



## GEISHA 101

The centuries-old tradition of *geisha* is one of Japan's most recognized yet least understood cultural traditions. *Geisha* are professional entertainers and social companions, skilled in the arts of conversation, music, dance, literature and tea ceremony.

### GEISHA TERMS

*Geisha* = Literally, “performing artist.” In Japanese, “*gei*” means art and “*sha*” means people or person.

*Okiya* = The house where *geisha* live. They do not entertain customers here.

*Hanamachi* = Literally, “flower towns,” or the districts where *geisha* houses are located. Today, *hanamachi* are primarily found in the cities of Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan.

*Shikomi* = The first stage of *geisha* training in Kyoto. Typically, girls served as maids in their *okiya*.

*Minarai* = The second stage of *geisha* training involving practical experience. *Minarai* no longer serve as maids and may attend parties, where they can learn skills through observing the other *geisha*. *Minarai* may only charge a partial price for their time.

*Maiko* = Kyoto dialect term for an apprentice *geisha*. *Maiko* is also the final of three stages of *geisha* training. *Maiko* are recognizable by their distinctive makeup, decorated hairstyle and colorful *kimono* dress. A *maiko* learns everything about the profession of *geisha* from her *onê-san*, shadowing her at engagements. This training stage can last for months to years before a woman is promoted to *geiko*.

*Onê-san* = Literally, “older sister,” or a *geisha* apprentice's senior mentor. The *onê-san* picks the *maiko*'s professional name.

*Geiko* = The Kyoto dialect term for “*geisha*.” *Geiko* have completed each stage of *geisha* training and may charge full price for their time.

*Danna* = *Geisha* patron, typically an affluent man. Traditionally a *danna* was taken by *geisha* to help cover the profession's large expenses.

### HISTORY

*Geisha* trace their roots to female entertainers in 18<sup>th</sup> century Japan, although some believe their culture is linked to dancers and performers from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1920s and 30s, an estimated 80,000 women were *geisha*. Numbers have since declined for various reasons, including the Westernization of culture and the strict training and expense of the profession. The exact number of traditional Japanese *geisha* today is unknown, but estimates place it between 1,000 and 10,000 women.

### TRAINING

In Kyoto, girls often begin their *geisha* training at a young age by joining an *okiya*, or *geisha* house. There are three stages of training: *shikomi*, *minarai*, and *maiko*. As *shikomi*, girls serve as house maids. Housekeeping

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duties are purposefully made difficult in “make or break” fashion. After passing an intense dance exam, *shikomi* become *minarai*.

*Minarai* no longer have chores, but rather focus on training in the field, where they learn skills such as light conversation and how to interact with guests. They usually are not invited to parties, but attend as guests of senior *geisha*. They can be hired, but may only charge a portion of the price of a full-fledged *geisha*. Girls are *minarai* for only a short period of time before they become *maiko*, or apprentice *geisha*.

*Maiko* intensely shadow a senior *geisha* mentor and teacher, or *onê-san*. The relationship between *maiko* and *onê-san* is extremely important. *Maiko* learn the arts of serving sake, clever conversation, and general comportment from their *onê-san*. An apprentice may be a *maiko* for months or years before becoming a *geiko*, or professional *geisha*.

*Geiko* may charge full price to attend parties or engagements. Traditionally, their time is measured by the burning of an incense stick.

In Tokyo, young women rarely go through a formal apprentice stage, instead becoming *geisha* in their twenties.

## **LIFESTYLE**

*Geisha* are high-cultured, professional entertainers. They are skilled in conversation, dance, playing musical instruments, the ritual of the tea ceremony and more. Authentic *geisha* are paid for their social company at parties and other functions, often held at special restaurants known in Kyoto as “tea-houses.” *Geisha* are expected to remain single. Traditionally, wealthy men known as *danna*, or patrons, support a *geisha*’s training and other expenses, which can be very costly.

## **APPEARANCE**

The appearance of Kyoto’s *maiko* is the one most often associated with *geisha*. *Maiko* always appear in public with the classic mask-like white makeup. Adult *geisha* also wear similar stylized makeup, but only for formal occasions.

*Geisha* wear beautiful, colorful *kimono*, or a traditional Japanese robe, with an ornate *obi* sash tied around the waist and knotted in the back. *Kimono* style and pattern are dependent upon the wearer’s age, the event and the season. On her feet are *tabi* (white socks split at the toe) and *zori* (flat-soled sandals). *Maiko* wear *okobo*, which are very tall wooden clogs.

When they wear their formal costume, *geisha* wear a wig done in a traditional style, with elaborate adornments such as combs and pins. At present, only *maiko* wear their own hair in traditional style. They must sleep using a neck support instead of a pillow, in order to keep their hairstyle perfectly in place.