



ETERNALLY CHARMING KYOTO

Time stands still and centuries of history and culture come together in this picture-perfect ancient city, home to a treasure trove of all things quintessential to the 'Land of the Rising Sun'.

By KUNAL BHATIA AND SHUVAJIT PAYNE



Colourful autumn leaves create a charming setting for the golden Kinkaku-ji shrine.

“YOU CAN NEVER SEE ALL 15 rocks at once,” declared the caretaker at Ryoan-ji’s Zen garden, even as we strained our necks, not completely believing the genteel *ojisan* (uncle) who uttered these words. It shouldn’t be so tricky, we thought while shifting a few feet back and forth to get a complete view of the meticulously arranged rocks—each set out on patches of moss and surrounded by a bed of precisely raked white pebbles. It’s a deceptively simple composition that has intrigued visitors ever since this temple-garden was laid out in Kyoto by a monk over 500 years ago! For the past five centuries, this has been *the* Zen garden to admire. It draws fans, like us, from across the world for its sheer beauty, made even more picturesque by the vivid colours of autumn, the season of our visit.

Not much later, we soon realised that this site was just the precursor of many more treasures that awaited us in Kyoto. It should come as no surprise as the city had been the historical capital of Japan for more than a millennium!

On Hallowed Grounds

With over 1,600 Buddhist temples and 400 Shinto shrines—among which, a remarkable 16 are UNESCO World Heritage Sites—we were never too far from a sacred spot in Kyoto. As you would imagine, we were spoilt for choice. We decided to first make a beeline for Kinkaku-ji, a short 20 minutes’ walk from Ryoan-ji’s garden. Known as the Golden Pavilion, this shimmering Buddhist shrine is

Devotees offers silent prayers at the rock garden of the Ryoan-ji Zen temple.



perched on the edge of the Kyokochi Pond. Once a shogun’s (military ruler) residence, it was converted into a Zen temple in the early 15th century and derives its name from the gold leafing that coats its exteriors. The sight is nothing short of magical, with flaming red maple trees framing the temple’s reflection on the pond’s placid waters. Since entering the pavilion is out of bounds, we joined the crowds of tourists, all seeking a glimpse of the Buddha and Goddess of Mercy deity that sit within from across the pond. It was a truly mesmerising spectacle.

By now, we were in the mood for a quiet escape, and so, we decided to visit the more solitary Honen-in Temple in the eastern part of the city. Lesser known and off the well-trodden trail, it sits just beyond Tetsugaku no Michi, or The Philosopher’s Path, a gorgeous tree-lined walkway alongside a quaint canal: a scene bursting with autumn’s orange and crimson hues.



Tranquil environs of the Honen-in Temple.

be symbolically purifying. With prayer halls, ponds, and even a moss garden, Honen-in embodies the meditative essence of Buddhism. We felt as if whatever we would’ve wished for in that enchanting ambience would’ve been granted to us!

Nourishment for the Soul

Hearts and minds satiated, the stomach soon began beckoning for attention. As the seat of the Japanese emperors on one hand and with a strong Buddhist influence on the other, Kyoto boasts two very distinctive styles of cuisine: *shojin ryori* and *kaiseki ryori*. Our first culinary tryst was with the former at Shigetsu, a restaurant within the Tenryu-ji temple complex. *Shojin ryori* is the traditional vegetarian cuisine served to Buddhist monks who are prohibited from eating meat and seafood. It was a pleasant surprise to learn that the meal is often prepared without any

A thatch-roofed *sanmon* (entrance gate) welcomes us in, beyond which are two raised sand beds known as *byakusadan*. We made sure to pass between the mounds—a gesture said to

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TO LIMITLESS POSSIBILITIES



onion or garlic. Instead, seasonal and locally-grown produce is used to create an astonishing variety of dishes in a balanced meal with five colours, five flavours, and five preparation methods. Delicacies included pumpkin soup, sesame tofu, eggplant in miso paste, and jellied sweets. In addition to the usual salty, sour, bitter, and sweet tastes, we also relished the essence of umami—a rich, long-lasting, savoury flavour. The simple meal served to us on tatami mats, with the sprawling temple gardens stretching out in front of us, filled us with gratitude.

After that wholesome meal, a leisurely stroll was on the cards. And so, we headed to Arashiyama, Kyoto's mystical bamboo grove, located very close to the restaurant. This thick forest of tall, thin green stalks soaring up to 30 feet high is truly enchanting, and the effect of the late-afternoon sunshine piercing through them is sublime. In sections where there was no one else but us, the rustling sounds of the bamboo swaying in the wind rang through our ears. Forever etched in our minds, the sound is so iconic that it is the only one from Kyoto to be selected for the Japanese government's list of '100 Soundscapes of Japan'. Music to our ears!

Elegant Evenings

As the sun fell, we made our way to Gion—central Kyoto's famed geisha district. *Geiko*, as they are locally known in the city, and *maiko* (apprentice geisha) are high-end Japanese entertainers skilled in traditional arts, etiquette, tea ceremonies, and the like. Immaculately dressed in flowering kimonos, hair coiffed up neatly, and with white-powdered faces, the women trot with a poised grace across the streets and alleys, rushing to their evening appointments. Catching a glimpse of them is surreal and an only-in-Japan



A visitor strolls through the lush trees of the captivating Arashiyama Bamboo Grove.

moment, but courtesy demands that one keep distance and refrain from interrupting them.

Instead, we stepped into one of the many *machiya*s (wooden merchant houses) that have been transformed into sophisticated restaurants. These specialise in Kyoto's second famed food-style—*kaiseki ryori*, which is haute Japanese cuisine spread over multiple courses. We were off to a good start with bite-sized *sakizuke* (appetisers) served with sake or plum wine. Following this was an assortment of mains, which the chefs kept doling out generously. The highlights included a *osuimono* (clear soup), *yakimono* (grilled fish), *agemono* (fried tempura), *mushimono* (steamed, savoury egg custard), and *sunomono* (vinegared shrimp and octopus). Just when we thought we'd had our fill, out came the *shokuji*—a set of rice, miso soup, and pickled vegetables served only towards the end of the meal! And finally, there was a dessert plate of fresh fruit and

A sumptuous feast of dishes from the *kaiseki ryori* cuisine.



confectionery, along with some matcha. We'd indulged a bit more than we should have, and dining to our heart's content demanded another stroll, this time around Gion. With fall leaves rustling under our feet, we wondered if we perhaps might spot a *geiko* again?

Connoisseurs of Colours

The next morning, we rose early to visit southern Kyoto's Fushimi Inari Taisha, amongst the most prominent Shinto (Japan's indigenous religion)



The bright and beautiful orange torii gates loom large at the Fushimi Inari Taisha shrine.

shrines in the country. The holy place is over 1,300 years old and well known for its series of orange *torii* gates snaking up a hillside. Dedicated to Inari, the deity of agriculture and business success, the gates are donations from those whose prayers have been answered. Numbering in the hundreds and lined up close to each other, they're unlike anything else we've seen so far!

This explosion of attractive colours continues through the day. By a stroke of luck, we were thrilled to secure tickets to *Gion Odori*, an annual song and dance spectacle held each November by Gion's *geiko* and *maiko*. Set to the beats of traditional music, the ladies put up a stellar show, leaving the audience enthralled with their synchronised movements, intricate dresses, and elaborate make-up.



An elegant maiko in a floral green kimono.

Riding that post-show high, we headed towards another elation: retail therapy at the lively Nishiki Market. Here there was an array of teas, pickles, and sake to choose from, as well as endless varieties of regional sweets such as *dorayaki* (pancake-like patties filled with red bean paste).

Shoppers enjoying a night out at the bustling Nishiki Market.



We couldn't miss picking up loved Japanese products like bento boxes, colourful hand fans, *kawaii* ceramics, and even *shokuhin sampuru*—replica models of popular Japanese dishes displayed outside restaurants!

Shopping bags full and street-food treats in hand, we settled down on a bench overlooking the Kamo River and watched this ethereal city twinkle at dusk. As our visit came to an end, our thoughts returned to the very beginning. What does the Zen garden at Ryoan-ji mean? Does it symbolise islands in an ocean or mountains between clouds? Some say the rocks are tiger cubs crossing water. Others, like us, slowly accept to let our minds wander off into a state of bliss. After all, in a city as historic and culturally rich as Kyoto, mysteries abound and not every question has an answer.

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