

# Flower Towns and Maiko

**F**lower Towns, the districts where maiko and geiko live, are an important part of Kyoto's historical heritage. There is a mysterious world of maiko, a symbol of Kyoto, that people rarely see. However, once you see their traditional beauty, it never goes out of your memory.



In each Flower Town, various traditional events are held through a year.

## Miyako Odori at Gion Kobu (Apr. 1-30)

Gion Kobu is the biggest Flower Town. Its Miyako Odori is a symbol of Kyoto's spring. It was started as the main attraction of expo held in Kyoto in 1872. The elegant dance performance is known as the Cherry Dance in foreign countries.

## Kyo Odori at Miyagawa-cho

(First Sun. to third Sun. of Apr.)

It was started in 1950 and all 60 geiko and maiko join. Every year they choose a Kyoto specialty or famous place as the theme of the performance. Their original movement is enjoyed by many people.

## Kitano Odori at Kamishichiken

(Apr. 15-25)

There are 25 geiko and maiko in Kamishichiken. It is rather small performance compared to other Flower Town performance, but is unique and innovative.

## Kamogawa Odori at Ponto-cho

(May 1-24)

Kamogawa Odori is the symbol of early summer of Kyoto. It has been performed over 160 times, the second longest after Miyako Odori. It features short plays between dance performances.

## Gion Odori at Gion Higashi (Nov. 1-10)

In this dance, the 50 geiko and maiko of Gion Higashi perform dances that represent the beautiful seasons of Kyoto. All the geiko and maiko dance together in the last song.

## Special Combination Performance of Five Flower Towns

(Third Sat. & Sun. of Jun.)

In this special performance the geiko and maiko from all five Flower Towns perform together.



## Kyoto's Flower Towns

Flower Towns or Hanamachi are Japanese traditional entertainment districts. There are six districts in Kyoto: Gion Kobu, Miyagawa-cho, Kamishichiken, Ponto-cho, Gion Higashi, and Shimabara (this district is different because maiko do not live here). Except for Shimabara that has no maiko, other five Flower Towns are called Gokagai. Each district has its own traditions handed down to present day.



## Maiko

Maiko were originally women who served tea to people visiting Kyoto temples about 300 years ago. Over time, they began to welcome people not only with tea but also with sake and a meal, and entertain them with dance and song. To become a maiko, the girls have to learn dance, Kyoto language, manners, etc. for one year. Finally on the day she can start working as maiko, she visits her district to tell her debut accompanied with senior geiko. Generally they name new maiko after one character from the closest senior geiko and it is the proof of their strong relationship. After becoming a maiko, she has to keep training for 5 to 6 years to be a geiko. The ceremony celebrating becoming from maiko to geiko is called eri kae (collar changing) as maiko have red collars and geiko have white. To be a geiko is to be a professional entertainer.

## Elegant Appearance of Maiko

### ◆Maiko Clothing

The gorgeous kimono worn by maiko were originally the clothing style worn by the daughters of kimono merchants along Muromachi Street in the Edo period. The okami-san, the female manager of the tea house where the maiko lives, buys everything for the maiko. There are some differences between maiko and geiko kimono. Maiko kimono have shorter sleeves and the obi sash is different. The shorter sleeve makes them look younger. The typical maiko obi is over 5m long, contrastively geiko's sash is much shorter. Maiko sash is called a darari obi. Because the obi has to be fastened very tight, there is a special man assists the maiko. Another maiko clothing feature are their 10-cm high wooden sandals called okobo.

### ◆Maiko Hairstyles

Maiko use their own hair to create their hairstyle. Most of geiko use wigs. There are many kinds of traditional hairstyles and the style a maiko uses depends on how many years she has studied (first year, ware shinobu and second year, ofuku). They also have special hairstyles for certain traditional events.

### ◆Maiko Accessories

The pretty hair accessories worn by maiko represents the changing seasons month by month (cherry blossoms for April, wisteria for May, etc.). They are called hana kanzashi.

### ◆Maiko Makeup

Maiko put on makeup by themselves. First year maiko wears red lipstick on their bottom lip only. They paint their faces white because in the Edo period there was no electricity and so with white faces they would stand out in a candle-lit room.

