京都時代祭り

Kyoto's Festival of the Ages

The Kyoto Festival of the Ages (Jidai Matsuri) is held every year on 22 October during Kyoto's autumn sight-seeing period and it is one of the city's three main festivals. The long and solemn procession of people depicts famous historical figures wearing authentic costumes of the day and has something of a triumphal air about it. However, the parade's origins are not to be found in some great victory. The Jidai Matsuri was inaugurated after the capital moved in 1868 from Kyoto to Tokyo; an association of Kyoto residents made a conscious decision to preserve the history and the future of their city.

There was good reason to be concerned for the future of the city when Emperor Komei moved the capital to Edo, as Tokyo was then known. In 1873, five years after the capital's move to Tokyo, the population of Kyoto had fallen to around 220,000, down from around 350,000 during the Edo Period (1600-1867).

As part of an effort to slow this decline, the Heian Shrine with its eye-catching giant vermillion *torii* gate was built in 1895 to commemorate the 1,100th anniversary of the founding of Kyoto. Back in 794, Emperor Kanmu moved Japan's capital to the site of Kyoto and called it Heiankyo. Built on the site of the former Heian Palace, the Heian Shrine is dedicated to the first and last emperors who ruled from Kyoto: Emperor Kanmu and Emperor Komei. The Jidai Matsuri was held as a commemorative event when the Heian Shrine was founded in 1895 and has been held on 22 October almost every year since then.

Close to 2,000 people are involved in today's parade which sets off from the Former Imperial Palace and makes its way to the Heian Shrine. The parade is approximately 2km in length. The participants wear well researched and historically accurate costumes from the 8th through to the 19th century, the period that Kyoto was the imperial capital of Japan. Equipment and accessories are also true to the times.

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Kyoto Imperial Palace

Leading the Jidai Matsuri procession are people dressed as the Edo-period warriors who supported the Meiji Emperor in overthrowing the shogunal government. The parade then works its way back through history.

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Heian Jingu Shrine

Historically important figures are depicted—not just political figures, cultural ones too, such as Murasaki Shikibu, the court lady who wrote what is considered to be the world's first novel.

The desire to preserve the history of Japan's former capital seems to have long been evident. But it is also interesting to consider another of the events held to commemorate the 1,100th anniversary, the 4th National Industrial Exposition. Today's Kyoto is known as the home of several of Japan's most successful hi-tech companies. Preserving culture does not exclude innovation and the city of Kyoto appears very conscious of this.

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A participant in the Jidai Matsuri

The city's homepage has a section titled 'Historical Kyoto'* and it ends on a note that leaves the reader in no doubt that the city does not want to be just a place of historical monuments. It reads: *"Kyoto is not the kind of city that is simply content to remain as it is. Instead, it continues to strive toward change and development, adjusting itself to meet the needs of each new generation. If it cannot succeed in this endeavour, the fire of its exciting 1200 year history would be blown out, making Kyoto just another city of past achievements. Kyoto will never succumb to this, it is and always will be, a living historical city."*

* **Kyoto City Web** www.city.kyoto.jp/koho/eng/historical/1200.html [accessed 25/08/2010]

It is possible to visit Kyoto time and time again and visit somewhere new. To help you decide how to use your time, the **Japan National Tourist Organisation** website www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/regional/kyoto is a good place to start. It also has links to official Kyoto city and prefectural travel sites.