




# AWAKENING KYOTO'S SECRETS

An ancient city resurges with progressive flair, beckoning new-age connoisseurs to indulge in its refined charms

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A distant glimpse of  
Hōkan-ji Temple graced  
by blooming cherry  
blossom of spring



A distinctive clomp resonates over the cobblestones as an impeccably dressed *geiko* darts across the winding alley. All heads turn towards her exquisite floral-patterned kimono, a nod to *sakura*—the blooming cherry blossoms of spring. A few seconds later, this burst of colour gracefully escapes curious eyes, slipping away behind weathered wooden doors. While it is a scene that has played out over centuries in Kyoto, the city's age-old

ways of life, celebrated traditions, and artisanal crafts are being revived and reborn with avant-garde sensibilities.

During its millennium-plus reign as Japan's historic capital, from 794 to 1868 CE, hundreds of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines were built across Kyoto. At the 600-year-old Shokoku-ji Temple, hidden behind the prayer halls and tranquil ponds, is a stunning contemporary art exhibit by Nihonga artist Kokyo Hatanaka. Titled '*Depicting*

*Pure Light and Clarity*', the show brings together his Buddhist philosophies and passion for Indian miniatures with works that are pensive yet embracing life and colour. It is a rare chance to see a large-scale solo exhibition of Hatanaka's paintings, many of which were produced in 2024.

The mesmerising depiction of emotions echoes in another cultural tradition, albeit taking a different form. Noh is a type of classical Japanese

**Clockwise from left:** Banana Offering (2023), part of Kokyo Hatanaka's exhibit at the Jotenkaku Museum in Shokoku-ji Temple employs a flattened perspective, vivid scenery, and bold use of colour; An exquisite piece by Takeshi Nakajima, breathing new life into Japan's ancient dyeing traditions; An integral component of Noh dance-drama theatre, these masks are prized possessions and vary between dozens of styles and expressions encompassing men, women, demons, and deities.

theatre with stylised movements, elaborate costumes, and soulful masks. Performers adorn these wooden faces to convey a range of expressions, which can dramatically change depending on how light hits their surface. Mask making is a laborious process, conventionally passed over generations. But, at the atelier of Mitsue Nakamura, young women apprentices are being trained in this coveted skill. Visitors are welcome to spend the day and try their

hand at different stages of production, from cutting and carving logs to colouring and coating to bring them to life. Be warned, though, the masks demand plenty of patience and can take up to a year to complete.

Such diligence is also evident across *kaiseki*—the region's favoured haute cuisine. At Kyoto Kitcho Arashiyama, helmed by third-generation chef Tokuoka Kunio, patrons are treated to painstakingly prepared and delicately



**Clockwise from left:** A symbol of Kyoto's true soul, Fushimi Inari Taisha pulses with timeless grace; Kintsugi is a traditional craft that repairs chipped and cracked pottery, while accepting breakage and putting-together as an inherent aspect of life itself; Thousands of crimson-coloured torii gates, each an offering of gratitude, line the premises of Fushimi Inari Taisha.

plated dishes. The private dining areas reflect understated Japanese elegance—pared-down, tatami-lined rooms with shoji screens opening onto a pristine garden. Guests choose the number of courses they would like to have, but the dishes served are a surprise. Expect the chefs to craft an experience governed by seasonality, natural ingredients, and the choicest of fresh produce, often sourced on the same day. Whether it is the *sakizuke* (appetisers) or *suimono* (soup), *mukozuke* (sashimi) or *yakimono* (grilled dish), a visual spectacle and melody of delightful flavours awaits.

To engage with the soul of Kyoto, partaking in a tea ceremony is a must. In the upscale neighbourhood of Gion, Maikoya provides personalised sessions

in a historic *machiya* (townhouse). Guests are encouraged to don kimonos and prepare *wagashi* (Japanese sweets) with red bean paste and rice flour, along with matcha tea, under the watchful eye and guidance of a learned master. Having shaped one's own treats and brewed one's own cup, the sense of refreshment and peace that follows is rather satiating. The setting, perhaps, has an equal part to play in this contentment.

*Kyo-machiya*, as they are locally known, are traditional wooden houses with a shop in the front and living spaces at the back. Long and narrow, they were mainly built in the 16<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Edo period, with complex carpentry details that are hard to replicate today. Growing conservation

efforts are prompting a handful of these to be adapted into boutique guesthouses such as the chic Maana Kyoto. With original wooden beams and clay walls, subdued lighting, and a hand-crafted ceramic bathtub overlooking a hidden courtyard garden, Maana's minimalist spaces are the epitome of sophisticated simplicity that only discerning eyes can appreciate.

Occupying pride of place in the *tokonoma* (alcove) of the living room at Maana Kyoto is a dyed fabric artwork by textile artist Takeshi Nakajima. He is part of an emerging wave of young artists experimenting with and pushing the boundaries of long-established techniques. Working with the *hikizome* style of hand dyeing, each piece of

fabric—be it for a kimono, a drape, a lampshade, or a cushion cover—is made unique by welcoming imperfections that arise from brush strokes, colour bleeds, unevenness, and even the temperature and humidity of the day.

Finding beauty within despair is best showcased by the art of Kintsugi, literally meaning 'to join with gold'. It has long been used to repair broken pottery and ceramics with gold-dusted lacquer. POJ Studio offers classes to learn the craft and also takes custom mending requests. Artisans spend months meticulously breathing life into broken pieces, rekindling the love for the old and the precious while paving the way for new-found appreciation. Much like the case for Kyoto itself. 🍱

