



Growing up, after 1200 years ...

I spent a day down in Kyoto this week. Looking back into an old passport to confirm this, I can tell how long it has been since I was *first* there ... 34 years!

When most foreigners are planning a visit to Japan for the first time, Kyoto is always on their list of places to see, and so it was with me all those years ago. I had read about how Kyoto was 'perfectly preserved', having missed out on large-scale bombing destruction during the war, and I was eager to see this time capsule of old Japan at first hand.

I was hugely disappointed. Aside from the famous old landmarks - Kiyomizu-dera, etc. etc., which were of course worth seeing - Kyoto was an ugly and desolate place, composed of wide swaths of ramshackle buildings interspersed here and there with bleak grey concrete structures. It seemed that what the Americans had failed to destroy, the Kyotoites had managed to do by themselves!

I know ... I know ... you are going to tell me that Kyoto - by design - is a place of 'hidden treasures' and all the good stuff is tucked away out of sight. That may be so, but no matter what manner of treasure you own, I still believe that it makes no sense to live in a slum!

So because of my dislike of this approach to city planning, I have never been particularly interested in spending much time there, and in the intervening years have been back only once or twice on quick trips.

I have to report though, that what I saw this time has given me cause to re-consider my feelings about this city, and I can tell you (and there is no 'grudgingly' about this) that I thoroughly enjoyed my visit, and would happily return again tomorrow!

What a livable place it seems to have become! I saw no bare grey concrete anywhere, and every single part of the city that I passed through (and I saw a lot of it because I rented a bicycle and spent the day zooming here and there on various errands) presented an attractive, well organized, highly welcoming and generally cheerful aspect.

Kyoto has always considered itself to be a kind of 'cultural capital', as opposed to major power centers like Tokyo and Osaka, but now it is finally looking the part! Somebody has taught this lady how to dress properly, and how to carry herself, and she looks great! Or perhaps we could stretch the analogy and say that the 'old lady' is staying indoors with her antiques and treasures, and has sent her daughter and grand-daughter out in her stead!

I had a most enjoyable day. My business meetings went well for the most part, I made good use of the city-wide WiFi available for visitors, and the most difficult decision to make was where to stop for lunch - there were so many appealing places beckoning.

I have to add at this point, that there just 'might' be something in the circumstances of my visit also at work here. It was a beautiful and warm spring day, and the young women crowding the streets and arcades were of course all dressed to suit. As evening approached, a full moon rose above the mountains to the east, and the lanterns along the Kamogawa painted a picture that made me regret that I was travelling alone this time ...

Given that kind of context, might it be possible that I was 'fooled' and that in reality there has been no substantial change in the place? I suppose so, and perhaps I should reserve judgement until I have seen the place again on a cold and rainy winter day. But for now, I will stamp a 'retracted' notice on my previous comments about Kyoto, and I'll look forward to my next visit!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>