

Kyoto Sites Overview

The fourth capital of Japan, Heian-kyō (平安京), or literally the “Tranquillity and Peace Capital,” indeed proved to be a tranquil refuge for Japanese authorities, where they found a permanent seat after the years of changes for the next 1000 years. In time, the city changed its name, becoming simply the Capital – Kyoto (京都市). Just like the other Japanese capitals, the city was designed after the Chinese Chang'an. Due to quick development, the 12th century population of the metropolis was already half a million. Over the centuries, Kyoto had its ups and downs, it thrived and it suffered destruction as a result of warfare. The particularly outstanding sites reminding the visitors about the former splendour of the most famous Japanese capital are: Kinkaku-ji (金閣寺) and Ginkaku-ji (銀閣寺), or the Golden and Silver Pavilions, the imperial court and the legendary entertainment districts – Gion and Ponto-chō. This is where one could once find beautiful Japanese geisha, today only to be seen in the most select establishments, closed to the majority of ordinary mortals. Kyoto functioned as the Japanese capital throughout the whole shogunate period until the emperor returned to the throne in 1868, when Tokyo became the new capital city.¹

¹ From [OYAKATA MASTER'S BOOK](#)



1) Fushimi Inari Taisha Shrine

Hours: Always open

Closed: No closing days

Admission: Free

Fushimi Inari Taisha is the head shrine of Inari, located in Fushimi-ku, Kyoto. The shrine sits at the base of a mountain also named Inari which is 233 meters above sea level and includes trails up the mountain to many

smaller shrines.

Since early Japan, Inari was seen as the patron of business, and merchants and manufacturers have traditionally worshipped Inari. Each of the torii at Fushimi Inari Taisha is donated by a Japanese business. First and foremost, though, Inari is the god of rice.

The earliest structures were built in 711 on the Inariyama hill in southwestern Kyoto, but the shrine was re-located in 816 on the request of the monk Kūkai. The main shrine structure was built in 1499. At the bottom of the hill are the main gate (rōmon, "tower gate") and the main shrine (go-honden). Behind them, in the middle of the mountain, the inner shrine (okumiya) is reachable by a path lined with thousands of torii. To the top of the mountain are tens of thousands of mounds (tsuka) for private worship. This popular shrine is said to have as many as 32,000 sub-shrines (bunsha) throughout Japan.

Foxes (kitsune), regarded as the messengers, are often found in Inari shrines. One attribute is a key (for the rice granary) in their mouths.

Unlike most Shinto shrines, Fushimi Inari Taisha, in keeping with typical Inari shrines, has an open view of the main idol object (a mirror).

A drawing in Kiyoshi Nozaki's *Kitsune: Japan's Fox of Mystery, Romance and Humor* in 1786 depicting the shrine says that its two-story entry gate was built by Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

The shrine draws several million worshipers over the Japanese New Year, with 2.69 million for 3 days in 2006 reported by the police, the most in western Japan.

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2) Kiyomizu-dera Temple

Hours: 6:00 to 18:30

Closed: No closing days

Admission: 400 yen

Kiyomizu-dera is an independent Buddhist temple in Kyoto associated with the Hosso sect of Buddhism. It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994.

The original temple was built in 778 by the Buddhist monk Enchin in honor of the Bodhisattva of mercy and compassion, Kannon Bosatsu. The present building, commissioned by the shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu, dates back to 1633. Kiyomizu-dera means “Temple of the Pure Water” and gets its name from the location near the Otowa Waterfall. Today, many parts of the temple have been renovated.

The Kiyomizu-dera Temple is unique because it is constructed without using a single nail. The street leading to the temple is flanked by shops selling handicrafts and sweets. The gates have statues of Deva Kings and Korean Dogs that are believed to protect the temple from damage. The main hall features the design typical of the Haien era. The outer sanctuary is decorated with paintings donated by local tradesmen, and the inner sanctuary carries gold leaf images carved on lacquer. Also, within the complex there is a shrine dedicated to the Shinto deity of love. The wooden terrace of the temple offers spectacular views across Kyoto.

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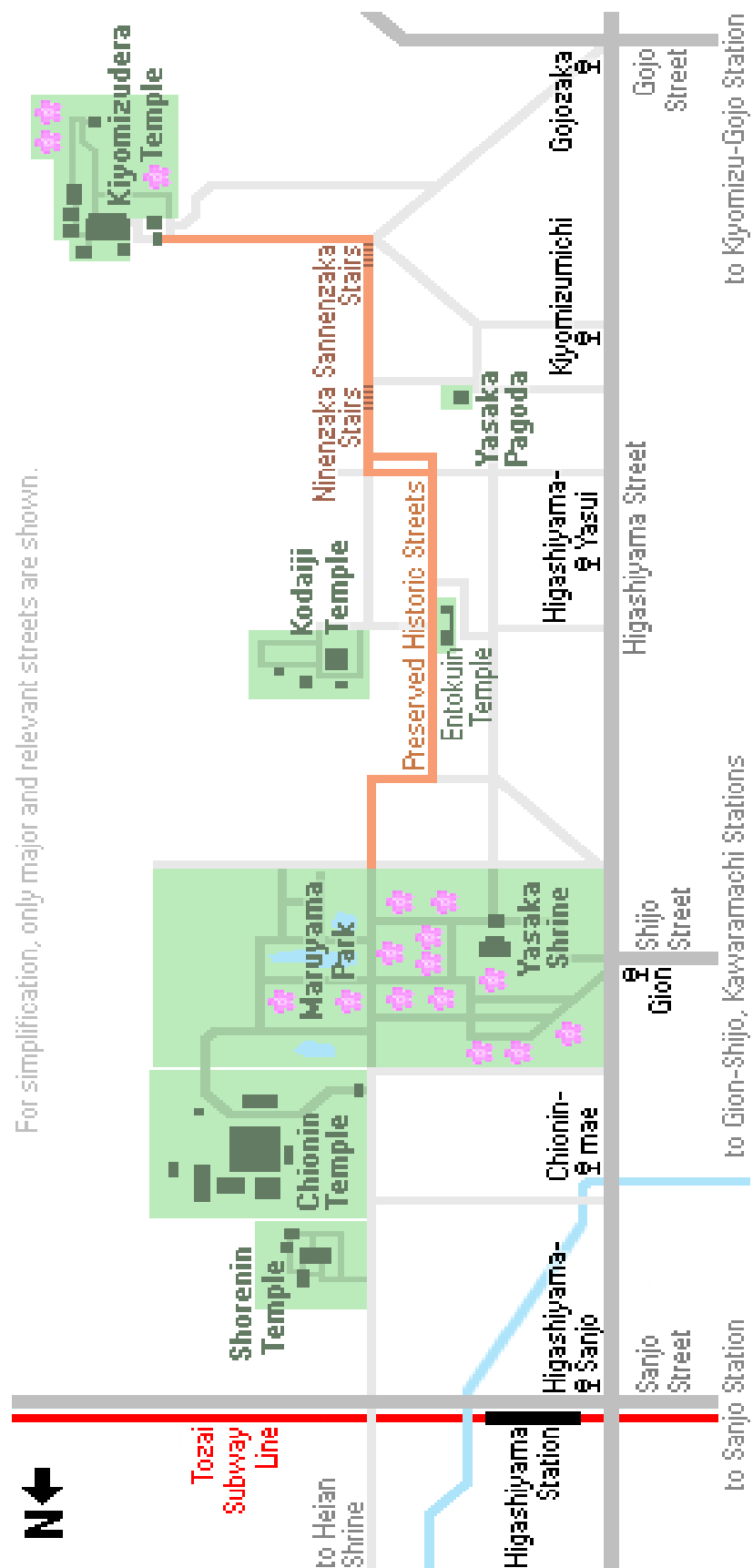
3) Ninenzaka & Sannenzaka Streets

The Ninen-zaka & Sannen-zaka are two parallel streets in the Historical Preservation District of Kyoto. They retain the environment of old Japan with traditional Japanese wooden houses flanking a stone paved street.

The Ninen-zaka means Two Year Hill & Sannen-zaka means Three Year Hill. They are located at the foot of the Higashiyama Mountains. The streets are popular with tourists because they are located near famous Kyoto landmarks including the Kiyomizu Dera Temple, the Kodai ji Temple and the Yasaka shrine. Visitors also come to pay homage to the famous Japanese portrait artist, Yumeji Takehisa whose house is located here. The site is also called Nene-no-saka after the wife of the warlord who rebuilt Kyoto, Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

The Ninenzaka & Sannenzaka Streets have unified wooden buildings in the traditional design of Kyoto houses. The shops that line the streets sell traditional arts, crafts and products like incense sticks, fans, textiles, candles, confectionary, souvenirs and intricate tableware. Some of the houses are restaurants and tea houses where weary tourists and shoppers can rest their feet. The two streets are steep slopes and can be difficult for some visitors to climb. The Ninenzaka & Sannenzaka Streets give visitors a feeling of walking in a street during the Heian era in Kyoto.

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4)Yasaka Pagoda

Open: irregularly from 10:00 to 16:00

Fee: 400 yen

Yasaka Pagoda, the last remnant of Hokanji Temple, is one of the most visible and recognizable landmarks in the Higashiyama District. The interior of the pagoda is occasionally open to visitors, which is a rare opportunity as most pagodas can only be viewed from the outside.



5) Kodaiji Temple

Hours: 9:00 to 17:30

Closed: No closing days

Fee: 600 yen

The Kodai-ji Temple was built in 1606 in memory of the spirit of the Samurai warlord Hideyoshi Toyotomi by his grieving widow, Nene. It is famous for the Maki-e paintings that cover the walls of the Spirit Hall.

The temple was built using the funds donated by Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first Tokugawa Shogun, who was a vassal of the Samurai warlord Hideyoshi Toyotomi. Nene, the wife of Hideyoshi, became a Buddhist nun after the death of her husband. The temple complex suffered damage by fire in 1798 and only two of the original structures have survived.

Managed by monks from the Rinzai School of Zen Buddhism, the Kodai-ji temple has many of its structures and objects declared Important Cultural Assets. These include the main gate from 1606 and the Spirit Hall. The Maki-e paintings in the Spirit Hall are worked with gold and lacquer. A notable painting is a well-preserved portrait of Hideyoshi Toyotomi. Another notable feature is a bronze bell that dates back to 1606. The temple is surrounded by beautifully landscaped gardens with gravel paths and a bamboo grove. Within the garden there are tea houses designed by contemporary Japanese artists. The gardens are illuminated every autumn between late October and early December, and visitors flock here regularly to enjoy the tranquil, aesthetically lighted garden and the spectacular night views of Kyoto opening from the temple.



6) Maruyama Park

Hours: Always open

Closed: No closing days

Fee: Free

Maruyama Park is a public park next to **Yasaka Shrine**. During the first half of April, when the cherry trees are in full bloom, Maruyama Park becomes Kyoto's most popular and most crowded spot for **cherry blossom viewing**.



7) Yasaka Shrine

Hours: Always open

Closed: No closing days

Fee: Free

The Yasaka Shrine is a Shinto temple located in the Gion District of Kyoto and is famous for being the venue of the Gion Matsuri Summer festival celebrated in July. In 869, portable shrines, called the Omikoshi, were paraded through the streets of Kyoto as an appeal to the deity for relief from a deadly epidemic that ravaged the city. Since then it has become an annual tradition in Kyoto.

The Yasaka Shrine was built in 656 AD and was dedicated to the God of prosperity, Susanoo-no-Mikoto, his wife and 8 children. The present shrine is the result of a reconstruction of the original buildings carried out in 1654.

The entrance to the Yasaka Shrine is through a red two-storey gate, called the Ro-Mon, flanked by statues of Shinto guardian Gods, while the steps to the shrine are guarded by figures of Korean Dogs. The Honden is the main hall where the Deity is worshiped. Worshipers ring the bell at the entrance to wake the Deity up before praying. To the left of the Honden is the hall for offerings, and to the right is the hall where religious ceremonies are performed. Kyoto residents flock to the shrine on a New Year Day to pray for prosperity in the coming year. The Maruyama Park near the shrine is Kyoto's most famous venue for cherry blossom viewing in spring.



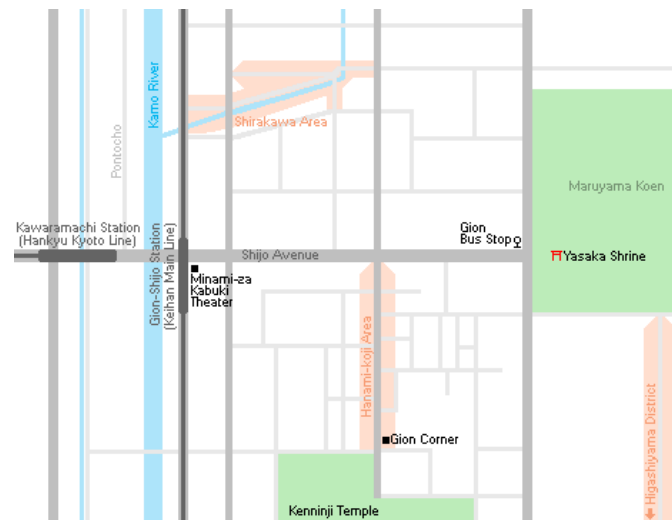
8) Gion District

The Gion District in Kyoto is the location where the traditional Japanese entertainers called the Geisha and their apprentices called Maikos reside and entertain businessmen. The Kyoto word for Geisha is Geiko which means Women of Art.

The Gion District is located around Shijo Avenue in Kyoto between the Yasaka Shrine and the Kamo River. All the buildings that flank the streets are built in traditional Japanese style and are called Machiyas or Town Houses. Inside these are shops, restaurants and Ochayas - traditional Tea Houses where Geiko entertain customers. Gion has been a Geisha district since the 1500s. Part of the street has been declared a Historic Preservation District and the City of Kyoto has made efforts to preserve the traditional architecture by moving all overhead utilities underground.

Tourists flock to the Gion district today to catch sight of a Geiko or Maiko en route to her engagement in full regalia. The district comes alive at night when patrons of the Ochayas come for their evening entertainment. A cultural show is held every day at the art center, called the Gion Corner, where tourists can view Geikos performing several traditional Japanese arts like tea ceremonies, dances and short comic plays. In April, the Miyako Odori festival, where Meiko perform traditional dances, is held here.

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9) Nijo Castle

Opening Hours:

Daily: 8:45am-5pm (admission until 4pm); entry to Ninomaru from 9am-4pm

Closed: Tuesdays in Jan, Jul, Aug, Dec (or the following day if Tuesday is a national holiday), Dec 29-31

The magnificent Nijo Castle is the former residence of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Opened to the public in 1940, this is one of the few palaces in Kyoto where visitors are allowed to view the interiors.

The castle was built in 1603 by Tokugawa Ieyasu, and was later enlarged by his descendant, Tokugawa Iemitsu, who added a five-floored tower, called Honmaru, which was later destroyed by fire. Nijo was also the site where the last Tokugawa Shogun, Yoshinobu, was restored to power as the Japanese Emperor in 1867.

Unlike other palaces, the Nijo Castle is not fortified but, instead, is surrounded by gardens and a moat. The complex comprises two structures: the outer Honmaru tower, and the main building and residence of the Shogun, called Ninomaru. The unique feature of Ninomaru is its squeaking floors, aka “nightingale floors” (uguisubari). The noise made by the floor planks, when walked upon, was to warn residents about someone entering the building. The interiors of the castle abound in beautiful paintings and sliding doors. There are also wax mannequins dressed up in ancient costumes so as to recreate the ambiance of a historical royal residence. In 1994, the Nijo Castle was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

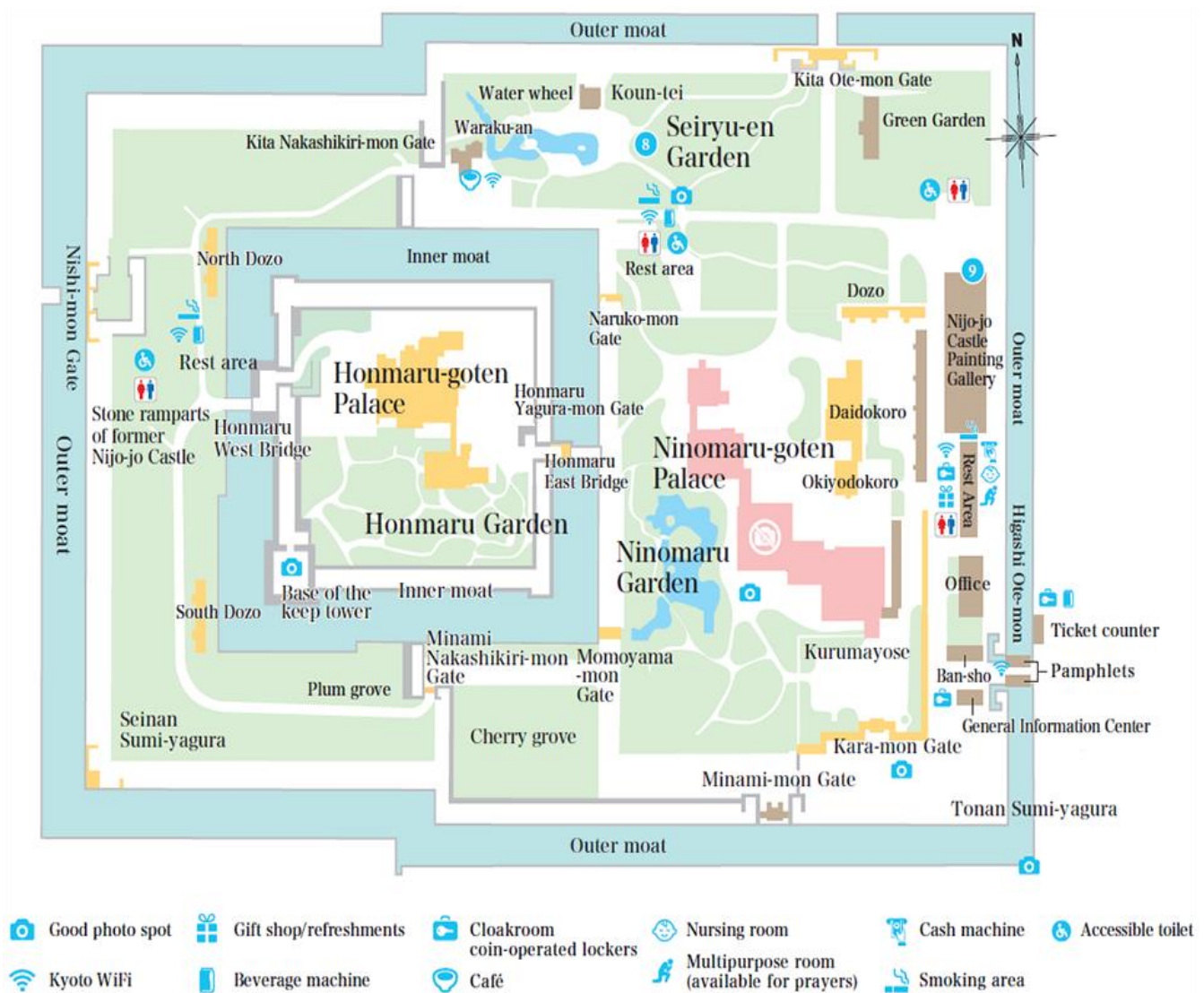
Tip:

Make sure to wear socks, as you will be required to take your shoes off to explore the interior.

Consider renting audio guide headphones for some valuable info that will help you understand the history of the complex better.

Otherwise, consider joining the English language tour running daily at 10am and 12:30pm.

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10) Saga-Arashiyama Station / Sagano Romantic Train

Lovers of train rides and scenic nature should reserve their tickets online for the Sagano Romantic Train and enjoy some of the best sightseeing around Kyoto – especially in late March to early April (cherry-blossom time) or November (for colorful foliage). Traveling from Arashiyama through the forested ravine and into rural Kameoka, the charming old-fashioned train has five cars/cabins, one of which – called “The Rich” – features an open design right down to the floor, which is great for panoramic views. Tickets are ¥630 per ride (one way) and you will need to ride back if you want to continue on in Arashiyama.

You can also take a 2-hour river tour back from Kameoka, which is – again – highly recommended for a great experience of rafting and beautiful sightseeing; note, however, that the river tour tickets can only be bought by the time you check-in at Saga-Arashiyama terminal, on a first-come-first-served basis. Whatever your choice, don't wait until arriving at Kameoka to buy a boat ticket, because you won't have enough time for such things. In fact, you will only have 10 minutes to walk from Kameoka terminal to the bus station where the bus will take you to the departure point of the boat cruise.

Inside the Saga-Arashiyama train station itself, you will find train souvenirs galore (the DVD of the train ride is a bargain!), as well as the Diorama Kyoto Japan, featuring model railroads and painstakingly recreated miniature versions of Kyoto's historical sites and neighborhood scenes. Well worth a visit by young and old!

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13) Arashiyama Bamboo Path

Conveniently situated next to the Tenryu-ji Temple in Arashiyama district and connected to hidden shrines, this small forested area of gorgeous bamboo standing tall is costs nothing to enjoy, and if you head out early in the morning on weekdays you will (almost) have it to yourself. If luck is on your side (with little tourist influx), you'll hear the clink of the canes leaning into each other and – on a bright day – find streams of light escaping through the bamboo and making their way to the ground. It's an easy and relatively short walk, allowing one to explore one of the “10 most beautiful tree tunnels in the world” before proceeding to other Arashiyama sights.

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11) Tenryu-ji Temple

Tenryu-ji Temple is one of the five great Zen Buddhist temples in Kyoto. It is managed by the Rinzai School of Buddhism and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994.

Tenryu-ji Temple was built by the Shogun, Ashikaga Takauji in 1339. He dedicated the temple to the Emperor Go- Daigo. Most of the temple buildings were destroyed by fire and others suffered extensive damage during the Onin war. The present buildings date back to early 20th century. The only surviving feature of the original temple is the pond and gardens designed by well known landscape designer, Muso Soseki.

The Tenryu-ji Temple has many unique features compared to other Zen temples. While most Zen temples are built facing the south, the building faces east. The two gates, the Chokushi Gate and the Middle Gate guard the eastern part of the temple. The Chokushi Gate is the oldest structure in the complex. The path from the gate leads west to the main hall and the sub temples are located on either side of the path. The Main Hall has an image of Gautama Buddha and two guardians and the ceiling has a painting of a dragon by artist, Suzuki Shonen. It is also the last resting place of Emperors Go-Saiga and Kageyama.

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12) Tenryu-ji Temple – Sogenchi Garden

One of Kyoto's very best sights, the garden surrounding Tenryu-ji Temple is a perfect fusion of white sand in wave patterns, moss, flowers, trees, and a stunning collection of rocks/stones arranged upon a pond. Unlike the temple's buildings, it has survived the centuries in its original 14th-century form. Set against the backdrop of Arashiyama's forested mountains, it all fits together perfectly.

Take your time for a relaxing stroll by the pond for some stunning vistas and photo opportunities. This garden is not huge – visiting alongside the temple (note that you need to get a ticket for both) will take you less than an hour to complete even walking slowly. Even if you don't pay to go into the temple buildings, you can see into some of them as you walk around the pond.

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14) Arashiyama Train Station Kimono Forrest

Opening Hours:

Open 24 hours

The Kimono Forest is an art installation around the Arashiyama terminal station of the Keifuku Randen Tram Line. Kimono Forest is composed of 600 clear, acrylic cylinders standing 2 meters tall. Within each cylinder is an example of kimono fabric design.

There are a total of 32 different traditional Kyo-yuzen designs, Kyo-yuzen being the name for a style of fabric dyeing developed in Kyoto during the Edo Period.

The designer behind the installation, Yasumichi Morita, chose the designs and they were produced at a Kyoto fabric company Kamedatomi. The pillars are arranged throughout the station and grounds. Some are in the dark station interior and others spill out onto the platforms.

Most are alongside the tracks on either side of the station with the biggest part being to the south. Here a long winding path leads through them and here you will find the Dragon Pond, a pool of water filled with coins thrown in by visitors like a wishing well.

In the middle of the water is a spherical ball of polished black stone engraved in gold with a depiction of a dragon. The dragon has long been a good omen in Japanese culture and the station is right across from the entrance to Tenryuji Temple which mean "Heavenly Dragon Temple."

The station is home to a variety of small stores and a couple of cafes and coffee shops. It is a good place to take a break after walking around Arashiyama. On the central platform is a free foot bath, an ashiyu where you can sit and soak your tired feet.



15) Togetsukyo Bridge

Also known as the "Moon Crossing Bridge", Togetsukyo is right in the center of Arashiyama and straddles the Katsura River in front of Mount Arashi. Its ends are adjacent to the Tenryū-ji Temple/Bamboo Forest on the north end and the Monkey Park at the south end.

With a spectacular backdrop of fall foliage and full-blown cherry blossoms in the spring, this famous landmark was originally built in the Heian Period (794-1185) and was last renovated in the 1930s. Though it looks all wooden from a distance, the columns and beams are made of reinforced concrete and only the parapets use cypress trees.

The poetic name was inspired by Emperor Kameyama who witnessed a shimmering moon rising above the surface of the river, appearing as though the moon itself was crossing the bridge. Since then, it has seen feudal wars, hosted samurai battles, and inspired some of the best haiku poems.

You can take photos from different sides and angles, buy souvenirs from the shops at each end, ride a rickshaw along the river banks, have a picnic by the water or a bite from the food stalls and many restaurants nearby. From July to September, you can also experience cormorant fishing in the evenings.

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16) Arashiyama Park (Nakanoshima Area)

Arashiyama Park is a prefectural park located in the scenic Arashiyama district of Kyoto and encompasses both sides of the Togetsukyou Bridge which crosses over the Katsuragawa River. It is surrounded by Kameyama-chiku (District), Nakanoshima-chiku and Rinsenji-chiku. At Kameyama-chiku on the southeast side of Ogurayama Mountain, cherry and maple is planted in the forest of red pine and it has become a natural forest full of mountain azalea. To the west, is a scenic overlook of Hodukyou Ravine, to the east is Emperor Gosaga and three succeeding Emperors' cremation mound.

Nakanoshima-chiku was developed on the sandbank of Katsura-gawa River and is famous for cherry blossoms. The area is visited by many tourists during cherry blossom viewing season. On the opposite side, in Rinsenji-chiku, old red pine has been planted and it is a great place to view Togetsukyou Bridge with Arashiyama in the background.



16) Ichitani-Munakata-Jinja Shrine

A small shrine on the side of Mount Arashiyama, over-looking the Hozu and Katsura rivers. If you continue along this path, you will come to the Iwatayama Monkey Park.



16) Arashiyama Monkey Park Iwatayama

Opening Hours:

Daily: 9am-5pm (Apr-Oct); 9am-4:30 (Nov-Mar); entry ends 30 minutes earlier

Closed on days with heavy rain or snow

Iwatayama Monkey Park is certainly a fun place for anyone who loves wildlife and animals. The park is famous for having a lot of free monkeys that can be found everywhere walking, jumping or eating. On the top of the hill, there is a small place where people can rest and admire the city panorama. The park is on Mt Arashiyama, on the same side of the Oi River as the train station. It is inhabited by a troop of over 170 Japanese macaque monkeys. The animals are wild but can be fed food purchased at the site.

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16) Zaō Daigongen Shrine – Can you find it?

Upstream from the Tonase Falls can be found the isolated enclave “Zao Gongendo”. When Emperor Go-Saga planted cherry blossoms from Yoshino on Mt. Arashiyama, it is said that he prayed for the coming of Zao Gongen. Zao Gongen also appears in the Noh Play “Arashiyama” (written by Komparu Zempo -15th century).

