

In search of a geisha

By: **BELINDA JACKSON**

Finding Japan's ethereal geisha in Kyoto proved much easier than expected for **BELINDA JACKSON**.

WE seek them here, we seek them there . . . the mysterious geishas of Kyoto. But unlike the Scarlet Pimpernel, those geishas are everywhere. I thought that geishas and maikos (their apprentices) were as elusive as a dream on waking - disappearing into dark shadows, glimpsed momentarily through a rice paper screen.

A beautiful vision, unattainable, unfathomable, with their china-white faces, cupid's bow lips, layers of fabric and feet clad in little, white toe socks and shod in wooden thongs. But here at Kiyomizu-dera, a collection of Buddhist and Shinto temples on a hill in eastern Kyoto, they're everywhere.

And far from being shrinking violets, a few brazen lassies are posing expertly for the voracious photographers, both Japanese and non-Japanese.

The slight turn of a snow-white neck, the drop of the lashes across a porcelain cheek, the flutter of a fan and then the abrupt dismissal of the pack of amateur snappers as they turn on the heel of their little wooden thongs and mince away: they've got it down pat. Some even have a boyfriend beside them.

Boyfriend? There's something not quite right. I thought boyfriends were wealthy businessmen who met the geishas discreetly in parlours (ochaya) where they drank tea, and the geisha would belt out a few numbers on her guitar-like shamisen, in a relationship that would span decades.

These are young, smooth-faced lads, hair dyed a punky orange, eyebrows plucked into girly arches, as is the current fashion among very young Japanese men and, far from being the stocky corporate magnate, they are willowy and attentive, traipsing behind as their women cut a swath through the crowds.

We ponder the apparent contradiction as we wander through the Kiyomizu-dera temple complex, which is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Kyoto. It's a magnet for visitors, especially in the cherry blossom season (hanami), when soft pink and white blooms surround the temples on the hill, creating a sea from which erupt the buildings of downtown Kyoto below us.

With buildings dating from the 8th century, it's quite the place to be seen, as school groups mix with a scattering of foreign tourists, a group of sprightly nuns admiring the view or a solo, devout man, bent with age.

Packs of young girls take the walk up the steep path to the temples, and middle-aged women shop in the souvenir strip for cherry blossom (sakura) specials which range from a soft pink sakura jam to sakura tea and sensational sakura-flavoured chocolates and marshmallow. Then the penny drops: all these little geishas (and they are tiny) are actually young girls who've hired the outfits to live the dream for the day, and wander among Kyoto's temples and streets, to be admired and photographed relentlessly. One such beauty is the utterly demure, utterly charming Shigeyuki and her beau, Azusa, both from Yokohama. They had spent \$7 (Y720) and taken two hours to get dressed and turn back the clock in old town Kyoto.

Later, on the walkways along Kyoto's famous canals, we spot many more women, with or without the full white makeup - with that little strip left seductively naturelle on the nape of the neck, mobbed again by keen snappers eager to grab the iconic Kyoto geisha-and-sakura shot.

And later still, a pamphlet written in English is dropped in my hands advertising a dress-up service for foreigners. Cute idea, but we all balk at the photo of the Caucasian woman playing geisha. That long face. Those funny eyes. And look at that long nose. It's all just so wrong. A total cultural faux pas if ever I saw one. I vow never to become a geisha. Our guide Toshiro, ever at my shoulder to explain the vagaries of Japanese life, says that Kyoto geishas are referred to as geiko, distancing themselves from the tainted image the West has had of geishas as concubines. And, of course, being from Kyoto himself, he is at pains to point out that Kyoto's geishas are the real deal - no trumped-up hussies here.

As night falls, we head into Kyoto's oldest quarter to assuage our disappointment by forgetting everything as we work our way through a bewildering array of dishes including fatty slivers of steak dipped in raw egg. It works, and I've forgotten about the faux geishas. But then, late that night, in the old, cobbled backstreets, we see a now-familiar shape slip past through the shadows.

"She's a real geisha," breathes Toshiro, with reverence ... Toshiro's eyes grow misty as he looks into the shadows after her: "Because look how fast she is moving. She is not stopping to have her photograph taken. And her makeup is exquisite." Goodness knows how he saw her makeup in this light, and why a man would even notice the quality of a woman's makeup. We all turn to catch her. But in vain. She's tottered off at a fair clip, not an easy task in white socks and 15cm wooden platform thongs.

The next morning, as I wander down for breakfast, two women are seated at the table beside me. Both in their early 50s, they look like sisters. One is immaculate in a beautiful Chanel suit, the other in a kimono and those little wooden thongs. She's not a geisha, but a modern woman in the traditional Japanese style. They take tea, and gossip as women around the world do, and now I understand what those little faux geishas are looking for. They just don't need the makeup.

Exploring Kyoto

Getting there: Kyoto is 15 minutes by JR Shinkansen (bullet train) from Osaka and 74 minutes by JR Limited Express "Haruka" from Kansai Airport.

From Tokyo, the fastest route is the Miyakoji rapid train, which takes 20 minutes, up to the cheaper JR Shinkansen Nozomi, which rolls in after a more stately 140-minute trip. Jetstar flies Sydney-Kansai (Osaka)-Brisbane daily from \$479 one way or StarClass \$1499, phone 131 538, www.jetstar.com

Join the act: You can dress as a geisha and wander around the streets of Nara, Kyoto's neighbour, for six hours for \$30 (Y3000), which includes the cost of a kimono rental and having someone dress you. For the boys, it costs \$20 (Y2000) to rent a yukata. Make-up is not included. Phone (074) 226 0493.

Accommodation: Hotel Granvia Kyoto is spectacularly located above the city's main railway station, a stunning modern design of glass and steel that houses department stores and cinemas. It conducts the Ozashiki Asobi Experience, in which you can spend an evening at a traditional tea house to dine and be entertained by a geisha. Includes accommodation and a traditional kaiseki dinner. Hotel Granvia Kyoto www.granvia-kyoto.co.jp or phone (075) 344 8888. Hiiragiya is one of Kyoto's most exclusive traditional guesthouses, or ryokans, in the city's centre. Former guests include Charlie Chaplin and Nobel Prize winners. There are 21 rooms, priced from \$300 (Y30,000) a night. Visit www.hiiragiya.co.jp or phone (075) 221 136.

For more information: Contact the Japan National Tourism Organisation for excellent information, particularly the Affordable Japan brochure, visit www.jnto.go.jp or phone (02) 9251 3024.

Kyoto Tourism's website (www.kyoto.travel) has information on cultural classes such as hand weaving, textiles, swordmanship and tea ceremonies, as well as the daunting "experience sumo wrestling" class.

Caption: Rising sun... clockwise, from far left, Yakushiji Temple in Kyoto; faux geisha on parade; and a geisha maiko (apprentice) in elaborate costume.

Illus: Photo (color): geisha maiko, japan
Photo (color): yakushiji temple, kyoto, japan
Photo (color): fauz geisha, japan

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