



Springtime in Kyoto

words & pictures
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Framed by an exquisite golden panel, an old man rocks animatedly back and forth on his heels. He holds a bamboo brush in one hand, flicking ink as black as an oil slick left and right across a sheet of crisp white paper.

His face is stern with concentration but contrary to solemn appearances, master calligrapher Mr Magami is in high spirits. Today he is celebrating with artful script a hallowed day in the country's calendar.

He points outside to a tree trunk, gnarled by the centuries, whose branches are bursting forth with delicate white petals. "The plum blossom is the first messenger of spring in Japan. It comes long before the cherry, this is a good day!"

Waving a hand over the *kanji* characters, he slowly translates his intricate hieroglyphics, "The plum blossom is so white...it makes the moon look very beautiful." He nods with satisfaction, rolls up the paper and kindly gifts me the scroll.

"Spring is a very important time in Japanese culture," he explains as we walk to the garden gate, "because the flowers come then they fade and fall. It is a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of life," he finishes, rather poetically.

I have arrived in Kyoto for the weekend, just as February gives way to March and the city wakes from its wintery slumber. Everywhere the streets are full of lively chatter, nowhere more so than Nishiki Market, also known as 'Kyoto's Kitchen', where housewives go in search of fresh sushi and colourful pickles, their kimonos pulled tight in the brisk air.

Here, even the bento boxes are dressed in finery to celebrate the new season, garlanded with edible, pink plum flowers known as *nama-fu*. Such boxes will be ceremoniously opened by Kyoto-dwellers at special blossom-viewing picnics or *hanami* in the coming days, just one of the many glorious traditions which make Kyoto such a popular destination with culture-seeking travellers to the Far East.



Previous page: Torii gates in the plum grove of the Kitano Tenmangu shrine.

Above: Ms Moriya, a tea mistress, begins the *chanoyu* or tea ceremony.

Below: Plum blossoms outside the Shoden Eigen-in Temple.



While the 'City of Ten Thousand Shrines' certainly boasts an extraordinary cultural heritage, first impressions can be disappointing. Here, much of the past competes for space with a modern-day fondness for concrete. Coach loads of tourists add to the swell of 1.5 million locals, rather diminishing the shine of sights such as the Golden Pavilion as they pause only for a selfie before moving on to the next Instagram post.

In order to experience something altogether more authentic, spiritual even, it requires the visitor to Kyoto to put away their maps and guidebooks and embrace the pleasures of getting lost. Armed with a smattering of conversational Japanese, I head off to do just that, down atmospheric streets of timber-frame houses far from the camera-clicking crowds.

After wandering a while I come across the Korin-in temple, complete with its own magnificent teahouse, set in a garden of ferns and red maples, purportedly designed by the 17th-century master-landscaper Kentei.

Sporting a large bamboo hat like an upturned wok, the temple's Zen Buddhist monk greets me with a "konichiwa" before scurrying away to oversee a funeral. I arrange a tea ceremony with Korin-in's tea mistress Ms Moriya who first invites me to wash at the outdoor washbasin. "You need to purify yourself, it's like cleansing before you go to pray," she says.

Squeezing through a small 'crawling-in door', the tea hut is a single room of perpendicular lines and desaturated colours, the opaque screen walls smothering the sunlight in order, I am told, to heighten one's sense of taste and smell.

Joined by her colleague Ms Akiyama, the preparation of *matcha* (powdered-green tea) proceeds at a pace where time visibly slows, every deliberate movement resembling performance art. Accompanied by a deep bow, I'm passed a bowl and sip the leafy, astringent liquid. Ms Moriya tells me she's been studying the infinite intricacies of the tea ceremony for an incredible twenty-six years. "In life, you must carry on learning and improving, but you can never achieve



Above: A *tsukubai*, a stone washbasin where guests attending a tea ceremony purify themselves with the ritual washing of hands and rinsing of the mouth.

Below: Mr Ninko Magami, master calligrapher, at work in one of the rooms of the Shoden Eigen-in Temple.





Above: A street in the Gion Hagashi district of Kyoto, where 'Tomitsuyu' lives.

Opposite: A *maiko's* hair ornaments change with the seasons, her *maquillage* is designed to make her neck look more slender and beautiful.

total perfection, that's impossible," she says philosophically.

Nightfall comes, casting a layer of magic across the old city. As diners take to their tables in the world-class restaurants, I head to the neighbourhood of Gion Hagashi, one of Kyoto's 'flower towns', or geisha districts, where I've arranged an exclusive glimpse into this hidden world.

Since the distant days of the Samurai, geishas have entertained guests with their skilled blend of classical music, traditional dance and witty

conversation. Highly respected entertainers, they spend five years as apprentices or *maiko*, living secluded lives and studying arduously before graduating to the position of *geiko* (as Kyoto's geishas are known).

Granted only a fleeting audience, I knock on the door to the *maiko's* house which is answered by her *oka-san*, a foster parent-cum-manager who guides me to the 'entertaining room'. From here I can just make out whispered conversation and the sound of shuffling fabric next door. 'Tomitsuyu' (her *maiko* moniker, I am not allowed to know her real name) then makes her grand entrance.

With great deliberation she kneels and smoothes her kimono into place, her halo of jewel-encrusted daffodils occasionally catching the dim light. She lifts her head to reveal a face painted ghostly white with flashes of red across the eyes and lips. I can't help but let out an inner gasp.

Speaking in a high-pitched voice to accentuate her youth, she tells me a little of her life, that she has reached her final year of *maiko* studies and relishes the learning of traditional Japanese arts, especially flower arranging.

She points out her special obi belt, worn only by *maiko*, and shyly shows me the nape of her neck, the *maquillage* designed to make it look more slender and beautiful in candlelight.

As this brief encounter draws to a close I ask about the flowers in her hair. She has chosen them especially to reflect the arrival of spring. "I love this blossom season," she tells me in a girlish tone, "but it goes quickly. It is a reminder that life is short, and we must live it well and wisely."

