

# TEMPLES, SHRINES, & BRUSH WITH FIRTH



Hello again,

for our third Japan travels edition. Thank you for all your responses and travelogue encouragement – apart from the fact that I have fun writing it, it is now becoming quite the little regular newsletter. I'm not too sure about 'blog-ing' it on a travel website, as some of you have suggested, but you'll never know – it could lead to my first job as a writer..?!

After a few more adventurous meals in Nagoya (including a *kaiseki*, a 12-course Japanese morsel bite degustation meal), exploring another few areas of the city known for their funky shops, sassy boutiques and nightlife (alas, still mostly e-Mu territory!) and disposing of a not-so-little box DHL back to Australia to make room in the suitcases, we set off for Kyoto on a Friday morning, a day of national public holiday in Japan. It was refreshing but not freezing, the sun was out and if Japan had birds they would have been singing. However, everything was packed even more than usual, the station an obstacle course bustling with excitement, as the Japanese shuffled cities to make the most of their free time.

Once again we caught the Shinkansen, which this time we made with about 10 seconds to spare – the obstacle course proved harder than anticipated to get around and, admittedly, Kym was getting a little relaxed about the Japanese trains punctuality (while I still had no hope). This being the case we hopped into the first carriage we could find before the train took off. This happened to be an inviting, cushy leather seats first class carriage and, since we weren't able to reserve any seats due the public holiday madness, we decided to stay put and pay for the upgrade later (which you can do on all Japanese trains, subway, etc). Cushy Class comfortably housed our still numerous luggage pieces, Kym had enough leg room to practice the cha-cha seated if he wanted to and I made myself at home by pulling out my book and reclining the seat in anticipation of a tranquil hour in comfort.

When the ticket master appeared, we greeted him armed with tickets, wallet and a courteous smile. Eventually, he made us understand that our seats were in fact reserved also and they would be filled at one of the upcoming stops. This regrettably meant Shinkansen paradise lost, so with bowed heads and tails between our legs at yet another Gaijin faux-pas we had made, we shuffled five long carriages to arrive at a very hot and stuffy Cattle Class. The remainder of the trip was taken up with finding seats, progressively removing most layers of clothing and putting them back on again as we approached our destination, and the perpetual "Do you think we're almost there?" worry as we had to traverse half the train again to retrieve our luggage from Cushy Class.

Kym went up ahead and I trailed behind him trying to look as unobtrusive and compact as possible. We were putting on a bit of a show for the sleepy, calmly seated locals – the only two Gaijin on the train, or so I thought. As I got to first class and the train started pulling into Kyoto station, I saw another Gaijin stand up to put on his coat. He was tall, dark and handsome, and as I was caught completely by surprise I stared. The sight of a Western woman still being a rare occurrence in the mass of short, skinny Japanese female counterparts, he stared back. As I passed him and our eyes met, he smiled and nodded and I realised that our Gaijin looked awfully like Colin Firth!

## TEMPLES, SHRINES, & BRUSH WITH FIRTH



I reached Kym, excitedly told him of my Colin Firth look-alike find and we trundled all our belongings off the train before it darted off. We waited for the masses to dissipate and when I next looked up again, there was my Colin Firth look-alike again, standing one metre away from us. Only this time, it was Colin Firth! While we had an entourage of Samsonite suitcases, he had an entourage of translators, personal assistants and baggage carriers. Somehow though surrounded by a sea of people who were there for his personal comfort, he still managed to look unassuming, pleasant and altogether rather normal.

He looked at us, we looked at him. He smiled and nodded in our direction, amused a little at our mass of belongings. We smiled and nodded at him, amused at his mass of escorts. Had it been anywhere else, I'm sure we would have gone unnoticed – here though we were bound by a common, unifying, strangers-in-a-strange-land link. Kym contemplated pulling out his camera and immortalising me with Colin to have evidence later that we did in fact sort of meet, but I felt we had moved beyond that. We had developed that convivial, unspoken understanding of what it's like to be foreign, tall and English in this country. Photos would simply not have done the relationship justice.

So whilst he walked off, hands in his pockets with not even a glove to lift, we walked off with our own Samsonite fan club in search of a lift that would take us into the impressive, massive steel and glass erection that is Kyoto station. On our way past the ticket office, we bumped into Col (as we affectionately started calling him) for a third time. This was enough to incite speculation on our part that it was fate we crossed paths, that soon we'd be having a drink together in the bar of the Westin Kyoto (where of course Col would coincidentally be staying also) and in a few years time we'd be invited to the Firths' summer BBQs in London with our children playing noisily in the backyard. The bubble burst abruptly when Col's limo did not follow our cab to the Westin Hotel.

I continued fantasising (quietly on my own) that we might bump into Col the next day or the day after at the Silver Pavilion, or the Golden Pavilion for that matter, since he was clearly in Kyoto to see the sights (Kyoto is not exactly a cultural town where he'd be promoting or making a film), and we could still have that drink but alas, it wasn't to be. Now I have to contend (and quite happily so) with my own version of Colin Firth with a lot less hair and a slightly receding hairline (the green tea shampoo is not doing a good job), and I guess I'll be following the real Colin Firth's career with a lot more interest having seen the man up close and personal.

After spending a few hours immersed in Kyoto, walking along a grey river lined with traditional Japanese houses so old that they look like they might fall down, the brush with Col and what could have been a lifetime of enduring Lennox-Firth friendship were put behind. Kyoto is Japan's old imperial city, having been the country's capital until 1868 when the balance of power shifted to Edo (which is today known as Tokyo). Kyoto has never been bombed and has thus managed to preserve famous monuments, some of which go back centuries.

Kyoto culture is an amalgam of many influences, of which the imperial court and nobility were the most important. Later came the samurai, the patrons of Zen Buddhism and the tea ceremony, which is an orchestrated ritual of symbolism and appreciation of the present moment. Kyoto-ites seem prouder than the rest of Japanese and, although they may grudgingly envy the economic vitality of Tokyo and nearby Osaka, they take gride pride in their refined cuisine and sensitivity to seasons.

## TEMPLES, SHRINES, & BRUSH WITH FIRTH



This is why winter does not do Kyoto justice and if one had to pick the best time to visit this Japanese city unlike any other it would be early to mid spring. With cherry blossoms in full bloom, the spectacle that unfolds is one of 'ooh's', 'ohh's' and 'ahh's' for the Western tourist. So when we set out early the following morning along one of Kyoto's best loved spots, the Philosopher's Walk, which follows a cherry-tree-lined canal meandering along the base of the Higashiyama Mountains, we still gushed at the chilling beauty of its bare trees reflecting in the water. The route is so-named because a Kyoto University philosophy professor used it for his daily constitutional. The path is also lined with all sorts of Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and even a Western style, Roman aqueduct.

At the end of the path stands Ginkaku-ji or the Silver Pavilion. The temple was originally a mountain retreat of a shogun, who wanted to finish the pavilion in silver as a tribute to his grandfather, who covered the Golden Pavilion in gold leaf. Unfortunately, the ruinous Onin Wars took place and the shogun never had the chance to fulfil his ambition. Without its final coating, the still so-called Silver Pavilion now has a glowing patina of age.

To stay in the theme of temples, shrines and old Japan, we went from the Silver Pavilion to the Golden Pavilion, which is located, inconveniently, on the other side of the city. So to warm up fingers and hands, regain some movement in our toes and give the cameras a break from the almost sub-zero outdoor freshness, we indulged in the luxury of a cab (taxis are a treat because they are so expensive). Along the way, we passed the city centre with its typical sky-rises, enormous advertising screens that cling to them, colour, brightness and buzz.

Half an hour later, we were standing in a beautiful Zen garden, in front of a glimmering temple across the water. The sun decided to make a brief appearance to coat Kinkaku-gi in a blue light and reflect its opulent richness in the pond. The garden was a meandering execution of order and thought. The atmosphere was peaceful (even though the visiting Japanese did what they are famous for and incessantly clicked away at their phones and cameras), people whispered and we were cocooned from the manicness of the city in the remote peacefulness of the past.

This is what makes Japan so unique and special – modern, ultra-advanced technology and unsurpassed engineering that are flung in your face juxtaposed with the traditional, the old, the revered, the serene that you have to seek and discover; the preserved beauty and wisdom of a temple that stands side by side two 40-storey glass monoliths with an interconnecting walkway on the 35<sup>th</sup> level; the peaceful solitude of a walk in a park versus the brightness and incessant clinking in a Pachinko bar (the Japanese version of poker machines and gambling).

With the world of silver and gold temples behind us and by now almost mid-afternoon, it was time to attend to grumbling stomachs. After staring at many plastic displays that looked so good that in the semi-dark you'd be forgiven for thinking they were real food, we picked a restaurant on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of a tower. This is a foreign concept to us, however the majority of restaurants in the heart of Japanese cities are housed in what look like office towers, on every floor of the building. The lift opens and all of a sudden you find yourself in an intimate, dimly lit world where you sit on floor cushions in sparse, spartan surroundings or have a little room all to yourself with windows overlooking the garish ad screens and the bright lights. This is a typical restaurant but the best part of the deal is that you can keep going from floor to floor, take a peek inside and if the atmosphere isn't quite what you're looking for, with a quick press of the lift button you can be off to the next one – we called it elevator sampling.

## TEMPLES, SHRINES, & BRUSH WITH FIRTH



However this time we stayed, we got our own room (so to speak), we ordered food that looked safe (but some of it unavoidably wasn't) and we talked about the day. A day that had started at a frosty 8.00am, a day packed with so much cultural richness and fascinating differences, a full day that would get filed away in the memory archives as 'A Day in the Life of Old Japan'.

By our third day in Kyoto, with walking being our main means of transport (I even managed to pop the heels on a pair of old boots, which only gave me justification to replace them with two!), we started to feel acquainted and almost at home with certain parts of the town. There is a little precious alley in the old part of the city called Pontocho Alley, that is renowned as an entertainment district. Although neon signs and restaurants (at street level this time) are encroaching, the street still preserves the traditional wooden *ochaya* – the type of teahouse where geisha entertain clients. It briefly crossed my mind that we might bump into Col there, but he is after all a married man with kids.

Pontocho is lined with restaurants and a lot of them serve fusion food, particularly a mix of Japanese and French. Since we were starting to crave a little Western influence in our food by now, we didn't need an invitation to take the plunge on a set 8-course fusion meal – which ended up being a 2-hour long affair, mouth-watering Tetsuya degustation on a budget.

That evening, before catching the train to Osaka (which is only 28 mins away on the slow train), we decided to walk off the unusually generous portions of our meal through the Gion District. As the dark descended and with the navigating bloodhound by my side (*sans* map, of course – the map was in my bag just in case), we found ourselves on narrow, cobblestone streets bounded on either side by teahouses and darkened by time *ochayas*. Gion is Kyoto's best known geisha quarter and has a reputation as the Japanese playboy's paradise. What was unusual about it on this Sunday night was how quiet and sleepy the streets were. It seemed we were the only people walking around and we could only conclude that the excitement wasn't starting until much later – either that or the Japanese like to keep it all very quiet, behind closed doors.

Instead of brimming gaiety we found some more shrines and pagodas and a park with an enormous ancient temple presiding over it. The park was completely black and had I not been with Kym (and Kym not been in possession of his very heavy camera lens that makes a fine weapon), I would have been terrified. I kept thinking 'We have stumbled on Hyde Park in Sydney or Central Park in New York, we don't know our way around, it's late at night so we'd better get the hell out of here fast'. The thing that I found the most disturbing though was the sheer quietness and solitude of the park. You could hear a pin drop on the footpath and the footsteps of the only person we passed could be heard from 300 meters away. We whispered in soft voices but soon these melded with our surroundings. It was almost as if the tranquillity dictated a sense of reverence and imposed serenity. There was nothing to say, nothing that could not wait. By the end of our little walk half an hour later I felt purged and at peace. The sense of fear had completely disappeared, life was good, sacred and only that shared moment mattered.

By contrast, two hours or so later, we were catapulted back into the vibrant, in-your-face, busy Japan. Osaka is Japan's third largest metropolis, behind Tokyo and Yokohama. It is also Japan's old merchant city and today's industrial powerhouse, and with that in mind I hoped I would have more success with the much sought-after 'eLu's'. Osaka boasts a castle that was

## TEMPLES, SHRINES, & BRUSH WITH FIRTH



built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, has an impressive history museum – which unfortunately we didn't get to as Kym was working (he did have to do some of that after all!) and I was travelogue-ing and getting acquainted with the shops – and has its usual spider web of freeways on eight different levels that come together like the most intricate arterial system, making our tunnels and bridges look like kindergarten infrastructure.

Osaka is also famous for its nightlife (which was in a different world to the less than animated Kyoto nightlife) and – wait for it – its food predilections. Apparently there is a Japanese saying that goes, “Kyoto-ites will go broke from buying kimonos (beautiful, authentic kimonos are something Kyoto is famous for), while Osakans will go broke from eating out too much”. As if that's what we needed – more traditional Japanese culinary delights! We did have one of Kym's favourites though – *okononomiyaki* – which the Japanese describe as their version of pizza, but I suggest you don't rely on that description if what you feel like is Italian pizza. It's more like a shredded cabbage pancake cooked on a hot plate, topped with seafood, shallots and a raw egg (the Japanese put a raw egg into everything!) – mmm, delicious... have I put you off *okononomiyaki* for life? Oops, sorry...

We were in Osaka for 3-4 days but our time there flew. We were a little tired and needed some Western downtime. Kym worked, I shopped and wrote and continued to clock up with fascination and delight our cultural and language differences. For instance, there was another case of a translated slogan on an ad that went something like “Give money, and have fun and happy time”. The trouble is that they weren't soliciting business for a geisha teahouse, but a Pachinko parlour. This is up there with an item on a menu, which in English said “Fatty fresh of tuna fish with mushroom truffle of marinated sauce”, or a sign on a subway train which read “If you see any dangerous or unidentified objects or persons on the train, please report them immediately”. I guess if you're going to be on a Japanese train you'd better not be unidentified!

Well, that's it for now. We sadly have only one day left in Tokyo and I'm hoping I'll be able to send this before we get back. The last phase of the trip, which covers Fukuoka, Nagasaki and Tokyo, will be written and reminisced from Sydney.

With love and good thoughts,  
Ioana & Kym

