Don't eat too much or cross your legs' – mastering the kimono, Japan's trickiest garment

Saved

The process is laden with deep cultural and symbolic significance CREDIT: GETTY

Danielle Demetriou, DESTINATION EXPERT

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Danielle Demetriou is given a masterclass in how to dress in this most traditional – and difficult – of garments

“Don’t cross your legs. Don’t eat too much. Make sure the neckline doesn’t open. And always fold the left side over right – the other way is for the dead.” It’s Friday evening in Kyoto and Nobuko Matsuzaka is gliding elegantly behind a hotel restaurant counter sharing her golden rules for dressing in a Japanese kimono.

Despite approaching the end of a long working day, Nobuko-san looks flawless in a navy kimono with subtle square motifs bound with a wide obi belt with a seasonal pink camellia flower and a purple cord.

Nobuko-san makes it look easy, but I'm not convinced, particularly when she confides that her own ensemble is the result of 25 years' experience, including three years of classes studying the Japanese kimono dressing. I am, however, grateful for her tips: the following morning, I will take part in my first kimono dressing class at Sowaka, an atmospheric hotel in Kyoto's Gion district – and it's something of a daunting prospect.

Dressing in a kimono is an art form that can take years to master. The process is laden with deep cultural and symbolic significance – from the meaning of the motifs (some flower patterns are only worn for a few weeks a year) and the choice of colours (bright pink is not for the middle-aged) to the dizzying quantity of accessories required to fix it in place.

Yet for all its rich heritage, kimono appear to be having something of a moment in the modern spotlight: the Victoria & Albert Museum in London has just opened the hotly anticipated Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk, exploring its social and aesthetic evolution since the 17th century.

Kyoto's Gion district CREDIT: GETTY

"The joy of wearing kimono is that it is not about ideal body shape, but individual styling," Anna Jackson, V&A curator and respected Japan expert, tells me ahead of my class.

Fortunately, upon arrival at Sowaka Hotel, general manager Taisuke Yajima demonstrates a pretty relaxed take on kimono dressing: he rummages inside the wide right sleeve of his grey silk kimono before pulling out his business cards (along with a stray pen), adding with a smile: "These sleeves are very useful! But the kimono police probably wouldn't like it very much."

The following morning, I fail to follow Nobuko-san's advice about not eating too much during the delicious multi-course Japanese breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Returning to my room, I

find a trio of smiling ladies dressed top-to-toe in black, unpacking a suitcase of kimono on to a sheet laid on the floor.

The setting could not be more perfect: my room is in a century-old wooden house, complete with sliding washi paper screens, tatami floors, midcentury furniture and a modern graffiti-inspired calligraphic scroll on the wall. It's fringed by private wooden corridors of creaking floorboards and windows overlooking a haiku-inspiringly serene courtyard garden, with seasonal trees, stone paths and the sound of flowing water.

First, Sato-san, leader of the kimono pack, neatly dressed in a black suit and glasses, explains: "Kimono offer a sense of beauty that is unique to Japan. But Japanese people today don't have many opportunities to wear kimono, so they are perhaps getting out of practice. It can take a long time to learn how to wear a kimono properly but if you wear one every day, it gets easier."

The Sowaka Hotel: a perfect setting for kimono dressing

She then talks me through the four kimono laid on the floor – a delicately gradated medley of colours, motifs, prints, textures – dressing me temporarily in each over my clothes, as a colleague holds up a pink plastic My Melody mirror so I can see.

There is a pale blue kimono with abstract snow and rice grass patterns; a black ensemble with flower blossoms and maple trees; a light pink textile with chrysanthemum, pine trees and stylised cloud motifs; and – one I immediately decide is perfect.

It's a deep indigo blue, created using the traditional hand-dyeing technique shibori, so it has a deliciously soft feel to it, plus a simple swirl of flowers depicting "chrysanthemums in the clearing mist". I soon realise that the retail prices of the kimonos are as jaw-dropping as the craftsmanship is intricate: these four range from 400,000-650,000 yen (£2,800-£4,600).

"The sense of beauty should not be too strong," Sato-san adds, approving of my choice of a geometric gold obi belt to complete the ensemble. "It's not about gorgeous. A kimono should only hint at a sense of inner beauty."

Next up? I feel like a bride getting ready for her wedding as I'm whisked into a makeshift salon in the bathroom, where Sato-san's chic colleague Chiaki-san transforms me into the closest I will ever get to resembling the real-life perfection of a Japanese housewife (picture a sweeping back bouffant, not a strand out of place).

'It's not about gorgeous. A kimono should only hint at a sense of inner beauty.'

And then the kimono dressing begins: first I'm wrapped in a light white cotton undergarment known as a hadagi, before I hold my arms in the air, bandit-style, for what feels like an eternity, and let the ladies work their magic.

I watch with surreal detachment as they conduct a nimble dance around me, cocooning me tightly in layer after layer of textiles and strings and belts and cords.

Confusion seeps in as I'm cheerfully informed there is a nagajuban layer between the kimono and the hadagi; koshi-himo ropes fix the nagajuban in place; the date-jime fastens it all further; while a stiff obi-ita board straightens the front of the obi and obi-makura the back; and the eri-shin makes the neckline straight.

About an hour later, my appearance appears to pass the Sato-san test and my transformation is complete. I slip my white split-toe tabi socked feet unsteadily into cream zori sandals and teeter downstairs into the rock garden, where I pose awkwardly for photographs as Sato-san maternally adjust my hands and calls out instructions: "Turn your feet in, so you're pigeon-toed! Yes!"

Next? It's time to put my kimono to the tea ceremony test. For a moment, I wonder where on earth I should put my money, phone, notepad – and briefly contemplate slipping them into my voluminous sleeves, before Sato-san fortunately intervenes by handing me a golden textile handbag to loop on my wrist.

Danielle in her full kimono ensemble CREDIT: YASUO KUBOTA

I am bundled into a taxi, where I perch forward uncomfortably to avoid squashing my perfectly positioned obi tie at the back, before inelegantly heaving myself out of the car upon arrival at centuries-old teahouse Bikouen on a quiet Kyoto lane. Here, I'm greeted by Angela, my smiling tea ceremony hostess looking sprightly in a pale pink kimono, an iPhone tucked neatly into her obi.

Originally from Hong Kong yet fluent in Japanese, she has studied tea ceremony for a decade and kimono dressing for almost as long. She is married to Kentaro Hashimoto, the fifth-generation tea master of 19th-century Bikouen (purveyors of tea to several Kyoto temples), which specialises in the so-called Samurai Spirit tea ceremony.

"Actually, I think learning how to wear a kimono is more difficult than tea ceremony," she smiles. "You have to communicate so sensitively." She guides me across an inner stone garden and into a simple 150-year-old tea room. Here, kneeling carefully in my very expensive kimono on the tatami floor, Hashimoto-san appears in his swishing blue robes and the pair quickly immerse me in the world of Japanese tea ceremony.

The next hour passes in a serene haze: both a ceremonial thick tea and a thinner green tea are painstakingly prepared during a meditative practice of whisking, stirring, heating, pouring, bowing and serving. As a finale, I'm guided through the process of making my own matcha green tea, rhythmically whisking the forest green liquid into frothy bubbles, before sharing it with my hosts.

A Japanese tea ceremony, a meditative practice of whisking, stirring, heating, pouring, bowing and serving CREDIT: GETTY

And as I lower my head and carefully place the uneven ceramic cup on the tatami floor, for one very fleeting moment, I forget my Western discomfort at being bound tightly in layers of rich textiles and strings and cords – and my kimono feels just perfect.

Essentials

Look the part

Sowaka Kyoto (075 541 5323; sowaka.com) has doubles from 42,350 yen (£295). The hotel can arrange kimono dressing sessions with Kim-ono Misay-ama (kimonomisayama.com), costing from 40,000 yen (£276) for semi-formal or formal kimono, plus staff transport costs. Hair styling costs from 3,000 yen (£21).

Kimono exhibitions

Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk is now open at the V&A, running until June 21 (vam.ac.uk). A series of kimono-related events will also take place, including the weekend course Kimono: A Global History from May 9 to 10.

Kimono: Fashioning Identities is a major exhibition running at Tokyo National Museum from April 14 to June 7 (www.tnm.jp). Tracing the evolution of the kimono over 800 years, it will feature textiles, prints and paintings from collections in Japan and around the world.