

DAVID MCGONIGAL discovers traditional Japan – and his tastebuds – in Japan’s heartland.

Tofu in Kyoto

The words struck terror in my heart. My host declared that “today we will have lunch in a tofu restaurant” with a smile and rejected every alternate suggestion of mine with steely resolve. Tofu? Isn’t that the rubbery bits of nothing you set to the side when enjoying a Japanese meal? But being a guest in Japan carries responsibility so at lunchtime I followed him into a beautiful Kyoto restaurant and crossed the indoor stream with heavy heart as if it were the Styx.

Two hours later I was a tofu convert. I’d experienced tofu of a wide range of textures and flavours and each had been extraordinarily good. It was a rewarding, filling meal that was enough to make this carnivore consider turning vegetarian. That road-to-Osaka conversion didn’t last long after I returned home though – only until I was re-confronted by the bland filler that passes for tofu here, in fact.

Japan’s tofu could be an analogy for the experience of visiting Japan itself. Because we drive Japanese cars and use Japanese cameras and DVDs and TVs, etc, etc, it seems as if we know the country before we ever visit it. And haven’t we all seen those well-regimented Japanese tour groups traipsing in and out of Australian and New Zealand tourist sites and duty free stores on their short visits here? So most of us have encountered Japanese people, albeit mainly when they are lost in our CBDs.

One’s first time in Japan tends to be a revelation

into a pleasantly alien nation. Of course, the shopping strips of Tokyo and Osaka give a glimpse into the future but only by exploring traditional Japan do you come to see the layers of civilisation that make it so special.

Kyoto has a history that goes back more than 1300 years and is the heart of traditional Japan. The city has a population of less than 1.5 million but it has more than 2000 temples and shrines that attract millions of tourists from all over Japan. It was the imperial capital for over a millennium until 1868 when it was transferred to Tokyo. The rich heritage has led to 17 sites in Kyoto that have been given UNESCO World Heritage status.

The cultural richness of Kyoto may suggest that it’s merely an open-air museum but that’s far from the truth. In fact, in the bustling downtown area with its office blocks and endless shops you could easily mistake it for any other Japanese city. To discover Kyoto you have to delve.

However, the main attraction in Kyoto could be found simply by following the line of visitors heading up the hill named Mt Otowa to Kiyomizudera or “Pure Water Temple” complex. For westerners, the most spectacular element is the temple’s wooden terrace that is 15 metres high and supported on tiers and 172 giant pillars, all built without the use of a single nail or bolt. It provides beautiful views towards the city. Today’s temple is a reconstruction of the one that burned down in the 17th Century. The water from the spring here is

rated as the finest in Japan – and therapeutic – with the considerable added benefit of giving worldly happiness to the drinker. Not surprisingly, there’s a long line of pilgrims waiting to try their hand at using the long handled ladles have a sip.

The steep lane up to the impressive gates of the temple is called Chawan-zaka or “Teapot Lane” and both sides are crowded with small shops. Whatever souvenir of Japan you desire can be found here – from tea sets (or T-shirts) and lace table cloths to herbs and perfumes, elaborate sculptures and those tacky, tiny gifts Japan has perfected. You may see a Japanese tourist who has elected to dress as a geisha for the day and you can certainly find green tea-flavoured ice cream.

For a more tranquil, rural experience, head to the northwest outskirts of the city and Kinkaku-ji or “Golden Temple”. The goldleaf-covered building on the lake is impressive but it is a recent reproduction because the original 1397 building was burned down in 1950 by a young monk to express his love for the building. The gardens with ponds and varied landscapes are beautiful and you can stop at the teahouse for a tea ceremony with the thick, caffeine hit that is Japanese ceremonial tea.

The superlatives just roll on for glorious Nijo Castle, built in 1603 as a shogun’s official residence. From the outside, the moated castle looks just like a castle should with layer after layer and ornate, convoluted roofline. Inside, the rooms are

For anyone with limited time, Kyoto is Japan in a nutshell. Besides the rich history it has all those quirks of contemporary Japanese life that are so beguiling.



The Golden Pavillion