



24 Hours in Kyoto

Jim Millward, Audley's Marketing Manager, recently took a flying trip to Japan to gain a flavour of the country.

Tokyo is probably everything you imagined it to be, soaring skyscrapers, neon and people on the go in their millions. On a dark winter's evening in rush hour it takes on the image of the futuristic city in the cult film *Bladerunner*. I must admit that as I boarded the Shinkansen, or bullet train, for Kyoto I was looking forward to exchanging the big city for a touch more serenity.

The Shinkansen are everything our rail system is not: they're seriously fast (360km/h), smooth, punctual, clean and the staff, like all Japanese, are the epitome of politeness. The journey to Kyoto was extra special as we passed the foot of Mount Fuji whose snow covered peak was glistening in the sun.

I had 24 hours in Kyoto, nowhere near enough time; we generally recommend that Audley clients spend at least three days exploring the city. Kyoto is a city, and with a population of 1.4 million quite a large one, with a modern but laidback feel but where you are never far away from a temple or garden.

My first visit, however, was to the food market where every conceivable type of ingredient was on offer and many samples laid out for tasting. Thankfully I had a guide with me who was able to put a name to the seemingly alien ingredients including blowfish, sea urchin and bean curd in a plethora of forms.

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My colleagues had told me not to miss the Golden Pavilion, Kyoto's number one sight. I can only take their word on it, it was being refurbished and covered with scaffolding, but thankfully there are 2,000 other temples to choose from. My first visit was to the Yasaka temple, on the edge of the Gion district, famed as the area where geishas live and work. While the temple is not one of the best-known, the sight of

a traditionally dressed geisha tripping in wooden shoes through the temple gardens was one not to be missed.

Nanzenji temple was my next port of call, and probably the highlight of my trip. More of a complex of temples it exuded tranquillity with its immaculately tended Zen gardens and perfectly balanced architecture. Despite this tranquillity the original shogun occupants apparently lived in a certain degree of fear, the floors were deliberately designed to squeak and the paper panelled walls were backlit to cast the shadow of intruders. The temple is also the start of the Philosopher's Walk, a one-mile trail which, when the maples are turning, must be stunning.

In Tokyo I had stayed in a large tower block of a hotel, which although of the highest quality, could have been anywhere in the world. Things were a little bit different in Kyoto, I was booked into the Kinmata, a 17th century traditional Japanese ryokan or inn, complete with Zen gardens, 'onsen' hot tub, paper screens, tatami mats and an extremely convivial host. Ryokans are about as far away from modern hotels as one can get, they have no restaurant, you dine in your room, sleep on a futon mattress laid out on the tatami matting and many, including the Kinmata, do not have en-suite bathrooms.

That night I dined in my room with a Japanese colleague who described the meal as the best he had ever had (he took photographs of all eight courses). Normally one would sit on the floor at a low table but the host was used to western visitors with inflexible joints, and provided a table. My guide had earlier told me that Chinese food feeds the stomach, French food the tongue and Japanese food the eyes. She was not wrong, what followed was eight courses of exquisitely prepared dishes, each with a visual theme, a piece of delicately flavoured salmon had a layer of whisked egg white on it with shoots pushing through it to symbolise the spring plants rising through the snow.

Kyoto is an absolute 'must' on any tour of Japan but do stay for more than 24 hours and do spend a couple of nights in a ryokan.

Travel File

Audley can arrange all aspects of travel to Japan, a 14-night individual tailor-made tour, including two nights in a ryokan, costs from £2,395 per person, based on two people travelling. For further details call our Japan specialists on 01869 276 217.