

Kyoto-Autumn Hints

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

There is no denying the fact that the seasons in Japan are distinctly defined and individual. But why should that be? Its climate and geographic location are the key to understanding the character of the seasons in the archipelago, and the nation's topography and distribution of islands adds a further dimension to her changing pageant of weather and nature.

In simple terms, most of the country has a temperate climate with hot humid summers and dry cold winters. But in Okinawa in the extreme southwest the climate is subtropical. And away to the northeast at the other extremity in Hokkaido the annual mean temperature is only 6.3 degrees centigrade. This means that at certain times of the year there may be as much as a twenty-degree difference in temperature between both ends of the nation.

While the four seasons are distinct, it would be truer to say that there are six in all. The extra two are periods of unsettled rainy weather: one between spring and summer and the other marking the end of summer and compounded by the coming of typhoons. The rain fronts form over Japan where cold air from the continent meets the warm air that collects over the Pacific and gives it its national average rainfall of a little more than 1,500 mm. The appearance of these fronts on weather maps heralds major changes in conditions and signals to the populace that a new season is on its way.

This is not all that contributes so much to the natural character of Japan. It spans approximately 22 degrees of latitude from 24 degrees north and lies between 124 degrees east and 148 degrees east. As a result, the flowering of the Japanese apricot and plum at winter's end gradually creeps up the country, the "blooming front" being modified here and there by altitude and topographical variations. This is followed by the cherry which begins to flower in late January in

Okinawa and finally comes into bloom in Hokkaido at the beginning of May.

By contrast, the onset of autumn approaches from the north, and with it comes cooler, more comfortable weather in which to enjoy the hues of the fall before the winter chills and snows follow. The quality of the colors of autumn is said to depend on having a very hot summer followed by a sudden drop in temperature. This may affect the depth of color but does not change the magnificence of reds, browns, yellows and russets that are so often seen amid contrasting greens. Sprinklings of rain only serve to heighten the glory of the colors that go on delighting the eye until early December in some parts.

In Kyoto there are many places to enjoy the maples, so often in consort with the weather-beaten buildings of untreated wood standing firm under sweeping roofs of grey tiles. Tofukuji temple in the southeast corner of the city has a covered wooden bridge from which to view a tapestry of leaves. The mountains of Arashiyama to the



A sprinkle of rain helps to bring out the colors of the parched leaves at Tofukuji temple

west of the city center present a natural setting for autumn, as picturesque as any could be.

Inevitably, the maples with their distinctive pointed leaves provide many motifs for the crafts of Kyoto. Embroidered kimono come ablaze with images of the leaves, while the dyed cloths take a more delicate angle. The ceramics of Kyoto take the shape of the maple leaves for small dishes or as motifs for delicately glazed patterns that all take their hints from autumn.



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Kyoto is easily accessed by train from all over Japan. Timings vary from year to year but the fall generally begins in late October and goes on to the beginning of December, with additional variations according to location and altitude. Go to Kiyomizu to see good ceramics, and Nishijin for kimono cloths. Many of Japan's best traditional crafts can be seen and purchased at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo Tel: 03-3403-2460.

