

The Real Japan

by Maxine Albert



Like Prince Charles, Jack Kennedy and Grace Kelly, I made the Westin Miyako my home in Kyoto. Luxurious rooms, a knowledgeable international staff and an ideal location to explore the treasured city make the Westin Miyako (www.westinmiyako-kyoto.com) the perfect place to stay.

Kyoto is famous for its ancient Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and exquisite Japanese gardens, which draw the visitor into a meditative state of sublime stillness. A lifetime would not be sufficient to see all there is in Kyoto. Some highlights: The Silver Pavilion, with its gardens of sculpted trees and emerald moss. The superb Zen gardens of Roan-ji and Daitoku-ji. The breathtaking Golden Pavilion. The magnificent Shugakuin Imperial Villa.

The kyo machiya, wooden town houses with lattice work exteriors, line the streets of Kyoto. Gion is the ancient entertainment district, with its tea houses and kimono-clad geisha. One can also find exquisite crafts and fine arts and textiles here. I was delighted to learn that Kyoto is a food lover's paradise, with its own native cuisine.

The language barrier was easy to overcome: whether pointing to a picture on a menu, or telling a chef how much I was prepared to spend, I was never disappointed with what came from the kitchen.

Next I headed southwest to Shodo-shima, an enchanting island in Japan's tranquil Seto Inland Sea with a Mediterranean climate, lush foliage, sandy beaches and healing spas. Also known as the Island of Well-being, Shodoshima has 88 Buddhist temples, a monkey reserve and Japan's only olive groves.

The Olivean Resort (www.olivean.com) offers tennis courts and comfortable spacious rooms with balconies overlooking the sea. Manager Ken Takenuga and his staff give each guest personal attention. The indoor-outdoor onsen (hot spring) spa is set atop 300,000 year-old thermal springs. Luxuriating in the steaming onsen surrounded by nature's beauty was an unparalleled sensory delight.

I revelled in daily olive oil massages, nature walks and attended a powerful Buddhist ceremony performed to rid one of impurities. A delicious kaiseki dinner with food prepared according to season and local sake was followed by karaoke.

My most memorable evening was the sukiyaki dinner at the home of Ms. Oka, a lovely hotel employee. The men, manager Ken and hotel owner Mr. Ikeda, cooked sanuki beef at the table while regaling us with hilarious stories of Japan's unique customs and manners.

That evening I realized the real Japan is found in the warmth and hospitality of its people. **BT**

In search of a travel adventure that would transport me to a place of beauty and serenity, I set out for Kyoto, Japan.

