

Introducing Japan

An unusual Kyoto-based project offers visitors from abroad an in-depth introduction to traditional Japanese culture. **Tony McNicol** joins in for a day.

A converted bean storehouse in a Kyoto backstreet is the unusual venue for an innovative introduction to traditional Japanese culture. During just one busy day, participants in the Origin Arts Program can try their hand at the ancient martial art of *waraku*, the tea ceremony, calligraphy, and noh theater. For guide Joshua Beatty, who is accompanying a group of American schoolteachers on a tour of Japan, the one-day program provides a deeper than usual look at Japanese culture. “We want to get past kimono and chopsticks,” he says. “It’s not about just stepping off a bus and taking a photo. The teachers really have to ask questions... [get] to know Japanese people.”

The Origin Arts Program was set up in 2004 by Alex Kerr. A writer and cam-

paigner for the conservation of Japan’s environmental and cultural heritage, Kerr advocates the preservation of that heritage through tourism. As the Japanese government strives to increase the number of foreign visitors to 10 million people per year by 2010, Kerr has put his ideas into practice in two projects based in the 1,200-year-old city of Kyoto. One is the Origin Arts Program. A sister project renovates and rents out Kyoto *machiya* traditional townhouses.

The arts program is based in a former bean storehouse behind one of the restored townhouses. On the ground floor are offices and a meeting space, above a multi-purpose hall that boasts the only noh practice stage in Kyoto. The whole building has been lovingly furnished by antiques collector Kerr with standing

screens, hanging scrolls, and ceramics.

Today’s first workshop is on *waraku*. Instructor Maeda Hiramasa, a former Olympic-class karate expert, introduces the ancient sword-based Shinto martial art. After an impressive demonstration of the “eight basic spiral motions” and the “Shinto primal sounds,” he details the philosophy behind *waraku*. What Japanese martial arts have to offer the West, he tells the fascinated high-school teachers, is their spiritual aspect. “Here in Japan, we have received so many gifts from other countries. We would like to give something back.” More than just a fighting technique, *waraku* is a form of spiritual self-improvement, he says. “We are not politicians or business people. But regular people can help improve the world too.”

The tea ceremony class is held on the second floor of the *machiya* townhouse opposite the practice hall. Today’s teacher, Sawada Minoru, shows the participants how to enter the tatami-matted tearoom as a guest, how to politely admire the calligraphy scroll and tea flower arrangement, and then how a host should handle the silk cloth, tea caddy, and tea scoop. Towards the end of the workshop, some



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Alex Kerr and calligraphy master Sawada Minoru demonstrate a few dramatic brushstrokes.

of the tea master's young pupils serve their guests bowls of frothy powdered tea.

When teachers return after lunch they find long tables laid out with paper, brushes, and inkstones ready for the calligraphy class. First they are taught how to write the Chinese character for "eternity." It's the character that all students of calligraphy have practiced for generations because it uses all five of the basic brush strokes. After that they are invited to draw a character of their choosing; instructor and assistants brush examples for them to copy. David Hruskoci, from Shrewsbury High School in Massachusetts, picks the characters that mean "science" (the subject he teaches). "I plan on hanging this above my door," he says cheerfully.

The noh class is given by precocious twenty-four-year-old noh master Utada Tatsushige. He has brought along a set of noh masks. All of the masks were made by Utada's father, one of Japan's most famous noh actors. Utada allows one of the participants to try a mask on for size, explaining how it should be handled and worn. (That's a unique opportunity because in Japan normally only fully trained noh actors are allowed to ever wear the masks.) Then they try some basic steps and movements from noh theater.

"I want to tell as many people about Noh as possible," says Utada after the class, explaining why he chose to take part in the program. But when asked whether the abstract movements and ancient language of the art form might make noh rather inaccessible to foreigners, he points out that Japanese people have plenty of trouble understanding noh as well. Luckily though, it's not necessary to understand everything. "If you look for meaning you won't enjoy it. It's better

just to experience it," he says.

Later on, after dinner, Utada is the star of a very special noh performance. In the darkened hall he performs accompanied by a small ensemble of noh musicians. One of the founders of noh, Zeami Motokiyo, wrote that the purpose of noh was to create *yugen* (mysterious dark-



Learning the basics of the martial art of *waraku* (top); a participant tries on a noh mask (left); handling the tea ceremony silk cloth and tea caddy (right)

ness). Judging by the reaction of the audience, the *yugen* is palpable during the breathtaking performance. Finally, for the day's last event the mood changes again with a lively calligraphy demonstration by Alex Kerr and Sawada Minoru, an expert in calligraphy as well as a tea master. Taking suggestions from the audience (and frequent sips from generous glasses of wine) they draw huge flowing characters on sheets of paper laid out on the floor.

During a break between workshops, Nancy Overholt of the Institute of International Education (the trip's organizer) praises the program. For her group, who have come to Japan on a Toyota-sponsored two-week tour of Japan, it is "a springboard to a deeper understanding of Japan," she says. "Not only does it open their minds to Japan, it opens their mind to diversity—in their own culture too." History teacher Nikki Marchmon-Boykin agrees. "I recommend that everyone travels," she says. "Once a person travels, they can respect difference."

All Welcome

And according to project founder Alex Kerr, the program has plenty to offer Japanese people as well as overseas visitors. More than half of the people who stay at the townhouses restored by the arts program's sister project are Japanese. And occasionally Japanese visitors come to the Origin Arts Program too. "We get plenty of Japanese people who are completely bowled over by this," says Kerr. "Look at the [traditional arts instructors] who are here today. You need to show them to Japanese people too."

Kerr and his staff are now planning a new project in the city of Kaga in Ishikawa prefecture. They plan to restore about forty traditional houses spread over three hamlets. The

houses will be turned into communities of holiday homes, restaurants, coffee shops, artist's studios, and stores selling local crafts. Again, it's all about using traditional culture to attract tourists, and using tourism to preserve traditional culture.

"How do you bring traditional houses alive?" asks Kerr rhetorically. "It is not by preserving them as a dead museum." ■

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