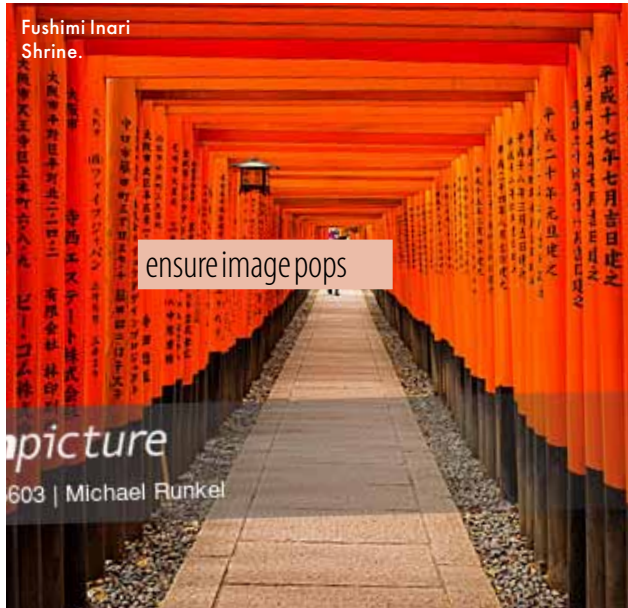


THE BEST... NEW OLD DESTINATIONS

KYOTO



Fushimi Inari Shrine.

ensure image pops

picture

603 | Michael Runkel



Shirakawa River.

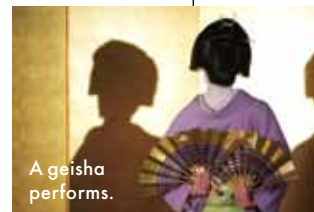


Ryoan-ji Temple.

(shiraume-kyoto.jp), on the banks of the Shirakawa River, was founded as a teahouse in 1600. The B&B rate (no dinner) mercifully brings the price down. From £96 per person, per night.

THE FUN BIT

Tokyo may have been anointed gourmet capital of the world in 2013 by Michelin but Kyoto has no hang-ups: its own constellation of Michelin stars still trumps Paris. Gion has been the city's most exclusive entertainment quarter since the mid-18th century, when the high society used to dine, dash and be sent the bill later. One or two remaining restaurants still operate an ultra-private policy, with chef/owners restricting access to a select, introduction-only clientele. At Kon, food is served *kappo* style: a succession of tiny, seasonal and bespoke dishes personally presented by the chef over the counter to the salivating chosen few. Think steamed and seared slices of steak marinated in sugar and black mountain pepper, for example. It's delectable haute cuisine that haunts you ever after.



A geisha performs.

WHY NOW

As Japan's former capital and imperial city for over a thousand years, Kyoto is a hotbed of traditional high-art forms, from calligraphy and ceramics to tea ceremonies and geisha entertainment. Meet the masters before they become too rare to find. Discover the deft beauty of their handiwork and the singular discipline required—this is what defines the very culture and mindset of Japan.

WHAT TO DO

Curiously, as if to channel their heritage, some Japanese visit Kyoto in costume. These dress-up-for-a-day geishas prove that replicas are easy to find. To come face to face with authentic masters requires an introduction, so a local fixer is a must (see below). Visit a private teahouse in classy Gion and be hosted by a dainty *maiko* (a geisha apprentice), tour enchanting gardens (at Shisen-do, Tenryu-ji, or the famed Zen rock garden at Ryoan-ji Temple) and have their significance



Shisen-do Temple

unravelling by an eminent gardener, or be enthralled by a Buddhist fire ceremony on Mount Hiei.

WHERE TO BE

*Aryokan* is the quintessential (and often eye-wateringly expensive) Japanese inn experience. A simple, *tatami* mat room (with a subtle floral arrangement and hanging scroll for adornment) can serve as your foldable-futon bedroom and private dining area. It's the exquisite multi-course *kaiseki* dinner that really does the dazzling. The deep cedar-wood tubs filled with hot spring water will have you crying into your boring old bathtub back home.

OVER THE RAINBOW (DE-LUXE)

Yoshikawa—one of a clutch of high-end inns (kyoto-yoshikawa.co.jp)—is justly revered for its picturesque garden, crisp tempura and the immaculate hospitality of its all-female, kimono-clad staff. From £192 per person, per night.

UNDER THE RADAR (DE-LESS)

A family-run inn in central Gion, Shiraume Ryokan



sl dark. pls open up

Shiraume Ryokan.

the fixer with all contacts Japanese—and the ability to effortlessly curate Kyoto's plethora of shrines, temples and treasures—is American-in-Japan Nemo Glassman (plus-alpha.jp). Original Travel (originaltravel.co.uk), edgy and contemporary, has lately become a specialist in Japan, a country whose subtleties and complexities require the most expert advice. Despite having all the familiar, hi-tech 21st-century trappings, it's so mysteriously alien it can feel like another planet; but fortunately Original is confidently down to earth.

—STEPHANIE PLENTL

PHOTOGRAPHS: PLAINPICTURE/ROBERT HARDING (FUSHIMI INARI SHRINE); MASAHITO MAKINO (RIVER); STEFANO AMANTINI/4CORNERS (RYOAN-JI); PLUS ALPHA JAPAN (GEISHA); JTB/PHOTOSHOT (SHISEN-DO)