

# MY LIFE *as a* GEISHA



Liberated lady? Geisha were created to pamper men—but they were also the freest women in old Japan, and masters of the arts of calligraphy, flower arranging, music, dance, and drama. Here, a present-day geisha in Gion, one of Kyoto's historic quarters.

WHAT WOMAN CAN'T USE SOME LESSONS IN FEMINE ALLURE? **SHOBA NARAYAN** TRAVELS TO KYOTO TO PICK UP SOME TIPS FROM THE MASTERS—THE CITY'S RENOWNED GEISHAS. TRUST US—THERE'S MUCH MORE TO JAPAN'S MOST ENDURING ICONS THAN WHITE FACE-PAINT AND A BEE-STUNG POUT

**I** HAVE COME to Japan to learn about allure. I've been married for seventeen years, and while my marriage isn't falling apart, it is fraying at the edges: a victim of minutiae like leaky taps, lost airline tickets, and PTA meetings. Nowadays when I ask my husband a fairly innocuous question such as, "Does this green dress suit me?" he gets this deer-in-the-headlights expression. I want Ram to look at me without fear and with adoration. So I have come to Japan to learn about feminine allure from its acknowledged masters: the geisha.

Suzuno-san thinks I shouldn't even be asking questions. Suzuno-san is a Tokyo geisha. Like most Japanese, she is slim and beautiful with high cheekbones, Dior-red lips, and a chignon worn at the nape, which the Japanese consider the sexiest part of a woman. This is why geisha and *maiko* (apprentice geisha) wear their kimono low on the neck, the nape revealed.

Suzuno-san is in her forties, maybe fifties. I cannot ask. Geisha don't reveal their age anyway. She teaches etiquette and bemoans the rising informality of her culture. "These manners are part of who we are," she says. "It is what defines us as Japanese."

We meet at Fucha-ryori Bon, a lovely restaurant with tatami-lined cubicles inside which patrons can have lunch in rice paper-screened privacy. Over the next hour, I learn how to pick up a soup bowl (one hand on the side

and one underneath), how to slurp udon noodles, how to sip green tea, how to place my chopsticks when I am done eating, and also how to treat a man.

Suzuno-san says that peppering a man with questions is a big no-no, something she tells all her *maiko*. Questions put a man on the defensive. "I may know a lot about politics, but I won't reveal it," she says. "Instead, I will draw him out."

This whole notion of playing dumb bothers me, and I tell her so. Hasn't she heard of feminism? Her interpretation is different. She plays dumb not because she is a woman and he is a man. She does it because she is a professional and he is her client. It has more to do with hierarchy than gender. Japanese men play dumb with their clients too.

It is a smart answer, but it doesn't help me with my marriage. I can't stop asking my husband questions even though I know it puts him on the defensive. I can, however, learn what Suzuno-san calls respect for both humans and objects. Respect the tatami by leaving your shoes outside. When you cross a room, don't just blunder across. Go behind people so that their conversations are not disturbed. Cover your mouth when you giggle. When you enter a tatami room, don't just walk in. Sit on your haunches and slide across the threshold, then bow deeply to your host while still kneeling.

We finish lunch. My interpreter and I drop Suzuno-san at her street corner before speeding off. I turn

around and watch her slide across the broad avenue. With her floral-pink kimono and erect carriage, she looks regal. Alluring.

**T**HE DICTIONARY defines allure as "the power to entice or attract through personal charm," which has more to do with gait and bearing than with beauty. The geisha are masters of allure. This, I believe, is why we are fascinated by them. It isn't that they are beautiful, although many of them are. Beauty is a wild card anyway, beyond our control. Sexy, after a certain age, borders on tawdry. Mystique is too much work. But allure, as the geisha so magnificently prove, can be taught and learned. Just like etiquette.

The Japanese call this *iki*, an aesthetic ideal that implies subdued elegance. *Iki* emerged in the eighteenth century as a kind of reverse snobbery that the working class developed toward the affected opulence of their rulers. *Iki* pits subtlety against gaudiness, edginess against beauty, relaxed simplicity against gorgeous formality. Loosely translated, *iki* means being chic or cool, but its nuances are particular to Japan—curves, for instance, are not *iki*, but straightness is. *Iki* combines sassiness with innocence, sexiness with restraint. Geisha, with their giggly coquettishness, are emblematic of *iki*, or aspire to be.

Kyoto represents the apotheosis of the *iki* aesthetic, and that is where my journey begins. At its center is the vast

Imperial Palace compound, which is surrounded by a grid of neighborhoods, a style of urban planning inspired by the Tang Dynasty's capital city, Chang'an (now Xi'an). Bordered by mountains on three sides, this neat, green, low-rising city of 1.46 million people is almost at the geographical center of Honshu, Japan's largest island. With its graceful Zen temples, crooked cobblestone streets, Shinto shrines, moss-covered gardens, and the meandering Kamo River, it is the country's spiritual and cultural heart. Kyoto is the quintessential Japan, in which every icon and art form that we associate with the country blooms into perfection.

In A.D. 794, the dour Emperor Kammu, freaked out by a series of accidents and natural disasters, moved the imperial capital from Nara to nearby Kyoto. He named his new capital Heian-kyo, Place of Peace and Tranquillity. Here, during the country's thousand years of relative seclusion from neighboring China and Korea, courtiers composed poetry, painted landscapes, drank sake, and held moon-viewing parties in autumn. The elegant Lady Murasaki wrote *The Tale of Genji*, widely considered the world's first novel (its influence still permeates Japan).

The city's fortunes wavered according to the whims of warring rulers, and Kyoto was taken over by successive feuding clans, shogunates, and armed samurai until the capital moved to Tokyo in 1868. This checkered history has contributed mightily to Kyoto's



layered character. Within Japan, the city is viewed with a combination of envy and disdain. Ask a Tokyo teenager what he thinks of Kyoto-ans and he will use words like *snobbish* and *conservative*. Kyoto people never talk straight, he will say. They don't reveal their feelings, and consider you a native only if you have lived there for generations. Theirs is Japanese reserve multiplied by ten.

**A**T TWILIGHT, THE city comes alive. Swarms of jeans-clad office workers make way for kimono-clad matrons hurrying off to buy pickles and eel at the bustling Nishiki Market. Every now and then, a geisha appears, standing incongruously under a neon sign advertising lingerie.

For a modern feminist like me, it is difficult not to view the geisha culture as archaic and sexist—and perhaps it is. But having grown up in the East, I know that perception doesn't equal reality. Contradictions exist within cultures—particularly in Japan, where myth and mystique are like a silken skein that shows but doesn't reveal. Yes, geisha were created to pamper Japanese men, but they were also the freest women in old Japan. “Successful geisha were strong-willed businesswomen,” says Japan expert Alex Kerr. “Unlike the typical sheltered Japanese wife, they'd been out in the world.”

An American who speaks fluent Japanese, Kerr is an acclaimed author, calligrapher, and art collector. I meet him at an Origin Arts workshop he conducts in Kyoto. Superbly designed and executed, his experiential workshops offer insights into the traditional Japanese arts: tea ceremony, calligraphy, flower arranging, music, dance, and drama—all arts that a geisha must master. The word *gei-sha*, after all,

**THERE IS A PROPER WAY TO DO EVERYTHING, INCLUDING OPENING A SLIDING DOOR. I AM SPEECHLESS AT THE LEVEL OF PRECISION**

means arts person, and *mai-ko* means dancing girl. For two days, I will receive some of the training that the geisha undergo for years.

Geisha have always played a key role in preserving the arts. This was how they differentiated themselves from the courtesans of the Pontocho pleasure quarters—by studying the arts



with a discipline that would give a Russian ballet dancer a complex. In winter, it is said, they would dip their hands in icy water and then sit outside in the freezing cold and play the *samisen*, a traditional stringed instrument, until their frozen fingers bled.

I remember this during my next lesson, which involves quite literally turning myself into a geisha. Kyoto has several shops that offer to transform you into a geisha or, for men, a samurai. My guide, Koko Ijuin, tells me that they are very popular with visiting Koreans and Chinese.

Koko-san, as I call her, is a

dainty woman who spent part of her childhood in America. Trained in the classical Japanese arts, she tells me that there is a proper way to do everything, including opening a *fusuma*, or sliding door. It goes like this: Kneel directly in front of the *fusuma*; place your fingertips in the handle; slide the *fusuma* open two inches; place the same hand on the frame, about nine inches above the floor; push the *fusuma* open halfway; change your hand and push the *fusuma* open the rest of the way; stand up and back away. I am speechless at the level of precision. This, I think, is the secret of Japan: to see greatness in small things and smallness in great things.

Yume Miru Yume, where Koko-san takes me, is a tiny makeup studio near a shrine. Three women descend on me like fluttering sparrows and whisk me up a flight of stairs to

black and gold. It is thirteen feet long. Old Japan was designed for a woman wearing a kimono—the squatting toilets, temple steps, and furniture-less houses. Now, they are all but invisible in the streets.

Two attendants dress me, and then we adjourn to the makeup studio below, where the *kao-shi*, or face master, smears a white herbal paste all over my face and neck. My lips are drawn thinner than they are and are painted bright red, like a rosebud. Then comes a wig with an elaborate hairstyle—not the famous split-peach one, suggestive of the vagina, but another updo. The hairstylist adorns my wig with lacquer combs, tortoiseshell bow-clips, and hanging silk flowers.

Finally, I am permitted to look in the mirror. An exotic stranger stares back—white face, red lips. I look Japanese. “*Kawaii!*” exclaim the girls. “Cute!”

*Kawaii* is a word used to describe *maiko*—their girlish giggles and presumed innocence. An American woman I meet later tells me that she detests the word; to her, it seems to wipe out a century of feminism. Japanese men, however, love this non-threatening cuteness. In fact, young *maiko* are told not to look men in the eye because it is disrespectful. Instead, their eyes “skitter,” says Koko-san.

It is showtime. I slip my feet into the high-heeled geta clogs and step into the sunshine. People start taking photographs—me holding a fan, an umbrella; simpering and skittering. I hobble up the cobblestone street to the Yasaka

**I'm iki: Accomplished geisha embody this Japanese aesthetic ideal, which combines sassiness with innocence, sexiness with restraint.**

the kimono room. The Japanese love of seasons is reflected in their kimono, and because it is spring, the ones I am shown are decorated with azaleas, weeping willows, and cherry blossoms. I choose a royal-blue kimono with red and green flowers climbing up the sides. My obi, the wide brocade belt tied around the kimono, is

**PLACES & PRICES**

**THE GLAM LIFE**

Geisha wannabes, get thee to Kyoto! Here are restaurants and shops to fulfill all your court-life fantasies . . . plus places where you too can be geisha for a day. See **page 126**.

Shrine. “Softly,” says Koko-san. “Don’t stride. Make a figure eight with your feet.”

Koko-san calls the elegant shuffle of the Japanese ladies *shinayakasa*. It suggests softness and ripples—like the waves, with one movement blending into the other. Young Japanese girls who have never worn a kimono “do not experience such movement,” says Koko-san. “This makes them look very ugly when they put on the kimono for the first time.” For a few minutes, I achieve my fantasy, if not my goal. I am a Kyoto geisha, but it is only as deep as my painted white skin; I have not yet been able to get under their skin and learn their secrets.

**T**HAT EVENING, I walk through the five geisha districts of Kyoto, also known as *hanamachi*, or flower towns. Light spills through the lattice screens and dapples the puddles in the road. Beautifully made-up geisha and *maiko* hurry between teahouses, going from one appointment to another. Tourists’ cameras click. The scene is at once thoroughly modern and utterly timeless.

The geisha’s *karyukai*, or “flower and willow world,” is both exacting and secret—one that prizes discretion (geisha rarely marry and if they do, they retire and never reveal the father of their child or children), yet is open to misinterpretation. When the American GIs occupied Japan, they stood in Tokyo’s Ginza district and chanted for “geisha girls,” or prostitutes. Today’s geisha go to great lengths to explain that they are sophisticated entertainers, not prostitutes. They may hint at their sexuality using double entendres and sexual jokes delivered with the most innocent of faces; they may draw out a man’s sorrows



by listening to him sympathetically and pouring more sake; but they certainly do not sleep around. Rather, they occupy a rarefied realm in which women are both divas and directors.

The earliest geisha were in fact men who played the role of court jester to the feudal lords of the thirteenth century. During the Edo period, merchants, shoguns (army commanders), samurai, and feudal lords spent their time traveling between Tokyo, the new capital, and Kyoto, where they might remain for months finishing deals or monitoring projects. Kyoto teahouses were built to entertain these travelers. Many of the early geisha were daughters of these teahouses, a tradition that continues to this day, with geisha being “adopted” by the *okiya* (teahouse) mother—*okaasan*.

Naosome, the geisha I spend an afternoon with, has been adopted by the Nakazato teahouse. She is all of nineteen. Our meeting is almost a roundtable conference: me, Koko-san, the fixer who got us the interview—a beautiful lady called Hamasaki-san—Naosome, the *okaasan*, and her assistant, who brings in cups of green tea.

Naosome is of erect bearing, exquisitely polite, charming, and, for a geisha, candid. Actu-

**Mirror, mirror: While geisha embody the perfectionism and effervescence of Japanese culture, the concept of *wabi-sabi* celebrates the old, the imperfect, the ephemeral. Kyoto’s Kinkaku-Ji, like most of Japan’s temples, is made of wood. Late afternoon is the best time to visit, when the gold paint is reflected in the pond below.**

ally, she is not yet a geisha but will be in a few weeks. The fact that she is becoming a geisha at nineteen shows how good she is at what she does, Koko-san says later. This means that she has found a *danna*, or patron, who will fund her studies and perhaps have a relationship with her. In her orange kimono with her scrubbed face and frequent giggles, Naosome looks far too young to have a *danna*, let alone

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be a geisha. When I mention how young she looks, she laughs. Compared with her friends back home in her village, she is very mature, she says. She has been to fancy restaurants and parties; met and interacted with important businessmen and dignitaries. “I can call them *oniisan* [big brother], laugh and joke with them,” she says. “Plus I get to wear a kimono, practice my dance, and live in this world of beauty.”

By now, I am starstruck by her poise. What, I ask, does she do to maintain her beauty? Yoga, a special diet? She giggles again. “I only avoid things that affect my work.” She pauses for a beat. “Such as garlic,” she ends with great comic timing. The room erupts in laughter.

I ask the *okaasan* how she picks the girls that she molds into geisha. She pauses for a moment and lets out a heavy sigh. “They have to be beautiful, of course,” she replies, “and disciplined, because they work long hours with few holidays. They have to be smart and learn quickly how to play instruments, dance, do tea ceremony.” After all, it takes three years to just get the basic stuff right: posture, hand gestures, and what she calls “piling up experiences.” But in the end, it is a gut feeling that she gets. “A geisha is like the sun,” says the *okaasan*. “When she walks into a room, it becomes brighter.”

I sigh—at the poetry of the words, at the audacity of my attempt to emulate the geisha. I can try to sit ramrod straight all I want. I can even learn how to put on makeup. But flirting with decorum requires skill; innuendo while maintaining propriety requires talent. A good geisha knows when to flirt, and how to do the right thing at the opportune moment—like Brooke Astor and Nan Kempner, who would have made excellent (Continued on page 147)

tel's Australian owner. She loves to cook, and the set meal this evening is exquisite—*nyonya*, nine Malay and Chinese dishes served up on a banana leaf. Narelle's business partner and a neighbor from down the road, a mustachioed Malay man who used to deal in antiquities, are bantering about politics, including the case of the exploding Mongolian mistress.

On my drive around the island next day, I find long sandy beaches, turquoise water, and sumptuous hotels. As the afternoon wanes, I retreat to Temple Tree's long, narrow, slate-colored pool, which looks out over a lagoon. I am alone. I slice through the water, then flip onto my back. Floating in the water, I see an old Malay house with a Chinese daybed in its entrance on my right, the lagoon and rustling sea grass on my left. A flock of herons flap overhead. Later, I lie on a chaise, absorbing the noises of Asia: tree toads clucking in the trees, cicadas screaming. A green-eyed cat crawls onto my chest, purring.

I am thinking about how peaceful this place seems, and the rich images of the past week roll through my mind—the lush rain forest, Malay women, Chinese temples, opposition politicians, former colonialists—although it's impossible to predict what the near future will bring. "There will be more casualties," Anwar has warned, adding that he is prepared to go back to prison. But Malaysia is being reborn. This country is on the road to something new. I can feel it in the air. □

## Kyoto

(Continued from page 115)

geisha. Geisha have an uncanny ability to light up a party and switch on the atmosphere; they understand and prize the art of conversation. They know exactly what to say to the shy wallflowers to draw them out without making them feel self-conscious. The Japanese call this *kikubari*—paying careful attention to others and understanding their desires before they vocalize them.

One evening, Naosome entertains me and my children at her teahouse. My daughters are six and eleven, dressed in recently purchased kimonos and looking slightly bemused by the unfamiliar Japanese food in front of them. Right off the bat, my six-year-old announces that the food tastes "weird." How will Naosome handle us? She doesn't speak English, and we don't speak Japanese. The evening is going to be a wash-out, I decide.

What Naosome does—after treating us to a traditional fan dance—is play games. She teaches my girls a song that provides

the background beat to several rock-paper-scissors-like games. Within minutes, my kids are entranced—by Naosome's grace, her laughter, the softness of her touch as she hugs them when they win. The evening passes in a whirl of perfume and giggles.

"Most foreigners think geisha only play games," says Sayuki, an Australian geisha, whose condition for meeting me is that I will list her Web site, sayuki.net. Such straightforward negotiation seems normal in modern business but comes across as blunt in a world where a geisha's time is measured by the number of incense sticks used while she entertains. In the wispy smoke trailing from the stick lies the key to an entire subculture.

**I**T IS NEAR THE END OF MY TIME in Japan, and while I know I shouldn't say this—being Indian, I've been treated to my own share of cultural stereotypes—I am convinced more than ever that Japan's aesthetic is singular, so distinct that it can make the country feel, at times, almost impenetrable. Consider: Most ancient civilizations base their notions of beauty on symmetry. Think of the Taj Mahal, the Pyramids, the Parthenon. But Japan worships asymmetry. Most Japanese rock gardens are off-center; raku ceramics have an undulating unevenness to them.

What's also unusual about Japan is how highly evolved, almost modern, its ancient aesthetic traditions are. Fragmentation, for instance, is a modern photographic idea, but the Japanese had it figured out aeons ago. Japanese paintings, for example, often depict a single branch instead of a tree. A fragmented moon hidden by clouds is considered more beautiful than a full in-your-face moon. They call this *mono no aware*, which implies an acute sensitivity to the beauty of objects, the "ahhness of things," as the Japanese would have it. *Mono no aware* attunes people to the fragile and the transient. It values the soft patina of age more than the sparkle of newness.

Another important concept in Japanese aesthetics is *wabi-sabi*, which again is contrarian. The Japanese are a perfectionistic people, yet *wabi-sabi* honors the old and the vulnerable; the imperfect, the unfinished, and the ephemeral. While other ancient cultures emphasized permanence and endurance (Indian stone sculptures were built to last forever, as were the Sphinx and the Sistine Chapel), Japan celebrated transience and impermanence. The tea ceremony, which is often considered the acme of Japanese arts, leaves behind nothing but a memory. *Wabi-sabi* connotes "spiritual longing" and "serene melancholy," which sounds pretentious but makes perfect sense when

FOR THIS MONTH'S CONTEST, SEE PAGE 142.

JULY 2009

## PAVING THE WAY

Unused pieces spell

YELLOW BRICK ROAD

## WHERE ARE YOU?

### COMPETITION RULES (SEE PAGE 110)

NO PURCHASE OR PAYMENT OF ANY KIND IS NECESSARY TO ENTER OR WIN THIS SWEEPSTAKES. A PURCHASE WILL NOT IMPROVE CHANCES OF WINNING.

1. Enter *Condé Nast Traveler's* "Where Are You?" contest by sending a 3½-by-5-inch to 4¼-by-6-inch postcard with your name, address, and telephone number, and correctly identifying the place shown in this month's installment of the "Where Are You?" contest, to:

*Condé Nast Traveler's* "Where Are You?" Contest

P.O. Box 41300

Naples, FL 34101-3050

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3. Only one correct answer will be registered per entrant per month for the Monthly drawings. For the Grand Prize drawing, contestants who have one registered correct answer at the end of the contest period (on or before January 10, 2010) will have one entry in the Grand Prize drawing; contestants with a total of two registered correct answers will have two; and so on. *Condé Nast Traveler* reserves the right to discontinue the contest at any time, in which event prizes will be awarded based on entries received to date.

4. For each issue, one potential Monthly winner of the contest will be chosen, on or after the eleventh day of the following month, in a random drawing of qualified entries that have correctly identified the location in that issue's "Where Are You?" contest. The potential winner will be notified by phone or mail. If the potential winner cannot be contacted within 14 days of attempted notification, an alternate winner may be chosen. All decisions by the judges are final.

5. Each Monthly winner will receive an award of \$1,000. There is no limit to the number of times a contestant may win the Monthly prize during the contest period. The Monthly winner's registered correct entry will be entered in the Grand Prize drawing.

6. One potential Grand Prize winner will be chosen, on or before February 25, 2010, in a random drawing of qualified entries that have correctly identified locations in the "Where Are You?" contests published in 2009. The potential winner will be notified by phone or mail. If the potential winner cannot be contacted within 14 days of attempted notification, an alternate winner may be chosen. All decisions by the judges are final.

7. The Grand Prize winner will receive a trip for two to one of the destinations featured in the 2009 "Where Are You?" contest. The choice of the destination is subject to approval by *Condé Nast Traveler*; disapproval may be based on potential danger, inordinate expense, or other factors. The Grand Prize will include accommodations for the winner and his/her guest for seven days and six nights, air transportation (coach) from the major commercial airport nearest the winner's home in the U.S. or Canada, and hotel transfers. Winner and travel companion must be available to travel on the same itinerary, as selected by Sponsor. Additional transportation, meals, in-room charges (e.g., minibar, movies), telephone calls, gratuities, incidentals, and all other expenses are not included. Prize elements subject to availability, certain restrictions, and blackout dates. Scheduling is subject to availability and blackout dates, and accommodations are on a double-occupancy basis. Travel must be completed within 30 months of notification of the winner. No substitutions for the Grand Prize will be allowed except by *Condé Nast Traveler*, in which case a prize of equal or greater value will be awarded. The retail value of the Grand Prize is approximately \$10,000, depending on exact itinerary.

8. Income and other taxes, if any, are the sole responsibility of the winners. Prizes are not transferable.

9. The contest is open to legal residents of the 50 United States, the District of Columbia, or Canada (except Quebec) who are 18 years of age or older as of the date of entry, except for employees of The Condé Nast Publications, participating promotional agencies, contributors to *Condé Nast Traveler*, and the families of any of the above.

10. The contest is subject to all federal, state, local, and provincial laws and regulations. Void outside the 50 United States and the District of Columbia and Canada, in the Canadian province of Quebec, and where prohibited. In the event the winner is a resident of Canada, the winner may be required to correctly answer a time-limited arithmetical skill-testing question.

11. Odds of winning depend on the number of correct entries received.

12. All entries become the sole property of *Condé Nast Traveler* and will not be acknowledged or returned.

13. Acceptance of a prize constitutes consent to use the winners' (and the Grand Prize traveling companion's) names and likenesses for editorial, advertising, and publicity purposes without further compensation (except where prohibited). The winners may be required to sign an affidavit of eligibility, and the winners and the travel companion may be required to sign a liability and publicity release, which must be returned within 14 days of the attempted notification or an alternate winner may be chosen.

14. Contestants, by entering the "Where Are You?" contest, agree to be bound by the above rules and regulations. Sponsor is not responsible for errors in the administration or fulfillment of this sweepstakes, including without limitation mechanical, human, printing, distribution, or production errors, and may modify or cancel this promotion based upon such error at its sole discretion without liability.

15. For the names of the winners, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope, after the eleventh of each month but before August 25, 2010, to *Condé Nast Traveler* 2009 "Where Are You?" Contest Winners, 4 Times Square, New York, New York 10036. Sponsor: The Condé Nast Publications, 4 Times Square, New York, New York 10036.

you visit rural Japan. The cherry blossoms are ephemeral and therefore *wabi-sabi*; the tea ceremony connotes loneliness and longing for a higher spiritual plane, hence it is *wabi-sabi*. The old cracked teapot, the weathered fabric, the lonely weeping willow are all *wabi-sabi*.

Geisha, however, are anything but. “Just as the tea ceremony represents the *wabi-sabi* aspect of Japanese culture, geisha represent the opposite—the effervescence of the culture,” says Toru Ota, a scholar and confectioner who teaches at Kyoto Women’s University and owns Oimatsu, one of Kyoto’s best sweets shops. I meet Ota-san above his shop, where bejeweled pastries in candy pink, baby blue, and melting orange

are displayed like works of art. A slim man who vaguely resembles Jackie Chan, Ota-san looks ascetic but is in fact an aesthete, pursuing a life revolving around beauty. He is a painter, a tea master, a confectioner, and a patron of the arts—a Japanese Renaissance man. He invites me to witness a tea ceremony at his rural retreat in Ohara, an hour outside Kyoto, for my final lesson in the Japanese arts.

The tea ceremony is exquisite. For those accustomed to the casualness creeping into the modern world, it can seem long-winded and needlessly formal. There are at least sixteen steps, including cleaning the utensils, admiring the teapot, exchanging greetings, eating the tea sweets, and then drinking the *matcha* (strong) and *sencha* (light) tea. In ancient Japan, *Chado*, or the Way of Tea, was considered the essence of civilization.

In a dark tatami room lit by candles, Ota-san mixes powdery *matcha* tea with hot water and offers it to us in a bowl. Just as I am about to sip, he casually lets it drop that the bowl I am drinking from is worth a million dollars. I carefully put it down, and we all laugh. The next round of tea, which is more dilute, is offered in a bowl that he picked up in Brazil, he says. It is almost worthless, he says, and laughs.

I gaze at the bowl from Brazil. The two countries could not be more different. Brazil, with its colorful, straightforward exuberance, is extroverted and open. Japan, with its penchant for gray, its reserve and formality, is as yin as Latin America is yang. I try to picture Ota-san at Copacabana Beach. It is impossible.

Which is the best tea ceremony you’ve ever done? I ask. I expect him to mention one that he did for knowledgeable Japanese scholars who knew the various steps of the tea ceremony. By now, I am able to intuit that a tea ceremony can be like a symphony—if all the players know what to do, the experience can be sublime. Ota-san has performed the tea ceremony for famous personalities including architect Tadao Ando and fashion designer Issey Miyake, both of whom were guests in the very tatami room I am kneeling in. So which is your favorite tea ceremony? I press. “This one,” replies Ota-san.

His answer reminds me of a Zen koan, or riddle. Ota-san tells me that he gears each tea ceremony to the guests. The scroll, the flowers, even the choice of tea utensils is based on what he thinks they will like.

“But how do you know what they will like?” I ask.

“I look at their shoes,” he replies. A riddle-like answer.

Much later, Ota-san drives me back into Kyoto in his Mercedes. It is pitch-dark. The road winds. A stream gurgles nearby. We are happy. We chat about Barack Obama, Nepali restaurants, and Kyoto’s beauty.

“Enjoy the light spilling through the latticework,” Ota-san says as he drops us at a street corner. “That’s the beauty of Kyoto.”

**I**T HAS BEEN TWO MONTHS SINCE I got home, and the geisha of Japan still influence my thinking. I pay attention to how I walk; to my movements, whether they are compact and graceful. These are small things, you might say. But to the Japanese, the small is big; the simple is profound. I am still feminist, but Japan seems to have rubbed off the edges. I tolerate stuff from my husband that I previously wouldn’t have. Again, it is small things.

Yesterday, for instance, my husband ranted about our new puppy. She is peeing all over our apartment and driving us nuts.

Over dinner, my husband lectured me about how I should fix the problem. In my previous avatar, I would have lectured him right back. Why is the puppy my headache? I would have asked, and gone on a tirade about shared chores and equality in marriage. The whole thing would have spiraled

downward and out of control.

Post-Japan, I just listened to him vent. The man is distressed, I thought. What would a geisha do? I wondered. And so I shut up and let him get it all out.

I can’t say that I’ve become more alluring after my time in Japan, but I’ve certainly become more patient. I try to appreciate the present and watch the moon—*wabi-sabi*, you know. Allure can be a sideways glance, a hand gesture, or just listening. Allure can be the simple realization that I am not letting down a whole generation of feminists by being more attentive to my husband. For that, I have the geisha to thank. □

The tea ceremony,  
the acme of  
Japanese arts,  
leaves behind  
nothing but  
a memory



➤ **Room with a View** Unfold the following page to experience Koh Samui’s remote Four Seasons retreat.



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