

Kyoto, Japan: A Visit to Japan

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Think of Japan and many people's first thought is of Tokyo, the modern day capital of the country, but that accolade is one that only recently passed to Tokyo. For many hundreds of years, Kyoto was Japan's capital city and today it's probably home to more history than any other major city.

Although never confirmed, it's suspected that during World War Two, a decision was taken not to bomb Kyoto, which means many of the attractions here date back hundreds of years. That's in stark contrast to Tokyo, where nearly everything was rebuilt after 1945. That makes it a unique destination and the history is everywhere, in shrines, castles, and gardens. In fact, there are so many standout attractions that it's hard to know where to start on a visit to Kyoto.

Our choice was Nijo Castle, which dates from the late 16th century, when it was created by Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu. It was the place for welcoming visiting dignitaries to the city and it's an impressive sight and one that must have put fear into the hearts of many of those visitors. You enter through the Karamon Gate, with its gold plated fixtures immediately telling you that you're in a place where no expense was spared.

The main part of the palace is across a courtyard and today's visitors have to quickly adjust their eyes to the low lighting levels that are in place to preserve the beautiful paintings all over the walls. These paintings are quite something, with some depicting big cats, such as tigers. The only problem was that, at the time they were painted, the artists had never seen these majestic animals, so could only guess at what they looked like and in fact ended up painting leopards! Despite that, they are stunning images and still look beautiful today, more than 400 years after they were first created.

As you walk along, you quickly become aware of one of the security measures put in place at Nijo Castle -- what's called nightingale floors. They were carefully laid out, so that nails beneath the floorboards would rub together and squeak. They still perform that function to this day. It was a way of the guards knowing exactly where people were, and made it almost impossible for intruders to get inside the castle.

Replicas exist today of the reception chambers that would have been used to greet guests and, with models of the Shogun and women in kimonos, you could picture exactly what it would have been like all

those years ago. What did surprise us was how simple the Shogun's living chambers were. No ornate decoration for him, contrary to what you'd expect.

The castle is only half the story here, as the gardens are a real treasure and worth devoting some serious time to. They're beautifully laid out and it feels as if they go on forever. The views from the castle walls over the gardens are well worth seeing. We were lucky enough to be in Kyoto during cherry blossom season and, during this time, they open up the gardens at night, so you can enjoy the cherry trees during darkness. It was a unique experience and the gardens were just as beautiful at night as they were during daylight hours.

Nijo Castle is quite unique in that it's on the subway line in Kyoto. Perhaps because there's so much history to this city, the subway line is very underdeveloped here, compared to Tokyo, with only two lines, one going north to south and the other essentially going east to west. That presents an interesting problem for visitors, as many of the city's attractions aren't anywhere near public transport. I didn't fancy the idea of trying out the city's buses, so we stuck with taxis, but even then, we found those to be a challenge, with many taxi drivers speaking either little or no English. Fortunately, with my pidgin Japanese, we got by fine, but it's definitely worth asking your hotel to write down the details of where you're heading, so that you can show this to the taxi driver.

Two attractions that are reasonably close to each other, within about a 15 -- 20 minute walk, are the Ryoan-ji and Kinkaku-ji, both of which are shrines. They're to the north of the city and any visit to Kyoto should take in both of these sites. Ryoan-ji is best known for a simple rock garden that consists of just 15 stones. Founded in 1490, no-one now knows for sure what these stones represent, but they're regarded as the pinnacle of Zen gardens. It certainly is amazing to see the stones with beautifully raked sand around them, and you can't help but wonder "how on earth did they get them in here without leaving a mark?"

There's much more to Ryoan-ji than just the rock garden though, although to read most guidebooks, you wouldn't know that. It's home to a stunning garden set around a large lake, and we enjoyed seeing that just as much as the main attraction.

Further down the same road is Kinkaku-ji or the Golden Pavilion. It was originally built by the third Ashkaga Shogun Yoshimitsu as his retirement villa. Sadly, this is the one site that isn't an original, following an arson attack on it in 1950. As has happened in Tokyo many times, it's been rebuilt, with the roof totally covered in gold leaf and you would never know that it's not an original. Your breath is taken away when you

first see it and I suspect we were even more amazed by it, as we saw it in the rain, with the water glistening on the building. It's definitely one of the city's must-see sights.

Another that falls into the same category is the Nanzen-ji temple to the east of the city. Fortunately this is on the subway system and it's only a few minutes walk from the station. Nanzen-ji is a Zen temple that dates from 1386 and the whole thing is a massive, sprawling complex. Immediately you can see why this is described as Kyoto's greatest Zen temple. There are some amazing views from the top of the two storey Sanmon Gate at the entrance, made all the more beautiful by all the cherry trees in full bloom at the time we visited.

Another shrine well worth seeing is the city's newest. The Heian Shrine is just over 100 years old and was built to restore Kyoto's pride, after Tokyo became Japan's capital city. It looks almost brand new, with a combination of brilliant red and green buildings that gleam in the daylight. Further down the road, as if to remind people how wonderful this city is, is a giant red Torii gate. I'm sure this certainly succeeded in lifting the spirits of everyone who lived here at the time, as it's a wonderful addition to the city.

For anyone with a love of history, a visit to Kyoto as part of a tour of Japan is a must. There's so much to see and do here that it's wise to allow at least a couple of days, and taking guided tours to some of the attractions that are further out from the city centre may be a good plan. If you want shrines and temples, then Kyoto has plenty to offer -- and some of Japan's most beautiful ones at that.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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