

## Kyoto—City, Climate and Culture

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

Spread out over a gently rising plane open to the south and flanked on the other three sides by wooded hills and mountains, the geographical peculiarities of its location have furnished Kyoto with some very special qualities which are more than just a little contributive to its overall character.

The mountains, for instance, are close enough to be seen from many parts of the city, more often than not at the end of a main thoroughfare. Consequently, their silhouettes not only provide a natural background to the dealings of everyday life in the city itself but also provide a reminder of the changing seasons. It is here that many of Kyoto's most famous Zen temples can be found, intentionally built in these rich natural surroundings which quite often form a "borrowed" backdrop to the temple gardens and are religiously inspirational, too.

The wealth of natural vegetation in the environs of Kyoto is, in fact, not all natural. Many trees—cherries in particular—have been planted over the years thus enhancing the beauty of these surrounding and highly accessible areas which, in direct contrast to the densely built-up city center, are like a spacious, natural "garden" to be

Right: Autumn colors and a wealth of natural vegetation; lower right: Vases fashioned in cedar "folded" into shape and "sown" together; below: The Momochitaru-kan Noh stage with its glowing timbers



flurry of snow on reaching the surrounding foothills only some five or six kilometers away. Impressions of the cityscape and individual buildings are therefore significantly colored

enjoyed by all.

The climate of the city is also affected by the peculiarities of its location, making it possible to experience slight variations in climatic conditions without covering much ground and within a relatively short space of time. Travelling from the city center bathed in beautiful sunshine, it is possible to be caught in a downpour, a shower or, depending on the season, even in a

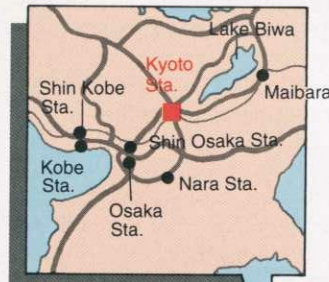
by such atmospheric conditions, and the character of the city in turn is made all the more rich and varied because of them.

As if this were not enough to make Kyoto a unique experience for both resident and visitor, the wealth of history woven into the fabric of the city alone makes it a place of enduring interest, more especially this year, the 1,200 anniversary of the founding of Heian-Kyo, the Capital of Peace and Tranquility that we now know as Kyoto.

It served as the seat of the Imperial court for more than a thousand years and its existence inevitably helped to foster so many of the traditional crafts which also benefitted from the demand for articles associated with the Way of Tea. Being one of Japan's most influential aesthetic traditions and itself part of the rich fabric of the city, this gave further support to a number of distinct crafts.

One of these is known as Kyo-sashimono. It has always, although not exclusively, gained much from both Imperial and Tea sponsorship, and can involve anything from straightforward joinery and cabinetry, to cooper, bentwood work, turning

Kyoto can be reached most easily by Shinkansen although there are now a number of highway buses serving the city, too. Reservations for Mukadeya or Momochitaru-kan can be made by calling (075) 256-6360, or by faxing (075) 256-7701. Address: 380 Mukadeya-cho, Nishikikouji Agaru, Shinmachidori, Nakagyo Ward, Kyoto, 604. Items of Kyo-sashimono are available from Enami, 89 Nishi-iru, 6 Jo, Ainomachi, Shimogyo Ward, Kyoto. Tel: (075) 351-4365; fax: (075) 351-8657. Various Kyo-sashimono items can also be purchased at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo. Tel: (03) 3403-2460.



JR line  
Shinkansen



and even some carving, using woods which are highly seasoned and true. These individual techniques are variously used in the making of small pieces of furniture and numerous smaller items such as trays, stationery boxes, vases, various dishes and containers for delicacies of Kyoto cuisine as well as a whole range of items used during the Tea Ceremony and at religious ceremonies at both Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. What all of these items have in common, however, is a degree of refinement and elegance, which is also a strong and unflinching part of the city's character.

Nevertheless, it is becoming more and more difficult to sample this degree of refinement and sense of sheer quality as a total environment, especially for the tourist. The restaurants Mukadeya and its sister building across the street, Momochitaru-kan however, do provide recreations of a timeless nature where there is much to delight both the palate and the eye. While Mukadeya was created by converting the premises of a kimono dealer, Momochitaru-kan is newly built in an inspired traditional style and even boasts a Noh stage, where so much freshly finished wood is a rare sight.

But ultimately, Kyoto is a total experience of culture and climate, life and nature. And, however many times it is visited, it will always provide a wealth of experiences that only serve to endorse the richness of its cultural heritage and its uniqueness in a world daily bereft of a true sense of elegance and quality.



In cooperation with the  
JAPAN TRADITIONAL  
CRAFT CENTER

## TABLE TALK

### Spaghetti con le sarde

While I was attending the Japan Economic Foundation-sponsored U.K.-Japan High Tech Forum held in Gleneagles, Scotland, I managed to steal away in between intervals to visit Sicily and Rome.

If you are interested in history, Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, is a place you want to visit at least once. Palermo, the capital, was the site where the last offensive and defensive battle was fought during the first Punic War. Many people may still remember that it was also the place where U.S. General Patton and British Viscount Montgomery competed with great pride to be the first to arrive during WW II.

After seeing numerous historical relics left behind by the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Normans, the French and the Spanish, I must say that the single piece of history that most struck my fancy about Sicily is this specialty of Palermo unique to the island—sardine spaghetti. The spaghetti does not smell in the least fishy and is made with the freshest sardine. This is indeed a marvel, which goes to show the wisdom of the local people. If we were to come up with an equivalent in Japanese food, I suppose the *nishin* soba, or herring

noodles, would be the closest.

Riding from Taormina, the largest tourist site in Sicily, our train headed toward Rome. Midway, the 10-car train was gobbled up in the belly of a ferry boat that cut across the Messina Straits in just about 30 minutes.

In Rome, my Italian friend treated me to dinner at Sabatini-Rome, located right across from Piazza di St. Maria. Because in Aoyama, Tokyo, Sabatini-Tokyo is well known as a high-priced restaurant and because this restaurant in Rome is the home base of the Tokyo branch, many Japanese tourists have come to dine here. In comparison, prices here, not surprisingly, are way cheaper than the Tokyo branch.

As far as I am concerned, Giggetto er Pescatore, the restaurant that I visited on the following day, has better food and nicer decor and is definitely one rank higher than Sabatini-Tokyo. Although I had swordfish and tuna fish steaks there almost every day, ironically, the place where I had the best fish steaks was at the Italian restaurant located near Piccadilly Circus in London.

Likewise, it is also undeniable that Italian dishes prepared at restaurants in Tokyo are definitely tasting better than the real McCoy served at restaurants in Italy. There is one problem though: Prices in Tokyo are almost double those in Italy. This is particularly the case with wine, the prices are

so high that it is maddening.

Now that the Japanese government is working toward a deregulation of prices, no doubt it will sooner or later bring to an elimination gaps between domestic and international prices. I am sure I am not the only one looking forward to the arrival of such a day.

**Hori Yoshimichi**  
Editor-in-chief



Left: Il Duomo  
(Taormina, Sicily)  
Below: Isola di  
Ustica (Palermo,  
Sicily)  
Photos: Courtesy  
of Italian State  
Tourist Board  
(ENIT)

