



FOM Study Tour to Japan

Trains, Temples and Table Temptations

By Helen Guy

Garden of the Ishiyamadera Temple; photo by Helen Guy

In November 2010, ten FOM members, led by husband-and-wife team Sim Sock-Yan and Robert Mann, flew to Osaka, Japan. We spent our entire trip within a day's journey of Kyoto, travelling mainly by train – either the Shinkansen or the Kyoto subway.

The first day we went to Okayama to see the famous Korakuen Gardens, one of the Three Great Gardens of Japan. The gardens are in the *kaiyu* style, which presents a different view with every turn of the path. The garden's many tea houses were built for the *daimyos* (feudal lords) of the Edo period (1603-1868). Nowadays couples in traditional dress use the gardens as a splendid backdrop for their wedding photos.

We spent the night in the town of Kurashiki (*kurashiki* means warehouse in Japanese) at a *ryokan*, or traditional Japanese inn. The attention to detail was outstanding, from the tea served on arrival to our *futons* being laid out on *tatami* mats while we had dinner. We learned to replace our outdoor shoes with indoor slippers and found our shoes turned around ready for us to step into as we left. During the Edo period taxes were paid in rice and *kurashiki* were built to store the grain. These canalside timber buildings, decorated with black and white tiles, are now largely used as specialist shops selling local products such as sake, pottery, chopsticks and beautifully packaged foodstuffs.

The food throughout the trip was wonderful, and the multi-course *kaiseki ryori* we enjoyed at this *ryokan* was no exception. *Kaiseki* emphasises the harmony between food, tableware and the seasons – our dinner was mainly fish, with each course featuring a symbol of autumn.

The following morning we visited the Ohara Art Museum, which features an excellent collection of Japanese ceramics, Asian arts and crafts and European works, all housed in a

Greek-style building surrounded by Japanese gardens.

Our next destination was the *onsen* (hot springs) town of Kinokasa, built around its seven springs. Joining the locals, we strolled around town dressed in the *yukata* and *geta* provided by our *ryokan* and had our first experience of public baths. We were too busy remembering the rules - shower first, don't put your towel in the water, soap afterwards - to worry about being naked in a public place. It was actually very civilised and quite common to see three generations of a family sharing this relaxing ritual at the end of the day. As it was crab season,



Outside the *onsen*; photo by Winston Oh



Shimogamo shrine; photo by Helen Guy



Kongobuji Temple, Mount Koya; watercolour by Winston Oh

dinner was crab cooked every way imaginable, from *sashimi* to steamboat – and the leftovers were served with rice for breakfast.

The next day was the most travel-intensive. Three trains, a funicular railway and a bus ride through farmland, mountains and steadily increasing rain took us to the World Heritage Site of Koyasan, or Mount Koya, where we spent the night in a Buddhist temple. We left the monks drying our suitcases while we visited the Kongobuji temple, centre of the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism.

After another *kaiseki* meal (this time vegetarian, with most of the food produced by the monks), we went on a night walk in the graveyard where the founder of the sect, Kobo Daishi, is buried. The cemetery contains over 200,000 graves, including some owned by corporations such as Panasonic, Nissan and Kirin. The following morning, we were able to observe both a prayer and a fire purification ceremony before breakfast and then journeyed to our final destination, Kyoto, where we spent the last four nights.

After the relentless green of Singapore, the stunning autumn colours of Kyoto took our breath away. Each day we were certain we had seen the brilliant red maples and the vibrant yellow ginkgoes at their most spectacular, only to be more enchanted by the view from a different temple the next day. I lost count of the number of temples we visited, each one notable for its architecture or Zen garden (these include moss gardens as well as dry, raked gardens), and of how many miles we walked. A particularly memorable shrine was Fushimi Inari, famous for its thousands of *torii* (traditional gates). Inari was originally the god of rice, but now ensures success in business. The gates, marking the dividing line

between the internal sacred space and the external profane world, have been donated by businessmen as thanks for their success.

We were fortunate to see some unusual temple ceremonies, including one in which artists disposed of their used calligraphy brushes, which were eventually burned. Similar ceremonies are held for other artists' materials such as needles, swords and knives. Our textile enthusiasts enjoyed the visit to a kimono maker, who proudly showed us his products as well as photos of kimonos he had made for members of the Imperial Family and other dignitaries. We also visited the Nishijin Textile Centre, where we saw the weaving process for *obi* and costumes for Noh theatre.

Another highlight was a night walk through Gion. Starting in a busy street outside the Kabuki theatre building, we followed our local guide through a pachinko parlour and into a world of narrow lanes lined with restaurants and inns where geisha rushed to meetings with their clients or patrons. Even here there was a shrine, to the god of entertainment. As darkness fell we looked across the river to see the distinctive outlines of the kimono-clad geisha with their elaborate hairstyles, deep in conversation with their clients or elegantly serving tea.

The last day, leaving the weekend Kyoto crowds behind, we headed to the hills for the Miho Museum, designed by I M Pei and cunningly concealed within the forested mountain landscape near Shigiraki. En route we stopped at another fascinating temple, inspiration for *The Tale of Genji*, arguably the world's first novel.

All too soon it was time to return to Singapore, but with many memories of a wonderful holiday with like-minded people, all of whom I now consider friends.

Helen Guy has been a resident of Singapore for over 20 years. She is a former docent and has been part of the docent training team. She was a member of the docent research group for the ACM exhibition *Hidden Faces: The Art of Japanese Masks*. This was her first study tour.



Wedding Couple at Korakuen Garden; photo by Yeo Siang-Goh