

# Travel



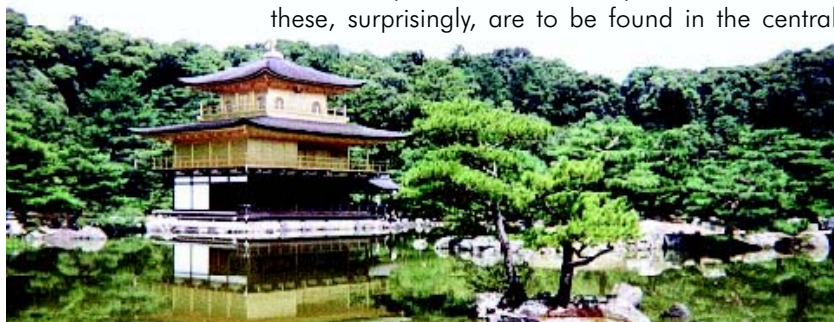
# GURU

By John White

The capital of Japan for more than a thousand years, Kyoto is endowed with an almost overwhelming legacy of ancient Buddhist temples, majestic palaces and gardens of every size and description, not to mention some of the country's most important works of art, its richest culture and its most refined cuisine. For many people the very name Kyoto conjures up the classic image of Japan: streets of traditional wooden houses, the click-clack of *geta* on the paving stones, *geisha* in a flourish of brightly coloured silks, and the inevitable weeping cherry. While you can still find all these things, and much more, first impressions of Kyoto are invariably disappointing. For the most part it's a sprawling, overcrowded city with a population of 1.5 million and a thriving industrial sector. The die-straight streets certainly simplify navigation, but they also give the city an oppressive uniformity, which you won't find among the tortuous lanes of Tokyo. And, perhaps not surprisingly, Kyoto is a notoriously exclusive place, where it's difficult for outsiders to peek through the centuries-thick layer of cultural refinement into the city's secretive soul.

However, there's plenty for the short-term visitor to enjoy in Kyoto. In fact, the array of top-class sights is quite mind-boggling: more than 1600 Buddhist temples, hundreds of Shinto shrines, two hundred classified gardens, a clutch of imperial villas and several first-rate museums. With so much choice, the biggest problem is where to start, but it's perfectly possible to get a good feel for Kyoto even in a couple of days. Top priority should go to the eastern, Higashiyama district, where you can walk from the famous Kiyomizu-dera to Ginkaku-ji, the Silver Pavilion, taking in a whole raft of interesting temples, gardens and museums on the way. Or you could head for the northeastern hills to contemplate the superb Zen gardens of Daitoku-ji and Ryoan-ji, and then gorge on the wildly extravagant Golden Pavilion, Kinkaku-ji.

With more time, you can visit some of the central sights, of which the highlight is Nijo-jo, a lavishly decorated seventeenth-century palace, while nearby Nijo-jin'ya is an intriguing place riddled with secret passages and hidey-holes. Try also to visit at least one of the imperial villas, such as Shugaku-in Rikyu or Katsura Rikyu, or the sensuous moss gardens of Saiho-ji, all located in the outer districts. And it's well worth making time to wander off the beaten track into Kyoto's old merchant quarters. The best of these, surprisingly, are to be found in the central



district north of Shijo-dori and across the river in Gion. Here you'll find the traditional crafts shops and beautiful old ryokan for which the city is justly famous.

The most famous festivals feature grand costume parades, esoteric ritual and elegant *geisha* dances, and take place in spring and autumn. These two seasons are undoubtedly the best time to visit Kyoto, though also the busiest; after a chill winter, the cherry trees put on their finery in early April, while the hot, oppressive summer months (June–Aug) are followed in October by a delightful period of clear, dry weather, when the maples erupt into fiery reds.

As the ancient and spiritual capital of Japan, Kyoto affords visitors a microcosmic view of the country as a whole. Like hustling, bustling Tokyo, there are parts of the city that resemble any other Japanese metropolis, especially the downtown area. You will find a throng of huge department stores in the vicinity of Shijo, a congregation of fine hotels around Kyoto Tower, and exciting nightlife and entertainment spots at Pontocho in the Gion district.

However, there is an important historical fact that sets Kyoto apart from other urban centres: It was never bombed during World War II. For this reason, it is possible to wander the older streets of the city and get a good idea of how life used to be in the medieval days of artisans and courtiers, merchants and samurai. You can still find streets lined entirely with wooden buildings—in the weaving district of Nishijin, for example. Some of these structures are more than 100 years old, which may seem somewhat surprising considering the susceptibility of such buildings to the dangers of fire, earthquakes and modernization, not to mention the ephemeral qualities that Japanese culture considers a strength, even in architecture. No nails were used in the construction of many of these relics of the past!

It is to see these sights, principally, that visitors come from around the globe. Kyoto has been acclaimed as the second most-visited city on earth after Makkah. Some 40 million visitors descend on the city each year. Yet, it is not difficult to escape the crowds and have a rewarding time in an out-of-the-way temple or shrine. Even Kyotoites themselves will pop into a shrine or temple now and then to pray or simply relax for a few minutes before continuing with life's more mundane tasks.