share of hip cafes and modern art. In Chinese philosophy, yin and yang describes how apparently opposite or contrary forces are actually complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world. Kyoto can be quite appropriately considered the cultural Yin to Tokyo's Yang. ■

Frank Raj is TII's founding editor.