Kyoto is a city of immense historic and cultural richness, including a great number of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Home to the imperial family for over 1000 years and capital of the country from the late 9th century until 1868, Kyoto’s initial flowering took place in the Heian era, 794-1192. This period of peace and stability was a crucial time in the evolution of classical Japanese culture. The imperial court began to develop a culture independent of Chinese influences, and, under the court’s patronage, arts and crafts flourished tremendously. In this period, too, developments in Buddhist centers in and around the capital were to have profound cultural influences. The monk Kukai established the Shingon sect, with a theology centered on “True Words” revealing the mysteries of Buddhahood. These words were transmitted verbally from teacher to student but not written; believing that the truths also transcend speech, Kukai encouraged cultivation of the arts. Through the influence of their teachings on Japanese thought and on the contemporary imperial court, Kukai and other Buddhist thinkers greatly affected the historical development of Japanese poetics and visual arts.

Kyoto is a valley enclave hemmed in by mountains. With their mixture of wooden houses and concrete buildings, the central neighborhoods form a cityscape of browns and grays. Against this backdrop are sudden bursts of color: street-side shrines adorned with bright cloth and flowers; abundant goods for sale on market days; diverse items on display in the windows of shops on narrow back streets.

With the many centuries of history and culture that endure, modern Kyoto is a city of contrasts. Regarded in Japan as a bastion of tradition and conservativism, Kyoto is also home to a number of universities and colleges that draw a large population of young people to the city. Compared to most of the country, people may be more likely to dress traditionally, but citizens in formal kimono share the streets with youths in the latest fashions and fads.

With so much tradition and history, the city is a magnet for tourists—and school field trips—from all over Japan. The best-known cultural treasures can be hard to truly see when crowds are dense, but walk just around the corner from the well-known sites, and there is likely to be an interesting glimpse of Kyoto’s daily life, along with traces of its old traditions.

This issue of Japan Notes looks at some of those glimpses.
The Year in Festivals

Kyoto is home to so many shrines and temples that visitors arriving nearly any week will find a choice of festivals, or, matsuri, to attend. These observances represent a rich variety of religious practices, ancient folkways, and historical events.

Many festivals originated in Japan’s agricultural history, so Kyoto observances of these will be similar to rites held in other parts of the country. A number of festivals unique to Kyoto, however, are held to celebrate the city’s own culture and history. Both Aoi Matsuri (May, below) and Gion Matsuri (July) have been held since the Heian period. Jidai Matsuuri (October) is a more modern creation: it was first held in 1894 to commemorate the 1100th year of Kyoto’s prominence.

Some highlights of the festival calendar follow.

January

As befits the time of fresh starts, the year begins with hatsumode, the first shrine visit. Women and children wear their best kimono, and everyone offers prayers for well-being in the coming months.

The first few days of the year are holidays, so this is a period of visits and recreation with family members. Traditionally, special card games and sports were common activities. Today, some of these old forms of entertainment are publicly re-enacted at Kyoto shrines.

Yasaka Shrine holds a festival where participants in historic dress play karuta, an ancient card game that was popular at the medieval court. Costumed players at Shimogamo Shrine compete in kemari, a soccer-like game that also was played at court.

February

Under the old lunar calendar, this is when spring begins. The Setsubun festival was the time for ridding the household of demons—they were exorcised by tossing beans inside and outside the house while shouting, “out with the bad, in with the good!” Numerous shrines and temples hold exorcism ceremonies. Bean-tossing is often combined with such purification rites as sacred dances and lighting of holy fires.

March

Spring begins to unfold as ume (plum trees) bloom. Perhaps the most impressive orchard to visit is at Kitano Shrine.

March is also the time of Hina Matsuri, the Doll Festival, also known as “Girls’ Day.” Families with daughters display dolls in their homes; some shrines and temples offer displays and observances.

The death of Buddha is commemorated this month by religious services. Several major temples own important painted scrolls which depict Buddha’s passing to Nirvana, and the scrolls are exhibited as part of these temples’ observances.

April

Flowers are a theme this month. Families and friends gather for hanami, cherry blossom viewing parties. Hana Matsuri, “Flower Festival,” celebrates Buddha’s birthday.

May

Aoi Matsuri, the Hollyhock Festival, is one of Kyoto’s major historical observances. It begins on May 3 with a display of archery performed by riders on horseback. On May 5 a horse race is held between two teams garbed in 8th century costumes. The festival culminates on May 15, with a grand procession depicting the pageantry of the imperial court.

June

According to the lunar calendar this is mid-summer, and it’s a period when Japan’s agricultural past is very evident.
in the festival schedule. Rice-planting—*ta-ue*—is performed at Fushimi Inari Grand Shrine, and numerous shrines hold purification rites to protect parishioners’ health during the months of hot weather.

**July**

Kyoto’s long history has included many disease epidemics and natural disasters. Protective, or *goryo-e*, festivals aimed at appeasing the spirits grew from these tragedies. The festivals were usually held in summer, when floods and epidemics were most likely.

*Gion Matsuri*, one of the oldest, was established early in the Heian period in response to a series of epidemics. The emperor arranged for special prayers and a parade; the city was spared further illness, and the festival continues to this day.

As Kyoto’s craft and merchant economy developed in the 12th century, the festival emphasis began to shift from religious purification to becoming a means for celebrating the wealth and taste of the commercial class. The massive, elaborately decorated floats that are the most noted feature of the festival originated in the displays organized by merchants and craft guilds. Today, most floats continue to be built by members of textile guilds.

**August**

This is the time of remembrance, as spirits of the dead return to earth during the period of *Obon*. The public *Bon Odori* dance is a joyous commemoration of spiritual connection to the ancestors. Along with New Year, this is the major time for families to gather, and people throughout Japan will return to their home towns.

In Kyoto the Obon season ends with one of the city’s most noted spectacles: the lighting of gigantic bonfires on the slopes of Mt. Daimonji. The bonfires are constructed in the shapes of Chinese characters representing Buddhist concepts, and the light is considered to guide the spirits of the dead back to their resting places. Residents and tourists flock to numerous observation points in the city to view the fires.

**September—October**

Harvest festivals and historical processions are held this month. Among the latter is *Jidai Matsuri*, the “Festival of the Ages,” held in October and one of Kyoto’s major events. In 1868 Kyoto was displaced by Tokyo as the nation’s capital. In succeeding decades, Kyoto found a new role in its importance as a center of arts and crafts. By 1894 the city had created a new festival, in which participants are costumed to represent all centuries of Kyoto’s long history. The procession of about 2000 marchers begins at the Heian Shrine and takes several hours to arrive at the old Imperial Palace. It’s been said of the festival that, in viewing *Jidai Matsuri*, one can see the sweep of Kyoto’s history unfurling as in a painted scroll.

**November**

This is the prime period for viewing maple leaves, and locations throughout the city and surrounding mountains offer exquisite temple and shrine settings.

Another type of color is seen this month, when families observe *shichi-go-san*, meaning, “seven-five-three,” the ages traditionally representing milestones in children’s lives. Girls and boys of those ages are dressed in full kimono for the family’s visit to a shrine, where prayers are offered for the children’s health and happiness. Some major Kyoto shrines draw particularly large numbers of families.

**December**

End-of-year preparations are foremost this month. Each family’s house has to be prepared for the holidays, and people attend year-end parties at their workplaces.

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