

京の華 Geiko and maiko—Jewels of Kyoto

Geisha have long been a fascination for many people outside Japan. It is fair to say that geisha along with samurai have become an instantly recognisable embodiment of traditional Japanese culture. However, misunderstandings about the performers and their world persist. This is not surprising given that even in Japan it is rare for people to have any direct contact with the geisha and apprentice geisha called maiko.

Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan, is considered to be the home of *geisha*, or *geiko* as they are known in Kyoto. Local people refer to the areas where *geiko* and *maiko* practice and work as the *kagai*, which literally translates as 'flower district'. While there are geisha in Tokyo and other parts of Japan, it is largely only in Kyoto that the women undergo strict training.

The members of the Jewels of Kyoto group which toured Australia and New Zealand in February this year are from Gion-east. Gion-east is one of the five designated districts: Gion Kobu, Gion Higashi (Gion-east), Kamishichiken, Miyagawa-cho and Pontocho. All *geiko* and *maiko* belong to one of these districts.

Highly skilled performers

Geiko are female traditional performing artists who undertake rigorous training. The very word reveals this when you

look at the Japanese characters. The first character *gei* 芸 means skill or art; 子 refers here to woman. The word *maiko* 舞妓 is composed of the character for dance 舞, followed by 妓 denoting a female.

Geiko are accomplished in Japanese arts, such as tea ceremony, traditional dance and music. Although trained in all the classical Japanese arts, *geiko* and *maiko* are most admired for their dance and musical abilities, namely singing and using traditional instruments such as *shamisen* banjo, *taiko* drums and *shinobue* flute.

Geiko and *maiko* perform at teahouses called *ochaya* and at exclusive *ryotei* restaurants. Although there are more exceptions these days, it normally takes an introduction before someone can visit an *ochaya*. *Geiko* and *maiko* may also be hired to entertain at weddings.

Quick facts

- The first people to be referred to as *geisha* 芸者 were men, not women. The first women who took on the role were called *onna geisha* 女芸者 or 'women geisha'.
- Fees are referred to in units of 'sticks' because fees used to be measured by the time it took a stick of incense to burn.

Commitment required

Becoming a *geiko* takes great commitment and the number of *maiko* is falling. Today there are around 180 *geiko* and 70 *maiko* in wider Kyoto; about 50 years ago, there were more than 1,000 in Gion alone. All Japanese must attend compulsory education until the age of fifteen.

In the past, most *maiko* would be ready to be full performers by this age, but in Japan today, this is when most girls make the decision to try to become a *geiko*.

Maiko must train hard to acquire the skills that will be core to their future work. *Maiko* who come from other parts of Japan must also learn the local Kyoto dialect. *Geiko* and *maiko* are members of an *okiya*, a household managed by the *okami-san*. *Maiko* must live at the *okiya*, even if a *maiko* is from Kyoto.



A *maiko* dances and a *geiko* plays the flute during the performance by Jewels of Kyoto members at the Consul-General's residence in February. *Maiko* dress the more elaborately of the two with long flowing sleeves and more ornamentation in her hair. And that is another point—the hair is the *maiko*'s own and she must maintain the style over a week by sleeping on a raised neck pillow. *Geiko* wear wigs and wear simpler kimono. There are other finer points of difference in dress and make-up.

Long performing lives

Once fully qualified as a *geiko*, women may choose to live away from the *okiya*. Prior to World War II, most *geiko* would have had a patron, but today's performers do not need this support and can make a living from wages and tips. Should a *geiko* decide to get married, she leaves the profession. The emphasis is on the conversational and performance skills of the *geiko* and this enables skilled performers to make it a lifelong career should they wish. Some women as old as eighty are still active as *geiko*!

Seeing *geiko* and *maiko* in Kyoto

There are some tour companies which can organise entertainment by *geiko* and *maiko* but this is expensive. Gion Corner features short digest performances including dances by genuine *maiko* and is an affordable option.