KYOTO

MIHOKO IIDA reminisces about the city she knew as a child and reveals how the ancient capital remains as steeped in history as ever – from its storied inns and traditional coffee houses to the deep-rooted respect for craftsmanship and ritual

PHOTOGRAPHS **EDVINAS BRUZAS**

THIS PAGE In one of the guest rooms at Hiiragiya *ryokan*, delicate paper *shoji* screens create a tranquil sitting area that looks out onto the garden. OPPOSITE A man wearing traditional Japanese dress walks through the streets of the preserved district of Gion, which is characterised by its low-level, wooden merchant houses

TOP ROW FROM LEFT Speciality vegetable store Toriichi on the historic Teramachi-dori offers a variety of seasonal produce. A fishing boat on the Katsura river, which runs through Arashiyama. The garden at Hiiragiya *ryokan*. MIDDLE ROW Exquisitely decorated *shoji* doors at the inn. Akemi Nishimura is the sixth-generation *okami-san* (proprietress) of Hiiragiya. Guests can cleanse their hands in a bamboo *tsukubai* on arrival at the *ryokan*. BOTTOM ROW A street in Gion. The distinctive Gionkaku tower at Daiunin temple. Schoolgirls visit Sanjusangendo temple in Higashiyama

Kyoto is where my grandmother lived. My parents and I used to take the Shinkansen bullet train from Tokyo, arriving at Kyoto Station two hours later, from where we would take a taxi along the Kamogawa, the river that flows north to south through the centre of the city. A street called Kawabata Dori runs alongside. For a long time, I thought it was named after the Nobel Prize-winning writer Yasunari Kawabata, who stayed at the storied Hiiragiya *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inn) and wrote such masterpieces as the 1962 novel *The Old Capital*, set in Kyoto. I chuckled to myself years later when I found out the street had no connection to the novelist and was called Kawabata because *kawa* means 'river' and *bata* means 'edge', making the street name simply River's Edge.

I think of this when people ask me what Kyoto is really like, as it is so easy to get carried away with the fantasies we project onto a city that evokes the imagination like no other. This is mainly due to its history as Japan's ancient capital – where the Imperial Court was based for more than 1,000 years until 1868, when Japan opened its borders to foreign influences. And, unlike Tokyo, Osaka or any of the other major cities, Kyoto escaped the severe bombings of the Second World War. As a result, its streets, homes, temples and *ryokans* have retained an old-world charm.

The city has always attracted the best of Japanese arts and crafts. Proof of this can be seen at the Kyoto National Museum and the more niche Raku Museum, which has displays of pottery used for tea ceremonies, and the Nishijin Textile Centre, dedicated to kimono making. The craftsmanship that sustained generations past is alive and well in shops such as Yamahon, which has a beautiful selection of pottery, serveware and decorative objects. Even essentials like brooms are handmade with pride at Naito Shoten, which has been in business since 1818. The markets and shopping districts are the arteries of local life, and some have been running for over 400 years: Nishiki, Shijo Kawaramachi and Demachi Yanagi are still some of the best places for everything from street food to household items. Confectioners Murakami Kaishindo opened its store on Teramachi Dori in 1907 and became one of the first shops in Japan to make and sell European-style sweets. It sits on the same street as the flagship store of Ippodo Tea, which has been in business for well over 300 years.

Much of life here unfolds at *kissatens* – traditional coffee houses modelled after those in Europe, where locals gather for conversation, or to read books or pore over manga comics. Walk into a few different *kissatens* and you will experience a new atmosphere each time. Some, such as the Salon de le François, are modelled after classic French cafés, while others evoke nostalgic tea rooms, such as Inoda Coffee, where waiters in white suits and black bow ties circulate among the tables. Inoda was established in 1940, and perfected the art of serving coffee with milk and sugar already added – now referred to as the 'Kyoto latte'.

The subtle politeness of letting you know when you have outstayed your welcome is another skill made famous by Kyotoites. It is well known that a person asking you to stay for tea indicates you must get going. I have always interpreted it to mean one should be mindful not to trouble someone, which is a consistent theme defining all interactions in Japan – especially in Kyoto. It is no coincidence that, as a family, we always stayed at a *ryokan* rather than at my grandmother's house during the New Year holiday.

The *ryokan* experience is not just about taking your shoes off at the entrance, or changing into a *yukata* – a casual version of a kimono that you can lounge around in. At a *ryokan*, meals are delivered to your room at a certain time; you must finish eating within a specific period; the communal bath is available only at certain times; and there may be a curfew because the innkeeper has to lock up for the night. I have been abruptly awakened early in the morning countless times by *ryokan* staff telling me that they need to bring in breakfast. I am usually barely awake, let alone prepared to digest a full Japanese breakfast, complete with miso soup and rice, but it comes with the territory.

Comparing *ryokans* to hotels is like comparing apples and oranges. For many, *ryokans* are a main draw of a visit to Kyoto and the history of how these inns came into their present form helps with the understanding of them. They are said to have their origins in the Edo period, when feudal lords (high-ranking samurai), were required to move frequently between Edo (now Tokyo) and their respective fiefdoms. This practice, said to have increased the central power of the military government in Edo by depleting the resources of the feudal lords, paved the way for roads and lodgings. The lords travelled en masse, in groups ranging from 100 to several thousand, all of whom were in need of food and accommodation. It was usually the local dignitaries or wealthy merchants who provided for the high-ranking samurai and this is what is generally believed to have been the foundation of the *ryokan* system.

Hiiragiya *ryokan*, possibly the most beautiful in Kyoto, started as a transportation and seafood shipping business, founded by Shogoro I, who was originally from Fukui, a prefecture to the north east. The second-generation head of the household became a renowned artisan of *tsuba-menuki* (decorated sword guards used by the samurai) and the family accommodated his samurai guests. This paved the way for Hiiragiya *ryokan*, which continues to host dignitaries from all over the world today, who come to admire its reed ceilings, polished beams, hand-carved *ranma* panels – which allow light and air to circulate – and its papered *shoji* windows framing views of the garden.

Author Yumi Yamaguchi explains that the *ryokan* is often linked to the concept of *omotenashi* or 'to entertain wholeheartedly' – without expectation of anything in return. As such, the *ryokan* goes beyond the service expected at Western hotels, where the relationship between hotel and guest is transactional. *Omotenashi* became a buzzword in 2013 when Tokyo was bidding to host the 2020 Olympics, and interpretations of the term continue to vary. But, at the end of the day, it is actually about the universal desire for human connection. In an ever-changing world, where services are increasingly being taken over by AI and personal interaction seems on the way out, being told when dinner is served and having your breakfast brought into your room between 7.30am and 8.30am could indeed be the biggest luxuries of all □

WAYS AND MEANS *Rooms at Hiiragiya start at around £290, B&B (hiiragiya.co.jp). British Airways (ba.com) and Japan Airlines (jal.co.jp) fly direct to Tokyo daily. It takes around two hours to get to Kyoto from Tokyo on the Shinkansen bullet train (global.jr-central.co.jp/en).*