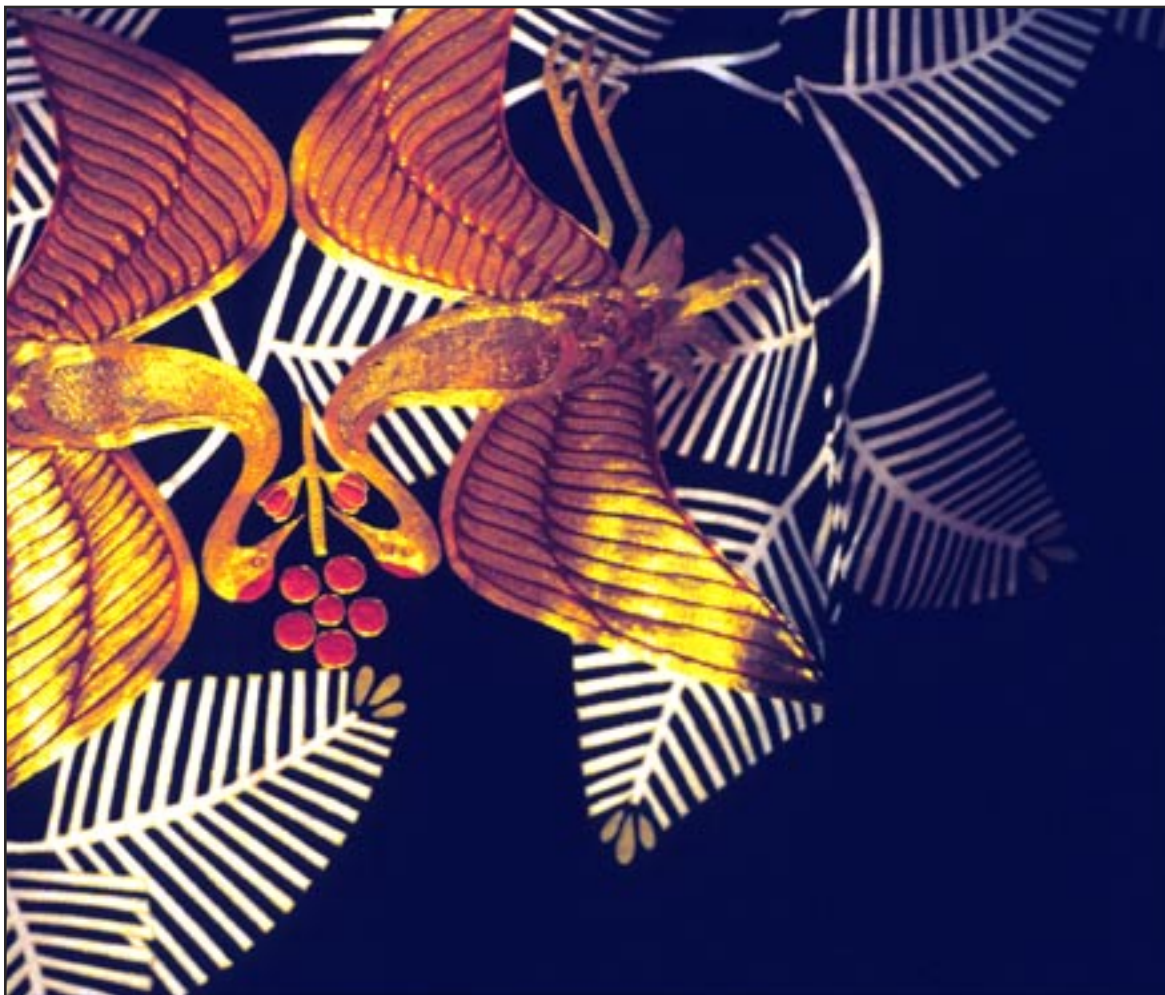




A mountain hut in the Japanese Alps.

In the last 25 years, Jim Wills has led more than 150 groups to Asia and Europe. Some 50 of these have been to Japan and Kyoto. He speaks conversational Japanese and has great enthusiasm for Kyoto, Japanese history and traditions. On two occasions he lived in Japan. He currently resides in San Anselmo, California, and does layout and computer work for The Petaluma Post, in addition to offering deluxe small group tours to selected destinations twice each year.



Kimono Fabric detail

TRAVEL

Kyoto: Japan's Jewel of Culture and Imperial History

by Jim Wills, the TravelWalla

My Kyoto

The sky was gray, it was raining and the August heat fogged the train windows. My first impression of Kyoto was something less than enchanting -- in fact it was dismal. The glimpse from the Shinkansen (Bullet Train), as it began to decelerate from nearly 200 miles per hour, was not what I had expected. I wasn't sure what I had expected, but it wasn't gray, water-stained, low-rise concrete buildings laced with neon signs and knots of telephone wires.

I had a wet sheet of directions, a small mountain of baggage, five damp, tired clients and no idea where I was going. The taxi driver

gave a quick bow, enlisted another cab, filled his trunk with baggage, waved off my direction sheet, turned the air conditioner up, and drove us off into the night. He exuded a calm and presence that relaxed me. He spoke enough English to assure me that he knew exactly where he was going.

The water stains faded and the edges of the buildings started to get softer as the afternoon gray sky turned into evening black. The neon signs cast a festive glow on the rainslicked streets and the telephone wires disappeared.

It took the cabbie a half a dozen stops, asking directions, but we finally arrived at the Myorenji Temple, where we were to spend the night. The driver had turned the meter off a while back so as not to overcharge us for his confusion. My first impression of Kyoto was beginning to change.

Baggage left in the entry way, we removed our shoes, donned soft sandals and were escorted to a low table in a room that opened onto a lovely garden. Here we had our welcoming evening green tea. The garden was exquisite. Five large black stones ringed in moss almost floated in a rectangular pond of raked gray gravel. Along one side, a row of pink Azaleas added a splash of color. I learned later that the garden had been created in the 17th century by a famous Kyoto designer.

The city was beginning to weave its web of charm around me. It began to reveal itself slowly, not giving up too much in the beginning. I was there in the role of escort and guide for an American family taking a summer holiday in Japan. They had contracted with me in America. I was a

Continued on next page.



Private garden with brightly colored Koi



20 years ago. .

a hotel was born. . .



We've aged well.



Petaluma
707-664-1155



Book our 'Friends and Family' rate
May through December 2005

TRAVEL

Continued from previous page

mountain guide and we had just finished a jaunt in the Japanese Alps and a successful climb of Mt. Fuji. The last stop on the trip was Kyoto -- their choice, not mine.

My impression of Kyoto changed completely in the next few days. I had a chance to see the city away from the station, to walk the neighborhoods, to explore the districts, take some time and drink tea. The inhabitants were universally friendly when approached, all with a certain grace and softness of speech and manners.

The history of the city quietly waits for the visitor to discover it. Feeling some gouges in the wood on a pillar in a temple, against which I brace myself to put my shoes on, I ask what they are. I am told these nicks and chips are the marks left by Samurai swords during fights that raged on that very spot.

My impression of Kyoto had changed dramatically during my first trip there -- changed so much that I knew I had to come back. And I did go back -- dozens of times. Over the years, every mountain trip to Japan ended with a few days in Kyoto, and the city revealed more and more of itself to me. I learned that first impressions, especially of Kyoto, are not to be trusted.

The World's Kyoto

Kyoto is a city on everyone's list of the world's best.

Shoes and sandals are left at the door in Japan. Go-ahead slippers or stocking or bare feet are customary in homes and many restaurants.



It has a character and history so rich and unique that it fills volumes. It is a city that defined refinement, held all the power of ancient Japan, introduced Geishas to the world, and shaped Japanese culture. It's a city whose influence continues to impact the world with today's environmental "Kyoto Accords".

What many consider to be the world's first novel, *Tales of Genji*, was written and set in Kyoto. The video game giant, Nintendo, started in Kyoto making playing cards. The Japanese Tea Ceremony was first performed here in a small teahouse in the private garden of the Shogun. In another era, Kyoto was famous for making fine silk Kimonos. Today teahouses in Higashiyama serve refreshments to their guests next to ponds full of bright Koi fish.

There is a tremendous contrast of cultures here. Ikebana flower arrangement and karaoke both thrive. Covered shopping malls are packed with school children, and Kimizudera -- a temple to the Buddha of Compassion -- is likewise jammed. There's a music amphitheater built into the main train station, yet people in the neighborhoods commonly use a "Cento" -- the public bath house -- as their traditional homes have no bathing facility.

Kyoto's population is about one million. The streets are designed on a

north-south, east-west grid copied from a Chinese city of a thousand years ago. The city center is the most densely populated place on earth. Specialty shops, in spaces so small that it is hard to believe, may be selling nothing but wooden combs or paper mobiles or tea cakes in the shape of leaves or incense for alters.

The seasons in Kyoto have strong contrasts as well. Cold, wet and generally miserable winters give way to hot, humid summers. Spring and fall, however, can be beyond compare -- spring with its Cherry blossoms and fall with its vivid "Koyo" color. Interior space is often too well air-conditioned -- too cold in summer and too hot in winter. Be

Post Notes:

FOOTLOOSE in KYOTO

Explore Japan's ancient capitol with a series of walking tours through the temples and neighborhoods of Kyoto. Discover special corners of this old city with a small group and an expert guide. Dine in gardens, see little-known corners of the old city, visit quintessential tea houses, share interesting conversation and stay in first class accommodations.

October 7 - 14, 2005

May 12 - 20, 2006

Land cost: \$2850.

(Double Occupancy)

Tour leader: Jim Wills

Included: Six nights accommodations in Japan, breakfasts, three dinners, guide, transfers via train and from Osaka Airport, tour transportation via taxi, bus, and subway, admissions, local taxes, and gratuities.

Not included: Items of a personal nature, alcoholic beverages, room service, meals not shown in the itinerary, airfare, airport taxes. Single supplement: \$785. Airfare roundtrip: (SFO-Osaka): \$853.



Reminiscent of the guard towers of Nijo Castle in central Kyoto, the Mastsumoto Castle contrasts with the Sakura-no Hana, Cherry Blossoms of Spring. Kyoto was the capitol of Japan during centuries of the rule of the Tokukagawa Shogunate. Nijo Castle was the home of the Shogun, the absolute ruler of the country.

prepared for rain at all times.

In every direction, there are attractions and sites worth visiting. The city has more than 1500 temples and shrines and easily as many small restaurants. Higashiyama, the eastern section of Kyoto, is mountainous, filled with Zen and Shinto temples and shrines. The north includes the Golden Pavilion and the famous Zen raked rock garden of Ryoanji Temple. But the real discoveries are the ones we will make on our own. Visit Kyoto and

Kyoto is a city full of gardens: Zen gardens, Moss gardens, ponds with giant colored Koi fish, public gardens, private gardens. Myorenji's rock garden is said to represent the events in one's life, the touch-stones of our memory, islands in time. For each person the garden has a different meaning. So it is with the city of Kyoto, as well.



see for yourself.

For more information about a tour to Kyoto in the fall of this year, including a complete detailed itinerary, call Jim Wills at (415) 461-9532, email jwills@webdaki.com or visit travelwalla.com.

What's a Walla?

Walla is from the Hindi suffix "-vala", meaning "agency". In colloquial Anglo-Indian usage, it means a person connected with a particular thing or function. Need your shoes fixed? Go to the shoe walla. Need a ride in India? Find the rickshaw walla.