

INTRODUCING KYOTO



Temple visitors can sip the sacred and therapeutic spring water at Kiyomizu-dera (p63)

Kyoto is a city of secrets. Thousands of secrets. Hidden behind ancient walls, down tiny alleyways, under layers of gesture and artifice. Myriad pockets of incredible beauty that reveal themselves to those willing to see and discover.

The joy of travelling in Kyoto is the quest, the pleasure of uncovering that perfect Zen garden, or happening upon a quiet temple at dawn and catching the monks chanting. Of mustering the courage to slide open the door to an unfamiliar restaurant and being rewarded with the perfect bowl of noodles.

It's not hyperbole to claim that Kyoto is the most beautiful city in Asia. Of course, you will not believe this when you step out of Kyoto Station and see the bustling business district around the station. You will think you've been had. And then you'll catch your first hint of Kyoto beauty – maybe the gentle curve of a temple roofline in the distance. And so it begins...

KYOTO LIFE

Everyone wants something different from Kyoto. Residents would love to turn the place into a modern city with all the conveniences of Tokyo or Osaka. Japanese and foreign tourists would prefer Kyoto remain a kind of living museum for Japan's incredibly rich cultural heritage. Just how the city responds to these seemingly contradictory demands is a central issue of Kyoto

political life and the topic of many of the conversations you'll hear in restaurants and bars. It's certainly the most pressing problem facing Kyoto today.

Fortunately, many people now realise that these two demands aren't as contradictory as they might first appear. Kyotoites are coming to understand that preserving something of the traditional aspects of the city will benefit everyone, not just those directly involved with tourism. As a result, the city leaders have made some excellent moves recently.

In order to protect the Kyoto cityscape, the city government recently enacted a law that places height restrictions on new buildings. It has also placed restrictions on large and intrusive billboards and neon signs (something you will surely appreciate if you've seen what parts of Tokyo look like).

Better still, the city government has been experimenting with turning parts of the Downtown Kyoto district into a pedestrian-only area in the evenings. One can only hope it pursues this to the obvious conclusion and turns the entire central downtown grid into a pedestrian-only zone both day and night.

The city has also been having a lot of fun with its image as the 'most Japanese' part of Japan. From time to time, the local bus company allows anyone wearing a kimono to ride the buses for free. The result is an increasing number of Japanese couples who explore the city in traditional outfits.

The most welcome trend in the city is the so-called *machiya* boom, in which traditional Kyoto town houses are being converted into extremely atmospheric restaurants, cafés, bars and shops. There is hope that if these *machiya* businesses succeed, it will stem the loss of the lovely traditional structures, a few of which are carted away each day in the back of a truck to be dumped into a landfill on the outskirts of the city.

Perhaps the most exciting trend is this: the world is waking up to the fact Japan is not that expensive! As a result, travellers are streaming into the city and one can hear Italian, French and German in the cafés and restaurants downtown. Similarly, you're just as likely to hear Mandarin as English spoken by the tourist next to you as you wait in line for a sip of holy water at Kiyomizu-dera's famous spring.

All in all, it's a great time to visit Kyoto!



Kyoto's traditional neighbourhoods are at their most atmospheric by night

GETTING STARTED

Kyoto is one of the easiest destinations in the world to plan for: got a pair of slip-on shoes and a passport? You're most of the way there! Of course, you'll want to give some thought to when you go. Want to see the cherry blossoms? Early April is the time. How about the autumn colours? The month of November is best. If you hope to hit one of Kyoto's excellent flea markets, you'll have to be in town on the 21st or 25th of any month. Naturally, you can't always pick your travel times, but the fact is you can enjoy Kyoto in any month of the year.

If you're considering a trip to Japan, you're probably worried about the cost. Here is the good news: Japan is almost certainly cheaper than you think.

WHEN TO GO

Many travellers plan their trips to coincide with Kyoto's famous cherry-blossom season, which starts in late March or early April. Once those blossoms pop open, they usually last no more than a week. As such, you've got a better chance of catching the autumn colours: if you visit in November, you're almost assured of catching them. The weather in spring and autumn is usually stable, with many clear, warm days.

The problem with both the cherry-blossom season and the foliage season is that *everyone* knows Kyoto is lovely then, so you'll be facing some serious crowds. This is not the problem you might think – you just have to work around it a bit and perhaps visit some less-famous temples, which is a good idea anyway.

Of course, you can visit Kyoto at any time of year. Yes, the winter can be cold, but it's hardly unbearable – temperatures usually climb to the teens during the day and drop into single digits at night. In the summer, particularly August, it gets pretty hot and humid, with temps in the thirties. But, unless you've got a serious aversion to heat or cold, these seasons are perfectly acceptable for touring and each has its own unique beauty. Don't forget, summer is also the season of Kyoto's famed Gion Matsuri festival (see p16).

For information on Japan's public holidays see p194. For more information on Kyoto's climate, see p190.

FESTIVALS

Few cities on earth have as many yearly events and festivals as Kyoto. There's something happening almost every day of the year. Here are the biggies, with a few interesting little ones thrown in for good measure.

January

HATSUMŌDE

1–3 January

This often raucous festival involves the first visit of the New Year to a Shintō shrine, where prayers are said to bring health and good fortune during the ensuing year. Kyoto's two most visited shrines on this occasion are Yasaka-jinja (p64) and Heian-jingū (p72).

TŌSHIYA (ARCHERY CONTEST)

15 January

Held at Sanjūsangen-dō (p60) from 8am to 4pm, this is the largest of Kyoto's three archery events held in January. Tōshiya dates to a 1606 feat by a samurai who is said to have shot 51 arrows in rapid succession along the veranda of the temple. Hundreds of kimono-clad archers gather for a competition of accuracy and strength, standing 118m away from a target 1.5m in diameter into which they try to shoot as many arrows as possible.

February

SETSUBUN

2–4 February

This festival signals the last day of winter according to the lunar calendar. People go to various temples and bless their homes, driving off demons, sickness and misfortune by scattering *mamemaki* (roasted soya beans) in and around the house, while shouting '*Oni-wa-soto, Fuku-wa-uchi*' ('Out with devils, In with luck'). You can enjoy the revelry at and Yasaka-jinja (p64) from 1pm to 3pm.

April

KANNO-CHAKAI (FLOWER-VIEWING FESTIVAL)

1–15 April

Held at Heian-jingū (p72) during the peak of the cherry blossoms. Tea is served and

ADVANCE PLANNING

Several months prior to departure, book your plane ticket (see p181). A month prior to departure (longer if you plan to visit April and May, around July 17, mid-August or November), book your accommodation and make sure your passport and travel insurance are in order. If you intend to do much train travel in Japan outside Kyoto, buy a Japan Rail Pass. You must buy these outside Japan; see p188 for details. Finally, whenever you have a chance, buy a pair of comfortable slip-on walking shoes to make temple and ryokan entry/exit easier.

shrine-goers can stroll among the *shidare-zakura* (weeping cherry trees).

MIBU KYÖGEN 21–29 April

At Mibu-dera (p57) from 5.30pm each night; Buddhist miracle plays are performed to teach doctrine through pantomime. Mibu Kyōgen has been celebrated every spring for the last 700 years.

May

AOI MATSURI (HOLLYHOCK FESTIVAL) 15 May

One of Kyoto's most important and largest festivals, Aoi Matsuri dates to the 6th century and commemorates successful prayers to the gods to stop calamitous weather. Today, the procession involves imperial messengers in ox carts and a retinue of 600 people dressed in traditional costume; hollyhock leaves are carried or used as decoration. The procession leaves around 10am from the Kyoto Imperial Palace (p52) and heads for Shimogamo-jinja (p56) where ceremonies take place. It sets out again at 2pm and arrives at Kamigamo-jinja (p91) at 3.30pm.

June

TAKIGI NŌ 1–2 June

Held at Heian-jingū (p72), this is a festival of nō drama held by flaming torchlight in the outdoor courtyard of the shrine.

TAKEKIRI E-SHIKI 20 June

Held at Kurama-dera (p85), this is a bamboo-cutting festival dating back to an event 1000 years ago, when a priest of Kurama-dera defeated two evil serpents

with the aid of Bishamon-tei, the Buddhist guardian enshrined at the temple. Today, eight priests dressed in robes and hoods of *yamabushi* (mountain priests) form two teams and race to hack to pieces four lengths of green bamboo that symbolise the serpents. The festival begins at 2pm.

July

GION MATSURI Peaks 17 July

Perhaps the most renowned of all Japanese festivals, this month-long celebration involves myriad events. Yoi-yama is held on 16 July, when more than 200,000 people throng the Shijō-Karasuma area in Downtown Kyoto (Map p50), and reaches a climax on the 17th, when a Yamaboko-junkō parade of more than 30 floats is held to the accompaniment of flutes, drums and gongs. On the three evenings preceding the 17th, people gather on Shijō-dōri, many dressed in beautiful light summer kimono, to look at the floats and carouse from one street stall to the next. Gion Matsuri was initiated in AD 869, at which time plague had ravished the city. The festival was offered as a prayer of relief to the god Susanō-no-Mikoto (the son of the gods, who, according to Japanese mythology, gave birth to Japan).

August

DAIMON-JI GOZAN OKURIBI 16 August

Mistakenly referred to by many as Daimonji-yaki (literally, burning of Daimon-ji), this impressive event is held to bid farewell to the souls of ancestors. Enormous fires are lit in the form of Chinese characters or other shapes on five mountains. The main fire is the character for 'dai', or 'great', on Daimonji-yama, behind Ginkaku-ji (p71), which is lit at 8pm. The other fires are lit at 10-minute intervals thereafter, working anticlockwise (east to west). It is best to watch this event from the banks of the Kamo-gawa or pay for a rooftop view from a hotel.

SENTŌ KUYŌ 23–24 August

Held at Adashino Nembutsu-ji (p82) in Sagano, this is a dedicatory mass to the souls of the countless *jizō* statues at this temple, which represent the deceased relatives of those attending the colourful ceremony. Reserve in advance by post by 15 June.

September

KARASU ZUMŌ 9 September

Held at Kamigamo-jinja (p91), this festival, which is also called 'crow wrestling', starts at 10am. Young boys compete in bouts of sumō wrestling. The festival is named for a legendary blackbird who came to rest on the arrow of Japan's first emperor, Jimmu.

TSUKIMI mid-September

During September, moon-viewing festivals take place at several locations, including Daikaku-ji (p82) and Shimogamo-jinja (p56).

October

JIDAI MATSURI (FESTIVAL OF THE AGES) 22 October

One of Kyoto's big three, this festival is of recent origin, dating to 1895. More than 2000 people dressed in costumes ranging from the 8th to the 19th centuries parade from the Kyoto Imperial Palace (p52) to Heian-jingū (p72).

KURAMA HI MATSURI (KURAMA FIRE FESTIVAL) 22 October

This spectacular festival is traced to a rite that uses fires to guide the gods of the

nether world on their tours around this world. *Mikoshi* (portable shrines) are carried through the streets and accompanied by young men in loincloths bearing giant flaming torches. The festival climaxes at 10pm at Yuki-jinja in Kurama (p85).

November

SHICHI-GO-SAN 15 November

This is a nationwide event in which proud parents dress kids aged seven, five and three in colourful kimono and visit local shrines to pray for their health and happiness. Yasaka-jinja (p64) and Heian-jingū (p72) are good places to watch the parents and children in their finery.

December

ŌMISOKA (NEW YEAR'S EVE) 31 December

People gather in their homes to ring in the New Year. It's customary to consume *toshikoshi soba* (thin, brown buckwheat noodles) before setting out to the shrine to see off the old year and welcome in the new. The activities continue from about 7pm to 1am, with huge crowds from about 11pm. Yasaka-jinja (p64) and Heian-jingū (p72) are great places to enjoy the action.

KYOTO: CHEAPER THAN YOU THINK

Anyone who has been to Japan recently knows that it can be cheaper to travel here than in parts of Western Europe, the US and Australia.

Still, you can burn through a lot of yen fairly quickly if you're not careful. In order to help stretch those yen, we've put together a list of money-saving tips.

Guesthouses There are plenty of good guesthouses in Kyoto where a night's accommodation costs about ¥3500.

Japan Rail Pass Like the famous Eurail Pass, this is one of the world's great travel bargains. It allows unlimited travel on Japan's brilliant nationwide rail system, including the lightning-fast *shinkansen* bullet trains. See p188.

Shokudō You can get a good, filling meal in these eateries for about ¥700, or US\$6, plus the tea is free and there's no tipping. Try that in New York. For more, see p116.

Bentō The ubiquitous Japanese boxed lunch, or *bentō*, costs around ¥500 and is both filling and nutritious.

Use your noodle You can get a steaming bowl of tasty *rāmen* (noodles in a meat-based broth served with meat and vegetable toppings) in Kyoto for as little as ¥500, and ordering is a breeze – you just have to say '*rāmen!*' and you're away. *Soba* and *udon* noodles are even cheaper – as low as ¥350 per bowl.

Hyaku-en shops *Hyaku-en* means ¥100, and like the name implies, everything in these shops costs just ¥100, or slightly less than one US dollar. You'll be amazed at what you can find in these places. Some even sell food. There are several in Downtown Kyoto, including one in the Teramachi covered arcade (Map p50).

Flea markets A good new kimono costs an average of ¥200,000 (about US\$1700), but you can pick up a fine used one at a flea market for ¥1000, or just under US\$10. Whether you're shopping for yourself or for presents for the folks back home, you'll find some incredible bargains in Kyoto's flea markets.

COSTS & MONEY

Japan is generally considered an expensive country in which to travel. Certainly, this is the case if you opt to stay in top-end hotels, take a lot of taxis and eat all your meals in fancy restaurants. But Kyoto does not have to be expensive, indeed it can be *cheaper* than travelling in other parts of the world, if you are careful with your spending. In terms of what you get for your money, Kyoto is good value indeed.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is no better place to start your explorations than lonelyplanet.com. Here you will find succinct summaries on travelling to most places, as well as the Thorn Tree forum, where you can ask questions before you go, while you are away, or dispense advice when you get back.

Other useful websites include the following:

Japan National Tourist Organization (www.jnto.go.jp) Japan's main national tourist authority.

JR East (www.jreast.co.jp/e/index.html) Information on rail travel in Japan, with details on the Japan Rail Pass.

Kansai Time Out (www.japanfile.com)

Kyoto Temple Admission Fees (www.templefees.com) These change from time to time, so it's best to get the latest info.

Kyoto Visitor's Guide (www.kyotoguide.com) Contains lots of Kyoto-specific information.

SUSTAINABLE KYOTO

Given Japan's location, there aren't many alternatives to flying here, unless you happen to be in South Korea, China or Taiwan, in which case you can take a boat.

HOW MUCH?

Business hotel accommodation (per person)

¥8000

Midrange meal ¥2500

Local bus ¥220

Temple admission ¥500

Newspaper ¥130

Sentō (public bath) admission ¥390

Can of coffee ¥120

Cross-town taxi ¥2500

Piece of automatic sushi ¥120

Onigiri (rice ball) ¥150

Once in Kyoto, however, you can bicycle everywhere; in fact, this one of the best ways to explore the city (see [p183](#)). If you don't fancy pedalling, you can get around the city on Kyoto's brilliant public transport system (see [p185](#)), or, for that matter, you can simply walk – it's a small city.

There's not much in the way of environmentally friendly accommodation, although most would agree that staying in traditional ryokan or simple guesthouses probably has less of a negative impact on the environment than staying in a modern hotel.

You can do a lot to help the environment by refusing packaging and bags when you purchase things in Kyoto. Here's the key phrase: '*Sono mama de ii desu*' ('It's fine just like that'). Alternatively, '*Fukuro wa irimasen*' ('I don't need a bag').

Finally, think about what you eat: the fish on offer at the sushi restaurant may come from a species that is being depleted, including, unfortunately, *maguro* (tuna).

THE AUTHOR

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Chris is an American who has lived in Kyoto since 1992. Soon after his arrival, he started studying Japanese language and culture. In 1995 he became a regional correspondent for the *Japan Times*, a national English-

language newspaper published in Tokyo. Chris joined Lonely Planet in 1996 and has written books about Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Victoria (Australia) and, most recently, the island of Borneo. Despite all his work-related travel, he still takes every opportunity to explore the world, in particular the Himalayas and Southeast Asia. When he's not on the road, he spends his time seeking out Kyoto's best restaurants, temples, hiking trails and various other *anaba* (secret places known only to the locals). He also conducts walking tours of Kyoto, Nara and Tokyo. For more on Chris, check out his website at www.chrisrowthorn.com or his blog at www.insidekyoto.com.

CHRIS' TOP KYOTO DAY

The first thing I do in the morning is head to the Tetsugaku-no-Michi (Path of Philosophy) for a contemplative stroll in the early morning light. I might stop in at Hōnen-in, sit on the steps and drink in the silence, or head south to Nanzen-ji if the autumn leaves are

working. Then I make my way downtown and grab some eel for lunch at Kane-yo, my favourite *unagi* restaurant in Kyoto. Next, I hit Teramachi-dōri to poke among the shops there, before making my way south for a leisurely pass through Nishiki Market. Following that, I head over to Junkudō bookshop. After browsing, I stop at a nearby coffee shop for a quick pick-me-up and a read. It's then time to visit a good local *sentō* (public bath) for a soak. Clean and refreshed, I head out to meet friends for dinner, perhaps at Aunbo or Ōzawa in Gion. After dinner we stroll along the Kamo-gawa between Shijō-dōri and Sanjō-dōri and then cross the bridge and soak up the evening ambience of Pontochō. Finally, we might head up to Orizzonte at the top of the Kyoto Hotel Ōkura for a drink while gazing over the lights of the city.

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