

CITY LIFE

KYOTO

Beneath the surface of sedate geisha teahouses and hushed shrines, Kyoto is a hotbed for legendary live music — here, Japan’s most unique, riotous acts are set free in the city’s underground clubs, grungy dive bars and historic cafes

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An Irish pub is, perhaps, not the obvious place to find yourself in the cultural heart of Japan. It’s with some trepidation, then, that I settle into a corner table at Field, an Irish pub above an udon restaurant in downtown Kyoto, where the door sign advertises that classic combination of ‘draught Guinness, good Irish music, and curry bread of Noharaya’.

My apprehension turns out to be wildly misplaced. Over the next couple of hours, a succession of fantastically talented Japanese musicians takes to the stage, putting the fiddle, flute, banjo and tin whistle to a series of riotous jigs, reels and slides that wouldn’t be out of place in the pubs of Dublin. “Europeans and Americans living in Kyoto started the Irish music sessions in pubs in the 1990s,” manager Hikaru Sato tells me between tunes. “A few curious Japanese joined them, and the Irish music scene was born.”

The genre was seized upon with aplomb by subsequent generations of Japanese musicians, who’ve taken it up with the passion, verve and skill typical of this nation of hobbyists. “Japanese people often believe that mastering something leads to enjoyment, both in work and in hobbies,” says fiddle and tin-whistle player Ryo Kaneko, fresh from a rousing rendition of Egan’s Polka. There’s even a word for it in Japanese: *ikigai* — the sense of motivation and life force generated by the pursuit of one’s passions. “Hobbies are huge here,” confirms my guide, Van Milton of InsideJapan. “And when you find one, you go for it, full throttle.”

The modest Irish folk scene is just the tip of the iceberg. The guidebooks speak of Kyoto with reverential awe: a city frozen in time, where robed monks sweep around hushed temples, and an opaque silence hangs above the perfect angles of Zen gardens. But there’s another side to the place — one that’s modern, rumbustious and irreverent to the core. By night, Kyoto is turned upside down. The city’s counterculture has long been brewed in the city’s music venues, locally known as ‘live houses’. In the 1970s, members of the Japanese Red Army, a female-led militant communist group who aimed to overthrow the monarchy, were said to have hidden out amid the swirling smoke and dark-wood walls of Zac Baran, one of Kyoto’s most famous jazz bars.

My own descent into the Kyoto nightscape continues at Urban Guild, the city’s leading avant-garde music space. Fractals project off the walls. A man in a bucket hat with a ducktail beard smokes a large cigarette of dubious legality. It’s a full house here tonight, spectators packed onto wooden benches — yet there are even more people standing around the stage, waiting to perform, than there are in the audience. A young man goes through some warm-up stretches; an elderly man with knee-length dreadlocks, topped with a rasta cap, repeatedly bends over and pounds his knees with his fists. They’re limbering up.

The need for physical preparedness becomes apparent as the night proceeds, a marathon of modern jazz improvisation that unspools through several hours with more than 30





Traditional fish breakfast at Roji Usagi, a cafe in a century-old townhouse

Clockwise from right: Nishiki Market; Naoju Yokota, a jazz drummer and the owner of Jazz in Rokudenashi, one of the most famous jazz cafes in Kyoto

Previous pages: Nishiki Tenmangu, a Shinto shrine in Nishiki Market



INSIDER TIPS

Audiences are flocking back to Kyoto's live music venues, meaning that shows can be busy. If there's a particular act you want to see or venue you want to attend, get your name on the list early by emailing before — this will ensure you're permitted entry, although payment is usually not taken until you arrive.

It's a good idea to have a face mask with you wherever you go in Japan, and music venues are no exception. It's not a legal requirement to wear one — Japan never needed to pass such laws, since compliance was so high — but you may give a bad impression or feel uncomfortable in certain settings if you're the only person not wearing one.

Can't decide between going for dinner or catching a show? There's no need to choose at Japan's traditional live houses. Try Jittoku, where a menu of basic but hearty rice and noodle dishes can be ordered during the show, and Taku Taku, where croquettes and pancakes are on offer.

performers, many of whom return to the stage time and again. The evening unfolds in an amorphous phantasmagoria of music and light. There's a circus feel, with children running amok across the stage, ducking beneath drum risers, synthesizers and microphone leads. The decibels rise; they stick their fingers in their ears. A salaryman sleeps on a corner bench.

One of the repeat performers is vocalist Fuyuco, who I chat to in between sets. She explains that Kyoto's smaller population — around half that of Osaka, and 10 times less than Tokyo — and less well-known venues have helped a different kind of music scene flourish here, compared with those found in bigger cities. "Kyoto is a small, deep city," she says. "People's connections are spread like roots; you can make a community easily here. The cost of living is also cheaper than other major cities, which is why so many experimental musicians live here."

The next day, I meet ambient music producer Ferdinand Maubert in Cavalier, a darkly stylish cocktail bar. As I quiet the embryonic thud of a hangover with Hibiki whiskies, he explains that Kyoto is at the vanguard of Japan's nascent electronic music scene. It long faced a unique stumbling block: a 1948 law, introduced to counteract the corrupting influence of US culture, which banned dancing after midnight. For long periods the police turned a blind eye, allowing nightclubs to operate semi-legally, but a series of high-profile raids in the 2010s, known as the 'War on Dance', shuttered an

already stifled scene even further. Protests followed and Japan's archaic dancing ban was finally lifted in 2015.

Ferdinand tells me things are moving forward here, even if progress is slow. "When I was in Europe in the 2000s, it was all about underground raves; now everyone wants them here in Japan," he says. "Ten years ago, we were in the 1980s in Japan. Now we're in the 1990s." The ambient music scene in particular is growing, boosted by a 2022 multimedia exhibition held in Kyoto by Brian Eno, the British musician and record producer who popularised the genre in the 1970s and 1980s.

Ferdinand agrees with Fuyuco that Kyoto makes a good home for those who don't fit so easily into mainstream life in Japan. "These people choose to live a little on the margins of society," he says, "and you can do that in Kyoto — it's more affordable, and it's also close to nature." The latter is particularly important to Ferdinand, whose debut album, *Made in Kyoto*, is infused with field recordings made in the bamboo forests outside the city.

Kyoto also provides a handsome setting for music venues, with its historic architecture having been spared bombing during the Second World War. Rock 'n' roll bands shake the wooden rafters of Jittoku, a former sake brewery said to be the oldest music house in Japan, while live swing music echoes against the mosaic tiles of Sarasa Nishijin, an attractive 1930s bathhouse that's now a cafe. ➤



Q&A with Yukari BB,
DJ and manager
of Jazzy Sport
record store

HOW DOES KYOTO
INSPIRE YOU
CREATIVELY?

Kyoto is known as an ancient capital, but it also has the highest number of universities in Japan relative to its population, so it's always fresh and full of stimulation and curiosity. Art festivals, such as Kyotographie and Nuit Blanche, are held frequently throughout the year.

WHAT'S SO UNIQUE
ABOUT KYOTO'S MUSIC
SCENE, COMPARED WITH
TOKYO OR OSAKA?

It's not necessarily highly commercial or flashy, but it's full of individuality and inquisitive minds that delve into specific music. Kyoto's musicians tend to seek quality above all else. There are many long-established workshops in Kyoto creating tofu, metalwork, kimonos, incense and more — that artisan spirit runs through the music scene, too.

WHERE ARE THE BEST
PLACES TO SEE MUSIC
IN KYOTO?

One of my favourites is a cosy, small reggae bar called Rub A Dub. Another is DNA Paradise; I'd say that it's the deepest music spot in Kyoto. It has a great vintage sound system and quality music. There's no sign outside, but it's worth finding!

REBEL MUSIC

'The nail that sticks out will be hammered down' — this traditional Japanese proverb is trotted out by foreign observers so often that I'm surprised to hear it repeatedly from Japanese people themselves when describing the country's collectivist, conformist society. Music, though, is a vehicle of escape for Kyotoites of a more individual bent. Walk among the canalside shophouses and cherry trees of Kiyamachi Street and you may be greeted by the striking sight and sound of Chanko Ponchi, an ex-sumo wrestler, rapping and beat-boxing in nothing but his *mawashi* (loincloth). Another individual of the Kyoto music scene is Taiji Sato, a guitar-wielding firebrand with a magnificent mane who has earned the sobriquet 'the Japanese Lenny Kravitz' and become a prominent fixture in the city's live houses.

Nowhere is Kyoto's fierce musical individuality more evident than in its upholding of the proud tradition of Japanese punk rock, spearheaded in the 1980s by acts such as Boøwy and Shonen Knife. Among those carrying the flag today are Kyoto legends Otoboke Beaver, whose brand of searing guitar punk and satirical lyrics — often damning of the narrow conservatism and familial pressures of Japanese society — has generated interest in Europe and the US and won acclaim from rock royalty Dave Grohl. "It was only after we started getting attention overseas that we were labelled as a punk band," singer

Accorinrin tells me, "but maybe our attitude is punk." Perhaps, she says, this has something to do with being from Kyoto, where, as with the wider Kansai region, "people are known for being direct and outspoken".

Even here, in the modern punk scene, the influence of Kyoto's traditional arts makes itself known. Accorinrin points to *manzai*, a classical comedy form. "Kansai is the birthplace of the comedy scene in Japan, so we don't consciously think about comedy; it's just a part of us," she says. "*Manzai* is a traditional type of stand-up comedy, usually two people in a conversation — it has a rhythm, a slow and fast speed. The changing tempo fascinates us and this influences our songwriting."

As luck would have it, the band are playing a homecoming gig in Kyoto during my visit, so I duly show up at Socrates, a grungy dive bar, with my guide, Van, in tow. Sweat drips from the walls as the band rattles through a set of pulse-quickening punk, with sweet pop melodies alternating with bursts of spiky rage over spidery guitar riffs. The band's bugbears are evident in the song titles — I Won't Dish Out Salads; I Am Not Maternal; Dirty Old Fart is Waiting for My Reaction — and in the righteous fury of the lyrics, barked in Japanese and English, with lines like: "A tenacious sulky troublesome ass/ Looking for a one-night stand/Creepy old fart."

"This is what happens in Japan," says Van, nodding approvingly, "when the mask comes off."

Clockwise from top: A tea ceremony at Camellia Garden, a historic home that offers private tea ceremonies near Ryōan-ji Temple; Fushimi Inari Taisha, a Shinto shrine in Kyoto; Obbli, a small cafe-bar that hosts regular live performances



Japanese hardcore punk band Roccon perform at Socrates dive bar

Club together
Nowhere is the city's fierce musical individuality more evident than in its upholding of the proud tradition of Japanese punk rock



Nishiki Market is popular for street food

14 HOURS IN

Kyoto

8AM

BREAKFAST AT ROJI USAGI

This cosy cafe in the Miyagawa-cho district is a lovely spot to plan out your day, not least because the owner is a helpful former tour guide and the walls are lined with books about Kyoto. The cafe is housed in a century-old *machiya* (townhouse) and set around a gorgeous rock garden. The menu is as traditional as the decor; feast on grilled fish, miso soup and pickled vegetables, or opt for the slightly more substantial Japanese curry. rojiusagi.com

10AM

VISIT KIYOMIZU-DERA

Among Kyoto's many splendid sights, the most impressive might well be Kyomizu-dera, a 1,200-year-old Buddhist temple that looms mightily on a forested hill in eastern Kyoto, a 15-minute walk from Roji Usagi. The main prayer hall stands on tall wooden columns, giving the illusion that it's floating above the trees. The whole place, in fact, is something of an architectural marvel, with its structures having stood since the 1600s despite being built entirely from wood and without the use of a single nail. kiyomizudera.or.jp

12PM

LUNCH AT NISHIKI MARKET

Known fondly by locals as 'Kyoto's Kitchen', the indoor Nishiki Market is a fantastic place to get a feel for the rhythms of daily life in the city, with vendors hawking fresh seafood and vegetables just as they have for 400 years. Ready-to-eat snacks are also on offer here for an unforgettable lunch: try tempura skewers of shrimp and conger eel, and don't miss *tako tamago* — a baby octopus stuffed with a boiled quail's egg, a delicacy that originated here in the market.

2PM

EXPERIENCE A JAZZ KISSA

The jazz *kissa* is a uniquely Japanese phenomenon: atmospheric cafes where the order of the day is to sit quietly and appreciate carefully curated jazz records. Originating in the 1920s, many have an atmosphere largely unchanged to this day. Jazz in Rokudenashi is one of the most famous, with dark-wood walls covered with vintage prints and magazines, and one of the finest collections of jazz in Kyoto. Spend a couple of hours here over a coffee or Japanese whisky. rokude.com

Drinking religiously

At Bozu Bar, you can talk (and drink) whisky and sake with the owner, who's also a Buddhist monk and head priest of Myoyu Kuonji in west Kyoto ➤



Kiyomizu-dera, a 1,200-year-old Buddhist temple

4PM

MARVEL AT FUSHIMI INARI TAISHA

No visit to Kyoto is complete without a trip to the city's most famous Shinto shrine complex, Fushimi Inari Taisha. Thousands of vermilion-coloured *torii* gates unfold up a mountainside in sets, like fallen decks of cards; as you walk through them, stopping off at shrines on the way, you'll notice they're flanked by dozens of statues of sly foxes, which in Shinto mythology represent guardians of Inari, the deity of fertility, rice, sake and tea. In exchange for a small donation, you can receive a miniature *torii* gate of your own, to leave as an offering at one of the complex's many shrines. inari.jp

6PM

DISCOVER THE WORLD OF NOH

Before exploring more of Kyoto's modern music scene, pay homage to its classical arts at the Kanze Noh Theatre. *Noh* is a form of dance-drama that originated in the 14th century, which involves performers donning striking masks to act out folk tales, songs and comic skits. Although it's one of the oldest theatrical forms still practised today, it's far from a stuffy affair and the tales of ghosts, gods and monsters — as well as the gags — can transcend any language barrier. kyoto-kanze.jp

8PM

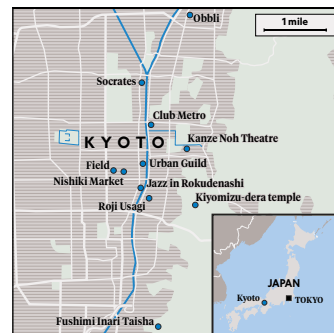
DINNER AND MUSIC AT OBBLI

Tacos might not be what you expect to find in Kyoto, but they do them superbly at cafe-bar Obbli, with classic Mexican dishes — *carnitas* (pulled pork), beef *picadillo* (a tomato-based dish), *pico de gallo* (a type of salsa) — presented with a Japanese eye for aesthetics (blue corn tortillas and bright pink pickled onions, for instance). Run by music obsessive Tani Haruya, Obbli has the feel of a cosy living room, lined with bookcases and plastered with vintage music posters, and there are regular live performances of folk, jazz, rock and more. twitter.com/obbli0616

10PM

DIVE INTO KYOTO'S NIGHTLIFE

Launched in 1990, Club Metro is said to be the oldest nightclub in Japan. Open every night of the week and featuring a rotating roster of DJs and live acts from Japan and beyond, it's a fantastic place to begin your exploration of Kyoto's nightlife. Erstwhile denizens include jazz crossover legends Kyoto Jazz Massive, American bassist Thundercat and French electronic duo Daft Punk, and the club remains a creative breeding ground for new and established acts alike. metro.ne.jp □



GETTING THERE & AROUND

British Airways, Japan Airlines and All Nippon Airways fly direct from London to Tokyo daily, from where it's easy to connect to Kyoto by bullet train (2hrs 15mins). ba.com jal.co.jp ana.co.jp

Average flight time: 14h.

It's possible to explore Downtown Kyoto on foot, but for sights further afield it's easy to get around using the city's efficient subway system. The bus network is also very easy to use. The Kansai One pass, available at subway and train stations or convenience stores, gives unlimited travel on buses and trains in Kyoto and the wider Kansai region. kansaionepass.com

WHEN TO GO

Spring is a beautiful time to visit Kyoto, with average temperatures of 14C in April and the city's trees smothered in cherry blossom, but it's also a very busy time of year. Summers are humid and average 33C in August, while autumn often has mild weather — highs of 23C in October — without the crowds of spring, and with gorgeous foliage colours. Winter is often cloudy, windy and rainy, with a January average temperature of 10C.

WHERE TO STAY

Hyatt Regency Kyoto, Sanjusangendomawari neighbourhood. Doubles from £220, B&B. hyatt.com
Mercure Kyoto Station, Aburanokojicho neighbourhood. Doubles from £120, B&B. mercure-kyoto-station.com

MORE INFO

kyoto.travel
Rough Guide to Japan. RRP: £18.99

HOW TO DO IT

InsideJapan can tailor a trip to Kyoto, offering three nights at the Royal Park Hotel from £480 per person, B&B, with a day of private tours and experiences, including a private tea ceremony. Excludes flights. insidejapantours.com