

PERSONAL JOURNEYS } KYOTO, JAPAN

Amazing Grace: The Art and Ordeal Of the Kimono

By MICHELLE GREEN

IT was one of those sweet female rituals that felt timeless and universal and that made me feel like a cross between Scarlett O'Hara and a submissive in an S & M frolic: In a centuries-old wooden town house in Kyoto where two Japanese matrons were teaching me how to wear a kimono, I'd been wrapped in gossamer layer after layer, and my captors were getting down to business with the waist-cinching.

"This very comfortable," said Taeko Fujii, a small woman who put a python squeeze on my ribs as she tied a foot-wide sash at my back. Clad in a smart gray kimono, Ms. Fujii, who teaches kimono culture at Wakayama University, did look perfectly at ease.

With the help of Michi Ogawa, the executive director of the Women's Associ-

At 'geisha school,' an American enters a world that's exotic even to some locals.

ation of Kyoto, a local group that offers instruction in traditional arts, Ms. Fujii tucked, pushed and pulled to arrange my green-and-coral silk kimono under the obi. She added a cordlike belt decorated with beads at the waist, then stood back and put a hand to her cheek.

"Beautiful!" she said. Ms. Ogawa, who was wearing a plain blue suit, did a tiny hand-clap.

Inspecting myself in a full-length mirror, I realized that I did feel exotic. The butterfly sleeves made my arms seem more delicate and my 5-foot-4 body look almost willowy — just like those of the Japanese women I'd been envying.

At the end of November, when Kyoto's shrines and temples and gardens were alive with fall color, busloads had converged on the ancient capital, and

among the throngs invisible in their designer wear floated figures in kimonos: young mothers, women in middle age, grandmothers. Gliding through the festive crowds, sometimes leaning lightly on the arm of a companion, they exuded a timeless chic.

So how did they manage it? Not just the look, but the allure. And what bits of wisdom could I smuggle home?

Though a number of places in the city rent kimonos, the Women's Association, with its instruction in the domestic arts (offered in households across Kyoto, as well as for groups in Tokyo) caught my imagination. "Geisha school!" cracked my boyfriend.

After scanning the group's Web site (www.wakjapan.com), I chose the 15,000 yen (\$136 at 110 yen to the dollar) Culture Program in Machiya, meaning in a traditional wooden town house. This private lesson in kimono-wearing runs 90 minutes to two hours and includes a choice of a second topic. The tea ceremony, with its emphasis on Zen, seemed like a good bet.

Hidden on a side street not far from Nijo Castle, Chionsha, the house where I was instructed, had reportedly been occupied since 1555 by the same family. In any case, it was chilly and museumlike; the only signs of life were shoes at the entrance. A tour of the home promised in a brochure was not offered; only as I was leaving did the owner, Kichiemon Nishimura, make an appearance.

BEFORE we began, Ms. Fujii, whose graying hair looked like a well-tended chrysanthemum, gave me a brief lecture about the subtleties of the kimono look. I didn't catch all of it, as her voice seldom rose above a whisper and her English was quirky. But her enthusiasm for her subject was clear.

"I like to teach Japanese, especially," she said. "So many girls don't know about their culture and the history of kimono. It's good to pass this on."

Even in the modern world, said Ms. Fujii, there are limits about how much flesh to expose. Revealing too much of the back, for example, is indelicate. The



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distance from the nape to the collar is measured in clenched hands: "Three hands for geisha," she said, "only one for daughter."

Even so, she added, it's essential to wear your hair up — because when so much is left to the imagination, what is revealed becomes that much more exciting.

As I would learn, subtlety and understatement are the underpinnings of the kimono mystique. Before I changed out of my jeans, Ms. Fujii showed me the one-size-fits-all undergarments,

which, I decided, looked like an Amish trousseau. Arranged on the floor were a susoyoke, or floor-length apron; a hadajuban, or short jacket that wraps around the waist; and a nagajuban, which is a longer robe that goes directly beneath the kimono. White tabi socks finished the look.

By the time I was suited up, my breasts and hips (which had been padded) had disappeared. So had my freedom of movement: to sit, I found myself sinking onto my shins like a camel; rising required pushing back on my heels

and unfolding like a lotus. I did well enough with those bits, but only because they felt like familiar yoga postures.

Learning to swish noiselessly while trussed, however, obviously required more than one lesson. I was told to step lightly but deliberately on the tatami mat.

"We walk like this," explained Ms. Fujii, "to echo the way the heart beats. As in Zen."

Watching my gait, she added, "So many people wear shoes indoors now that they walk in kimono the same way," stamping her foot one, two, three. "But we do not do the stomp."

HAPPILY, the tea lesson was harder to botch. Held in a tea-house in Chionsha's serene garden, it was an exercise in spiritual seduction.

The ritual is one in which you "have your guest in your hand," Ms. Fujii said. "Just slowing down and contemplating one another is very powerful."

We knelt facing one another across an enormous kettle on a brazier. Like a priestess, Ms. Fujii drew a small kit from the front of her kimono and extracted a bit of silk with which she "purified" the lacquerware tea container, the long-handled bamboo spoon, the spider-like whisk.

Everything in the tea ceremony, she explained, has a time, a place, a reason. The simple arrangement of flowers in the niche, or tokonoma, were meant to be admired when guests arrived. My hands would be placed on the tatami mat at a certain distance from its edge. Sweets eaten before tea with a pick-like utensil called a kuromoji are designed to reflect the seasons.

Like meditation, the tea ceremony is about being in the moment. But part of its beauty — like the heartbeat walk in the kimono — is echoing movements that have been repeated for centuries.

With a shallow spoon, Ms. Fujii tapped green matcha into a bowl selected for its quiet beauty. A stream of boiling water turned the powder into a pea-colored liquid that she whisked into a froth. Fast, then slower, in a prescribed motion; only the right hand, never the left. She issued invitations and cued my responses as if they were lines in a play.

As I held the bowl of tea that she had made for me and drank deeply, my teacher remained silent so I could take in the sharp fragrance and the creamy, bitter taste.

"Now you bow," she whispered when I was done. As I folded forward on the mat, I barely noticed that my feet were asleep and my obi felt like it was slicing through my midsection.

It was a small price for my introduction into Japanese domestic culture; after all, as I had learned, grace is so much harder than it looks. ■