

# Memoirs of a GEISHA GUIDE



Duncan & Izumi Flett

## FACT FILE

A guided tour of Kyoto with Duncan and Izumi can be included in any of our tailor-made tours to Japan. A two week classic itinerary would cost from £2,300 per person. For further details please contact Laura, Lou, Zoë or Henrietta on 01993 838 210.



Since early 2006 many Audley clients visiting Japan have been guided through the 'floating world' of Kyoto's geisha district by resident experts Duncan and Izumi Flett. Husband and wife team Duncan and Izumi provide a sense of history and context to this traditional and enigmatic world, as well as making sure you are in the right place to see the geisha and maiko (trainee geisha) tripping from one engagement to the next – one of the country's finest photo opportunities. The couple are also knowledgeable about Japan's traditional crafts, with the ancient art of Kimono a particular speciality. Many of these crafts continue to flourish in modern Kyoto, and special tours visiting the artisans at work offer a great opportunity to learn about the history and significance of the art as well as to purchase some unique items. Laura Morris, one of our Japan specialists, spoke to Duncan and Izumi about life in Japan's most traditional city.

### How did you come to live and work in Kyoto?

We've always had Japan in our lives: my wife (Izumi) and I both have one Japanese parent. Izumi's mum is from the Kyoto area and my mum is from Gunma, a rural district north of Tokyo. Incidentally both of our dads are British, but Izumi was born and raised in Barcelona, just to make things a bit more complex! We were both living and working in Tokyo for FIFA during the 2002 World Cup and once that project came to an end we decided to move to Kyoto as it was the nicest city either of us had ever been to. Since then we've got married and had a son, so we are very happy with the way things are going for us in Kyoto.

### Is the world of the geisha as closed and exclusive as is made out?

In a word, yes. But they are making efforts to relax some of the rules. For instance, it is a little easier to secure a maiko for 'atoseki' whereby she



One of Kyoto's shrines

will accompany you for a drink and/or a bite to eat after 10pm. The costs are still quite prohibitive though and you still need someone to vouch for you even for this 'atoseki' service. That's why the Miyako Odori dances in April are always sold out – for the vast majority of Japanese people it's the closest they will ever come to a Kyoto Maiko.

### Is there a particular element of Japanese culture that you find especially appeals to Western visitors?

Well there are several really. The people are very friendly and helpful and visitors are often amazed at the lengths Japanese people go to, to help them out. The culture itself is unique: quiet and understated. The Japanese approach to life and the Japanese language itself really makes a visit to Japan something so 'different', which is refreshing as you don't want to travel halfway around the world only to find out that it's the same as your home nation. The food is fantastic and some of the healthiest you can eat and the traditional arts and crafts are exquisite.

### Are you a fan of Japanese food, and if so do you have a particular favourite restaurant?

Yes, we are both big fans of Japanese food and it's basically all we eat, both at home and outside.



Rickshaw guide



Kyoto Maiko

We have more than one favourite restaurant - for traditional Kyoto tofu cuisine we go to one of the oldest restaurants in Japan, called Okutan. It's almost 400 years old and they make the tofu they will serve that day every morning. The restaurant is located within the grounds of the Nanzenji Zen Buddhist Temple, at the end of the Philosophers' Walk. For tempura, we always go to Yoshikawa, located on the corner of Oike-dori and Tominokoji in central Kyoto.

**Do you have a favourite place in Kyoto?**

The square kilometre of traditional shops and funky cafés defined by Shijo, Karasuma, Kawaramachi and Oike-dori. This is a great area to stroll around if you have free time in Kyoto. You'll probably bump into us!

Zen garden in autumn



The Golden Pavilion