



Is Kyoto overrated?

By Chris Broad

Whilst preparing a two week itinerary for a good friend who's coming to visit Japan for the first time, I find myself asking, do we really need to visit Kyoto?

In June 2015, some friends and I hopped on to a small ferry in the town of Sakata, in rural north Japan, and sailed out into the Sea of Japan, for an island called Tobishima.

Tobishima has a population of about 250 inhabitants and isn't particularly accessible during the winter months, due to high winds and freezing Siberian weather. In summer however, it feels more like a subtropical desert island, with untouched bleached sandy beaches and water so clear you can watch the fish gliding beneath the waves. Gollum would love it.

Despite being 30km out to sea, the island even offers one of the best views in Tohoku. Looking back towards the mainland you can witness Tohoku's tallest volcano, Mount Chokai, rising up 2,200m into the clouds.

The hour long journey to the island wasn't entirely uneventful. All three of us were violently sick. A mixture of big waves, small boat, high temperatures, and troublesome hangovers. But stepping off the boat, we were revived by the fresh island air, and managed to rent three bikes from a small shop nestled in the port.

We decided to try and circumnavigate the island and set off from the bustling port town, along the quiet winding road that circled the island. But no sooner had we reached a quarter of the way around the island, the road came to an end and we had to hop off our bikes and start walking along a beach. Soon, the beach too came to end thanks to some meddlesome cliffs, but fortunately the shallow waters meant we were able to go around the cliffs, climbing rocks in between. Now I'll admit, I was secretly hoping to stumble across some long lost pirate treasure - which isn't as ridiculous as it sounds, given that a few hundred years ago, the island had in fact been inhabited by "Dwarf Pirates". Well, that was their nickname - they weren't particularly popular.



On an uninhabited part of a barely inhabited island, in search of lost pirate treasure.

'Wakou' Pirates were their real name - and admittedly given that it sounds like "Wacko", that doesn't sound too friendly either.

So there we were, lost in some shallow waters on an isolated part of the island, wading through the warm waters in bare feet (we'd bravely left our shoes and socks with the bikes), on a calm summer's morning, in an environment that looked somewhat like the edge of the Earth.

Just as we were reaching what can only be described as the absolute middle of nowhere, we suddenly spotted what looked like some stone stairs jutting out of a cliff, concealed by some overgrown trees.

Curiosity got the better of us - particularly my two Irish friends (Irish people always seem to be the most adventurous of all) - and we decided to see where the stone stairs led. For ten minutes we beat our way through the overgrown foliage to open up the pathway, gradually working our way up the cliff to salvation.

Finally, the foliage fell away to reveal an enclosed courtyard, with a well preserved, but seemingly forgotten shrine. And yet, despite being hidden away as though untouched for years, it was still in excellent condition and the fine wooden carvings remained beautifully.

I felt a surge of adrenaline - we'd discovered something hidden away that had taken a combination of effort and luck to discover. There was a sense that very few people - particularly foreigners - would stumble across it. As we stood there in front of the shrine, on an uninhabited region of an isolated island in the Sea of Japan, with the only audible sound being the waves lapping against the cliffs below, I knew this place and the experience of finding it, would stay clearly in my memory for a long time to come. My romanticised notions of adventure had been fulfilled. My daydreams were vindicated. Best of all, our journey around the island had only just begun.

Now, of course, it would be completely unfair of me to compare this exciting memory of discovering a forgotten shrine in an adventurous manner, to visiting one of the most infamous temples in all of Japan in the city of Kyoto.

But let's do it anyway.

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto is a national treasure loved by all (*pictured*), and is usually in the top must-see lists of every guide book written about Japan ever. A world heritage site, it's nothing short of iconic. A wonder of Japanese architecture. A relic of a time long past.

And when I found myself stood in it's majesty, I gazed at it long and hard and felt... nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Well, except perhaps, disappointment and frustration.

Because first off, like every single temple in Japan ever, it got burned down.

The building you're looking at may as well have been built last Tuesday. Yes, it's a faithful reconstruction, but as someone from Europe, raised within a one mile radius of three castles and four churches all built about 500 years ago, the cultural snob in me makes it a lot more difficult to feel care about faithful reconstructions of buildings burned down by clumsy monks.

I've visited the Kinkakuji 'Golden Pavilion' Temple twice now - in fact the first time, I was genuinely excited to visit it. The view of the temple next to the giant pond is infamous and my Japanese friends and colleagues battered its infamy into me everyday at work for a year, before I cracked open the piggy bank and expended half a months salary to visit it firsthand.

My smile and sense of anticipation began to wane at the ticket gate however, when I saw the kind of queues usually reserved for popular theme parks rides in August. Admittedly, I'd anticipated it given it's infamy, so I let it go, knowing it was going to be an incredible scene that would remain etched into my memory for a life time.

After purchasing a ticket and working our way through the crowd towards the pond, the sound of a million camera shutters echoed around me - it's important to point out that in Japan, camera phones have to legally make a camera noise due to perverts on trains. It's a good idea, but unfortunately it means you hear camera shutter sound effects coming from smartphones all day, everyday, wherever you go in Japan.

In the same way that I'd beaten down a path through the foliage on the side of a cliff on Tobishima, I fought my way through a crowd of hundreds to get to the edge of the pond.

Until, there it was, stood be for me in all it's magnificence.

Some recently renovated wood, with some gold stuck on.

So pristine that it could have been built just yesterday (and indeed the roof had been, in 2003).

I'm not sure what it was; the 400 people around me shouting "Wow" and taking pictures on their camera phones without looking, the never-ending wave of camera shutters, or the pleasant yet massively overhyped artificial view, but I wasn't a happy bunny.

I can't deny it looked nice. It did. But I still felt nothing. No surge of excitement. Nothing worth remembering. I stared at it for at least 15 minutes, took a nice photo and a selfie like everyone else, then fought my way towards the exit. The box was ticked, I'd seen the Kinkakuji temple. On to the next must-see World Heritage site we went.

Sadly, I find this sums up most people's trips to Kyoto; just a series of boxes to be ticked.



The Golden Pavilion: the best thing since sliced fingers

Some of those boxes are genuinely good. The Fushimi Inari shine (the hundreds of shrines curving their way up a mountain) are mesmerising, the Tenouji rock garden was relaxing and the views from the Monkey park are wonderful.



Fushimi Inari-taisha Shrine: worth seeing

My favourite 'tourism attraction' in Kyoto is barely an attraction. It's called Philosopher's Path, and it's a lovely little footpath along a small stream in a relatively tranquil district of the city. Not only were there barely any tourists, but my friend and I had a nice little encounter with an overexcited, elderly rock salesman, who spent 30 minutes telling us how much he loved the Beatles in broken English, before giving us both some free rocks.

For the most part though, I find people who visit Kyoto for 3 or 4 days as a tourist, tend to fall into three categories. The first category are people who blindly praise Kyoto, without really expressing why; it's as if they just say it's good because it's the generally accepted view to just say Kyoto is good. Usually along the lines of:

"Oh my god, Kyoto is like...it's like so historic...and...like...so historical...and so ancient and historical."

The second category are those who come away from Kyoto underwhelmed. Many are disappointed upon arriving at the prestigious ancient city, only to walk out of a monolithic modern train station into a bustling modern city littered with a limitless sea of shopping malls. I've found many express initial disappointment upon arriving in Kyoto for the first time and seeing the downtown area resembles just another Japanese city. Others go to a temple looking for enlightenment, and after spending two hours in a crowd of people, come away with enragement.

The third category are people who just really love temples, shrines and Japanese heritage. And no crowd would be too large or too noisy to wipe the smile off their face, as they wander the busy streets. Even amidst a horrific zombie apocalypse, they'd continue to bask in Kyoto's atmosphere with a smile, oblivious to the ensuing madness around them.

Before being violently eaten.

In the face.

Naturally though, with a limit of just two to threes days, most tourists are eager to merely get some nice photos, quickly gunning their way through half a dozen temples and shrines from the Tripadvisor list, before moving on, without being able to truly appreciate the city or having a single memory worth remembering.

Perhaps it isn't Kyoto that's overrated though - just many of the tourist attractions. I've been to Kyoto four times; three times in a tourist capacity and once to visit a friend. Easily the most memorable trip was to see my friend, as we wandered into a public bath house and relaxed in hot spring water, before popping into a pleasant bar and chatting with the owner. It dawned on me that Kyoto wasn't just one big tourism hotspot. It's probably a fantastic place to live. After all, it's regularly ranked as one of the world's most liveable cities and the majority of people I know who've lived there will agree that it's a worthy title.

But whenever a good friend comes to visit for two weeks and I play my roll as a sarcastic tour guide, I think long and hard about whether or not to take them to Kyoto and it's a decision I'll have to make again later this year, when a good friend comes to visit Japan for the first time.

The friend who's visiting me explicitly stated they're happy to go off the conventional route, in pursuit of a more memorable and adventurous holiday - the same kind of trip I prefer. We have the shared aim of just wanting a fun and memorable journey with random encounters and the exploration of less touristy locales. Not getting lost in crowds of people for hours at a time.

And that is without a doubt, the very essence of visiting Kyoto as a tourist. Queueing, crowds, and noisy and annoying fellow tourists, who will ruin most of your experiences at temples and shrines unless you get up silly early every morning, or visit at off-peak times during the year. I find myself wondering if people feel the thousands of dollars they've spent to travel to Kyoto, only to stand in queues all day was a worthy investment.

With that in mind, will I take my friend to Kyoto during their 2 week trip to Japan later this year?

Yes I will.

Overall Kyoto is a great city. Undoubtedly overhyped, but still the second city worth visiting after Tokyo, for first timers in Japan.

And anyway it's not necessarily the city itself that's the problem. It's the mix of an ancient, tranquil city, overflowing with cultural heritage, behind overrun with noisy and annoying tourists from around the world. The city is merely a victim of its own success.

With that in mind, when my friend comes, I plan to hire some bikes so we can avoid the downtown areas and instead cycle down the backstreets. We'll avoid the overrated tourist traps such as Kinakuji (the Golden Temple), Ginkakuji (the Silver Temple), Nishiki market and the traditional, yet fantastically dull and overrun streets of Gion.

It's difficult to have a memorable adventure when you're following the same path as everyone else. So instead we'll focus on quieter districts of Kyoto, in an attempt to get a real feel for the city's atmosphere. We'll wander amongst the quieter shrines and gardens and stroll along Philosopher's Path. Hell, maybe the rock merchant is still there. We'll chat about the Beatles again and get free rocks.

And of course, we'll visit the Fushimi Inari shrines, because some tourist traps are too good to avoid.

Given my friend is going to spending at least £2,500 to visit Japan for two weeks including flights, above all, I want to focus on giving them a two week adventure they'll never forget. Those kinds of experiences and memories are far more likely to happen when we're not in a queue, at another tick-box location in Kyoto.

With that in mind, maybe I'll take her to Tobishima, with a shovel.

Few things would be more adventurous than digging up long lost Dwarf Pirate treasure.

(For those who want to see the shrine and footage of Tobishima, you can actually spot them in the first minute of a video I released a while back: https://youtu.be/FIsrz_w9uqs).

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