



CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | CALM KYOTO



instant escapes

Calm Kyoto

The old imperial capital serves up ancient wonders with Japan-ease

For 1,000 years, until forced to move to Tokyo in 1868, the emperors of Japan created in Kyoto a powerfully enchanting city. Its temples and teahouses remain today. So come to relax in creaky timber inns, laze over artful food, idle in alleys where geishas still potter, and be transfixed by the cherry blossom, which will soon usher in spring. **By Minty Clinch**



SEE & DO

● Reassuringly flat, Kyoto is a cinch to cycle round. Book a bike (from £7 a day; kctp.net) from the terminal by Kyoto train station, and glide north beside Lake Biwa Canal, 20km long and mirror-still. Legs stretched, you might loop to the Imperial Palace (1 on map), pedalling its broad gravel paths past plum trees and cherry blossom. Return via the Shinto shrine Heian Jingu (2): its green roofs and red columns are a beautiful beacon as you pedal past.

● To avoid shrine fatigue, pick wisely. The most iconic is Kinkaku-ji, the Golden Temple (3), shining with gold leaf (take the Karasuma subway line to Kitaoji, £1.80 from Kyoto Station; then a 10-minute taxi, £11). Another spectacle is Ryoan-ji (4), the Peaceful Dragon, with its grey-sand rock garden, moss-flecked and mystical (take the JR bus from Kyoto Station; £1.60; 30min). Also see Nanzen-ji (5), set in the foothills of the Higashiyama mountains (20 minutes' walk from Keage Station on the Tozai line, £1.80). Once a 13th-century emperor's hideaway, it's now HQ of the Rinzaï Buddhist sect.

● Temple supremacy — at least for fun factor — belongs surely to Kiyomizu-dera, up a steep cobbled street (kiyomizudera.or.jp; £2.70; 6). Built without using a single nail, it's an imposing 8th-century Buddhist complex, reconstructed in 1633. The main pillared hall, its wooden platform jutting out over the hillside, provides sensational city views.

YOUR MOVIE MOMENT
Recognise those stepping stones in the gardens of Heian? Scarlett Johansson hopped across them in *Lost in Translation*

That's a wrap: kimono-clad woman in a Kyoto alleyway; below, Heian Shrine; Buddha statue at the Ryoan-ji temple

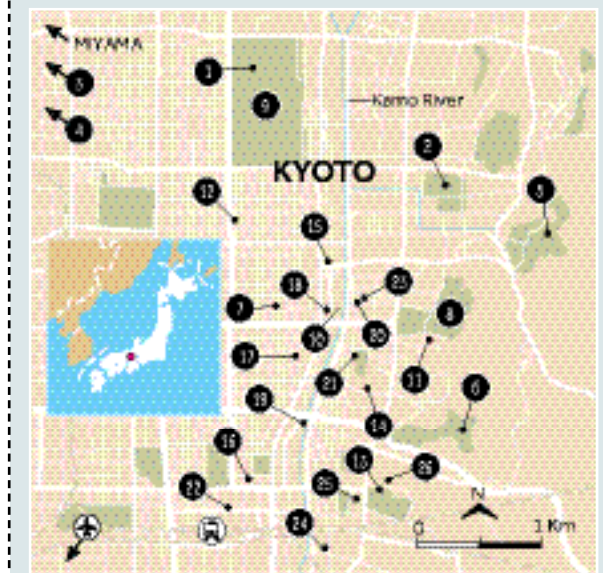
● A must-do preliminary to Kyoto's celebrated cuisine is a saunter through Nishiki Market (7), a vast trading camp rammed with pickles, confectionery, fish — perhaps whale meat — and less identifiable seafood specimens (often still writhing). Don't miss the oyster and saké bar by the exit: giant succulent bivalves cost £3 each. The highlight, though, is the knife shop founded by an imperial master swordsmith in 1560.

● Cherry blossom is one of the most spellbinding attractions in Japan. It's already busting out this month in subtropical Okinawa, and while its waves won't reach Kyoto before late March, it is such a crowd-puller that you should book now. Stick these hotspots on your Google Map: Maruyama Park (8) and Imperial Palace Park (9), where rashes of blooms flutter calmly, lighting the scene palely, the way snow does.

● Tangerine lanterns, pots of uplit foliage, menus on dark wood stands: pretty Pontocho (10), an alley parallel to the Kamo river, comes alive at night. The 500-year-old flagstones flow with carousers, heading past (or into) the ancient wooden townhouses, known as machiya, which welcome guests (usually at a price). Look for garish banners and lanterns. From May to September try *kawayuka* — 'dining on a terrace overlooking a flowing river'.

● Geisha-spotting? Beware: many are tourists with makeovers. Look for the real deal around 6pm, which is clocking-on time for the business banquets and parties that underpin the 21st-century geisha's workload. Typically, geishas charge £800 for a two-hour dinner. Instead, try song, dance and talk with apprentice geishas (maikos) at tables for four at Gion Hatanaka (maximum 40 guests; £127pp with food and drink; gionhatanaka.jp; 11).

● With English sat nav, self-driving in Japan is easy (and on the left). Try a loop into the rural past among thatched farms in the valleys around the Miyama region, 50km north of Kyoto. You're welcomed for a night in a ryokan (futon bed, dinner), and can pootle back on the old imperial highway along Lake Biwa's eastern shore (£390 for two, with car and ryokan; japan-experience.com). >



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EAT

● **Oodles of noodles**

HONKE-OWARIYA (Dishes about £8)
Because: This slurpy soba-noodle joint has centuries of pedigree (the original branch started out selling confectionery in 1465). **Travel's tip:** Soba rice cakes and *soba-borufudge*, sold on site, are delicious and easy to pack, making great gifts. 624 Teiammaenocho, Shimogyo-ku; honke-owariya.co.jp; ⑫

● **Italian indulgence**

IL PAPPALARDO (Mains about £15)
Because: After maxing out on noodles and sushi, a pizza craving will hit at some stage. Bright and cheery, this place sidesteps minimalism, down to the Chianti bottles on tables. **Travel's tip:** A beacon for international guests, it's always busy. This is one you do need to book ahead. 451-1 Myohoin Maekawacho, Higashiyama-ku; 00 81 75 533 3330, ilpappalardo.com; ⑬

● **Better batter**

TEMPURA ENDO YAOSAKO
 (Three-course lunch about £30)
Because: Kyoto tempura is hailed as the nation's best, and everything here gets the feather-light frying treatment, from prawns to exotic mushrooms. **Travel's tip:** Sit by the sunken fireplace in the Ozashiki Bar for a clear view of the chefs at work. 566 Komatsu-cho, Higashiyama-ku; 00 81 75 551 1488, gion-endo.com; ⑭

● **Banquet bonanza**

HAMACHO (Nine-course menu £45)
Because: A parade of dishes is the essence of Kyoto dining, delivered in ornate, multi-compartment boxes. **Travel's tip:** Bag a booth opposite the slicing counter to admire chef Edji's blade acrobatics. 488 Ebisucho, Nakagyo-ku; 00 81 75 257 4949, hamachodesu.com; ⑮

● **Sushi by the season**

SUSHI IWA (Lunch menus about £65)
Because: Glistening scallops, wild eel, ruby fatty tuna... This place is fastidious about its fish and the results are delicious. **Travel's tip:** The late Apple chief Steve Jobs said this was the best sushi he'd ever eaten, and you can still book his (10-seat memorial) table. Ainomachi-Nishiminamikado Shimojuzuya Shimogyo-ku; 00 81 75 371 9303, sushiiwa.jp; ⑯

BARS & CAFES

● **Tip-top cocktails**

BARROCKING CHAIR
Because: Bartender Kenji makes knockout Martinis, among more lurid concoctions. **Travel's tip:** It's hidden in a backstreet — get your hotel to write its name in Japanese so drivers or passers-by can steer you. 434-2 Tachibana-cho, Shimogyo-ku; bar-rockingchair.jp; ⑰

● **Singalong hotspot**

BARCODE
Because: Cheap drinks set the tone for this casual karaoke bar near Shijo station. A hit among locals and tourists. **Travel's tip:** Karaoke-shy? This is the place to try. The selection machine even speaks English. 366 Kamiyacho Nishikiyamachidori Shijoagaru, Nakagyo-ku; bit.ly/barcodekyoto; ⑱

● **Elevenses into lunch**

EFISH
Because: Nobody does coffee with quite the attention of the Japanese, and this spot is a fine pared-down space for a caffeine hit as you wander canal-side. **Travel's tip:** Come for lunch — the clam chowder is top. 798-1 Nishihashizumecho, Gojo-sagaru, Shimogyo-ku; ⑲

ASK THE LOCAL

Tomo Shinya, the Four Seasons' chief concierge, is expert at helping first-timers avoid mistakes

It is tempting to take tours by car or bus — it's quickest, but not the ideal way to see the city. There is also a subway, but it only has two lines and, of course, you will have nothing to photograph! I tell people to walk to see lovely glimpses of Kyoto. Late at night, unlike Tokyo, it becomes tranquil and you can walk into alleys full of local restaurants and bars. Cycling is good, too, especially in the manic cherry-blossom season. To beat the biggest crowds, ride along the Kamo river, past pink sakura trees in bloom. The flowers are beautiful after dark: walk Shirakawa Street — you may have the yozakura (illuminated blossom viewing) almost to yourself!

A REALLY LATE ONE?

As well as karaoke, you can come and throw shapes here until the early hours

ORDER THESE...

Highlights are the fish balls in green plum soup, congee eel and scallops in jelly

MENU WARNING

Picky eater? Beware the multi-course omakase (chef's choice). It delivers their faves, not necessarily yours



STAY

● **Self-catering steal**

RINN GION KENNINJI (Doubles from £70, room-only)
Because: It's an English-speaking guesthouse on the fringe of Gion (geisha central — staff here will point you to places where you can be dressed as one for photos). There are microwaves and washing machines. **Travel's tip:** Pack a picnic and stroll to Maruyama Park in cherry-blossom season. 69-1 Hakatacho, Higashiyama-ku; rinn-kyomachi.com/location/rinn-gion-kenninji; ⑳

● **Fantastic views**

KYOTO TOWER HOTEL (Doubles from £105, B&B)
Because: It's right opposite the railway station, and you can ride up to the radio tower on the roof — the tallest structure in the city — for giddy views from the observation deck. **Travel's tip:** Guests pay reduced rates at the Yuu onsen (public baths) on floor B3F of the Kyoto Tower Building. 721-1 Higashishioji Karasumadori, Shimogyo-ku; keihanhotels-resorts.co.jp; ㉑

● **Live like a local**

HIGASHIYAMARYU (Three-bedroom townhouse from £181, self-catering)
Because: You can live like a local in this charming home with a balcony, rock garden and fully equipped kitchen. It is modern (and air-conditioned), yet feels wonderfully yesteryear, with silk hangings, wooden screens and ornamental ceramics. **Travel's tip:** Take advantage of one of the house's free bikes for a day. 21-7 Chinohashinomotocho, Higashiyama-ku; booking.com; ㉒

● **Traditional Japanese inn**

GION YOSHIIMA (Doubles from £254, half-board)
Because: At this family-run ryokan in Gion, built in 1747, you don your kimono for meals at low tables and sleep soundly on futons rolled out on your tatami mat. Rooms have en-suite bathrooms. Windows overlook 150-year-old lime trees in the courtyard garden. **Travel's tip:** Don't overeat by day — dinners here are multi-course and filling. 229 Shinmonzen, Gion; yoshi-ima.co.jp; ㉓



SPA GEEK?

You'll love the OTT one here: among the wacky treatments is moxibustion: burning dried mugwort applied to key body points

● **Big-city oasis**

HYATT REGENCY KYOTO (Doubles from £260, B&B)
Because: It's a busy-city/tranquil-suburb combo. And it looks great, from its gold lobby to its kimono-clad headboards. Recover in room 1506, one of three fifth-floor balcony suites, with a touchy-feely cypress-wood bathtub. **Travel's tip:** The National Museum across the road costs £3.60 to enter and has lovely verdant grounds. 644-2 Sanjusangendo-mawari, Higashiyama-ku; kyoto.regency.hyatt.com; ㉔

● **Historic sanctuary**

FOUR SEASONS KYOTO (Doubles from £506, B&B)
Because: It's luxury in an outstanding historical setting, Shakuuien: an *ikeniwa* (pond garden) with two islands created 800 years ago for the samurai Lord Komatsu. Atmospherically, one of them hosts a Champagne and saké hour at dusk. **Travel's tip:** Breakfast is a special treat if you take it on the sun terrace. 445-3 Myohoin Maekawa-cho, Higashiyama-ku; fourseasons.com; ㉕

GET ME THERE GO INDEPENDENT

You can't fly to Kyoto direct from the UK, but ANA flies Heathrow-Tokyo from £780 return. The bullet train from Tokyo to Kyoto (via Mount Fuji) takes two hours and 20 minutes. Or ANA connects to Osaka (15 minutes from Kyoto) via Tokyo, from £792 return. From April 2019, BA will fly nonstop from Heathrow to Osaka.

GO PACKAGED

Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.co.uk) features Kyoto on a 12-night trip taking in Mount Fuji and Hiroshima; from £4,785pp, including flights, touring and internal trains. Or try **Inside Japan Tours** (insidejapantours.com).

GET AROUND

The best way to travel overland is with a **Japan Rail Pass**: £195, for unlimited travel on Japan Railway trains, buses and ferries. See japanrailpass.net.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Japanese National Tourist Office (JNTO): seejapan.co.uk ■

East meets rest: clockwise from top left, suite at the Hyatt Regency; Steve Jobs's favourite, Sushi Iwa; the Four Seasons is set in lovely gardens; rooftop bar at the Kyoto Tower Hotel; Nishiki Market knife shop

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