



TRAVEL

How this Japanese city is keeping the geisha tradition alive

Meet the mistress of Nara's last geisha house — a remarkable woman who's on a mission to keep this complex tradition alive in her ancient city, a former capital of Japan.

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Most visitors to Nara come for the sacred deer. They've been here for at least a thousand years, grazing on the city's parkland, protected around the huge temples that trace the city's illustrious past as the capital of Japan in the eighth century. But even with the day-tripping crowds, its popularity is nothing compared to that of Kyoto, the nearby city that succeeded Nara as capital in 794.

Only a few other people are strolling the path I'm following around Sarusawa Pond. Most are here to take photos of Kofuku-ji temple's octagonal hall and five-storey pagoda, which poke over the trees that frame the city. The maples are already a deep red, the willow leaves trailing in the water a pale yellow, but the air still has the humid heat of summer. It doesn't take long to find the door I'm looking for — marked by tasselled red lanterns with the word 'Ganrin-in' written on them in kanji (Chinese characters used in Japanese writing). Another lantern bears the name 'Tsuruya'.

geisha house left in the city. I've come to meet its last mistress, to find out how she's trying to keep the tradition alive. At the height of Nara's popularity in the early 20th century, around 200 geishas and maiko (geishas in training) lived and worked here. In the decades since, numbers have dwindled — a pattern seen throughout Japan as young women have sought more flexible work, and forms of entertainment considered more modern, fashionable and affordable have taken over.

When I ring the buzzer, the wooden door slides open and a small hand gently pushes aside the yellow curtain to reveal the smiling face of Kikuno-san, the geisha who runs Tsuruya. Wearing a pale-blue silk kimono and pristine white tabi socks, she bows and beckons me inside. She leads me through to Tsuruya's main room, a warmly lit space with sliding shoji screens and a long, low table with floor seating. She pours me a dainty cup of oolong tea, its smoky aroma mingling with the fresh, grassy scent of the tatami-mat flooring. Her every movement seems like part of a dance, from the delicate placement of her finger atop the pot as she pours, to her lowered gaze and slight head tilt as she listens to me talk.

Osaka-born Kikuno-san tells me she began her training here at Tsuruya when she was 15. "My aunt encouraged me — she ran Tsuruya then," she

ceremony, calligraphy, shamisen [a three-stringed instrument], dance and so on. Three years later, in 1990, I debuted as a maiko.” It took her another six years to become a geisha and then she took over Tsuruya in 2007.



As Kikuno-san's career progressed, she says she saw geishas in Nara and beyond retiring — and not enough girls joining the profession. It's something of an irony that in the nearby city of Kyoto, where geishas remain part of the living culture, the tradition draws so much interest that the city has had to impose restrictions to curb disruptive overtourism — yet here, Kikuno-san struggles to find trainees. “So few girls are interested in becoming maiko now,” she says. “So I'm trying new approaches.”

Traditionally, teenage girls would move into an okiya (geisha house), which would cover living expenses, training costs and materials. Then, when they started earning, they'd slowly pay off this debt — effectively binding them to their okiya for years. Kikuno-san's innovations include funding their training — for at least a year — which can be part-time, allowing them to live and work elsewhere. As a result, their ties to Tsuruya are about passion, not financial obligation. She also pays them a salary once they start, rather than basing their pay on how many engagements they get. “We've created a new term for these trainees: ‘kotoka’,” she explains.

Kikuno-san gestures to a spot above a doorway where slips of paper hang, each bearing the name of a member of Tsuruya. On the left is Kikuno. Next to it is Yoshiki, a dance specialist who debuted as a geisha in 2023 but mostly works as an actor, living elsewhere and occasionally coming to Tsuruya for events — “a two-sword lifestyle”, Kikuno-san muses. The next three are her kotoka: Kikyo, who also works as a social worker and influencer; and Maki and Saki, who have become TV personalities.

The kotoka approach allows trainees to earn income elsewhere or pursue higher education while they assess whether this is the career for them. But it comes with its own challenges; trainees are not as immersed in the geisha world and more freely able to leave it. “In all honesty, I’d like to keep training them in a more traditional way,” Kikuno-san admits, “albeit without leaving them in debt at such a young age. But the most important thing is showing that Japanese traditional arts are a viable career option.”

Her own passion is unquestionable. In 2014, Kikuno-san established the Hana Akari, an event she self-funds each April that offers a rare opportunity to see geishas from across Japan showcasing their talents. “I make sure there are always some late-availability tickets at the tourist office,” she explains, calmly pouring more tea. “I want as many people as possible to see our artistry.”

Kikuno-san also shares her artistry on a smaller stage, at the sort of individual and small-group events that make up a geisha’s typical day. These might include a tea ceremony at a hotel, a two-hour dinner and a performance at a ryotei (traditional high-end restaurant) or a meal with music and drinking games here at Tsuruya. Kikuno-san is keen to make them as accessible as possible, eschewing traditional complexities such as



With accessibility being so important to Kikuno-san, she also maintains an active online presence. As well as her Instagram account and the Tsuruya website, Kikuno-san runs Hana Akari YouTube and Facebook pages, and engages with global media. She's appeared in everything from the New York Post — she once took the Hana Akari to New York City, even riding the subway in full kimono and make-up — to the BBC series Japan with Sue Perkins.

Unsurprisingly, Kikuno-san has a well-used phone. She pulls it gracefully from her kimono sleeve — she's offered to perform a dance for me, but with no shamisen to accompany her, Bluetooth will have to suffice.

Kikuno-san kneels on the tatami, bowing her head over a white fan, and as the haunting opening notes of a traditional kouta song begin to play, she starts to dance. Each movement flows into the next, the geisha's hand delicately turning or sweeping up her kimono sleeve just so, the fan making gentle arcs and sudden slices through the air. Practised and precise, it's a mesmerising display.

recommendations for touring the city. “Nara has such clear air, so the sunsets are beautiful — especially from Nigatsu-do, as it’s on a hill,” she says. Later that day, I follow her advice, making my way through the park and up a winding path to the eighth-century temple, a wooden building with a sweeping tiled roof located next to a forest. The crowds have thinned out and the lamps are being lit along the wide veranda. As I watch the rosy glow of sunset wash over Nara, I think back to Kikuno-san’s response when I asked her what it meant to her to be a geisha here in this city. She’d paused for a long time, finally saying: “I think... I was born to come here.” It’s hard to disagree. Nara’s geisha are as much a part of the fabric of this historic town as its temples and wooden houses. And now Kikuno-san is the custodian of that living culture — until she finds the next person to carry the torch of Ganrin-in.

How to do it

Nara is around 45 minutes from Kyoto by train.

A three-day bespoke trip to Nara for two people with tour operator [Luxurique](#) costs from ¥1,280,000 (£6,485). This includes transfers, five-star accommodation, a guide and the Kikuno-san experience, but not flights. @kikuno1118 tsuruya.my.canva.site

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