

Alice Bianchi-Clark and her son lose themselves in the serenity of Japan's temple gardens

With its rugged rocks encircled by ripples of raked white gravel, the walled dry garden of Ryoan-ji is a haven of quiet serenity. This small, enclosed space has no grass or leafy plants, only moss, sand and stones. Its simplicity leaves much to the imagination – and this is its strength.

No wonder Edward's eyes are wide. My son is only six and at his age there's not much difference between a garden and a sandpit: both are realms for play. 'Playtime?' he says hopefully, before I tug him back on to the wooden viewing platform.

We're in Kyoto in central Japan, a 150-minute journey from Tokyo by Shinkansen bullet train. Monty Don's TV series *Around The World In 80 Days* is the inspiration for our trip. There's an aura of enchantment once you reach the scattered but well-preserved historic temples with their cobbled paths and gardens.

It's akin to the delight of stepping into a toyshop – less Toys R Us, more Walt Disney's Pinocchio with a Japanese twist. The magic is everywhere and, perhaps, this is why the temple



SIMPLY DIVINE

BLOOMING MARVELLOUS: Cherry blossom at the Kiyomizu-dera temple; the Golden Pavilion, right; and geishas, below, all in Kyoto

gardens are spellbinding. Kinkaku-ji/Rokuon-ji features a dazzling golden three-storey pavilion set around a pond with a picturesque scattering of rocks and bridges amid pine and maple trees. Ginkakuji-Jisho-ji has a sand

garden, piled to symbolise Mount Fuji. The Fushimi Inari Shrine stars countless vermilion Torii gates (entrances to shrines) and a towering bamboo forest. The Kokedera temple sits on a rug seemingly woven with soft mosses.

Zen gardens celebrate nature. The Japanese have a heightened sensitivity to beauty. The challenge is to stop and be present for every little moment, no matter how trivial. Edward does this effortlessly; he finds delight in

every moment, in every detail. Could this be the key to the Zen spirit of mindful contentment?

Cherry trees are festooned with sakura: cerise and pale pink blossoms marking the arrival of spring. The

Japanese revere sakura. Hamami, cherry blossom viewing, is a national pastime. We amble along a cherry tree-lined canal.

'Snowflakes!' cries Edward, stretching out joyful, playful arms to the

sky. Petals waltz around us, airy and graceful in the breeze. Edward has never seen snow before, nor dancing cherry blossom.

We're staying at Hiiragiya, a traditional ryokan, with painted paper slid-

ing doors, tatami mats, cypress wooden baths and large windows with views over the camellia garden. It's enchanting. Clad in a kimono-like dressing gown, Edward tugs at my dress.

He pouts and says: 'Mummy, I think they forgot our beds.' Thankfully, after a kaiseki tasting menu of delicacies served in lacquered doll-sized cabinets, futons are rolled out.

Edward curls into a slumbering ball, celebrating the simplicity of this moment. Children, truly, are wonders.



GETTING THERE

British Airways (ba.com) offers return flights from Heathrow to Tokyo from £835. For information on Hiiragiya visit hiiragiya.co.jp/en. **Wendy Wu Tours** (wendywutours.co.uk) offers a 13-day Trails Of Japan tour, including flights and a stay in Kyoto, from £4,990pp.

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AT LAST, I'VE SEEN THE SUN RISE IN THE HIMALAYAS

During the long overnight flight to Delhi, I remembered how, at the age of 16, I was set my first-ever journalistic task – interview the scary old groundsman 'Sonny' Clarke for our school magazine. Former Army officer Sonny got surprisingly emotional as he told me about the best moment of his life: 'Seeing the sunrise over the Himalayas.'

For an English schoolboy in the 1960s, that seemed an impossibly exotic and distant experience. How would I ever get to see something like that? Over the years that phrase 'the sunrise over the Himalayas' became fixed in my mind as a metaphor for all that is fabulous but unreachable. I started travelling in the 1970s, but India and the Himalayas were never considered. The colourful images and films

made it look incredible but warnings of unhygienic, chaotic travel with a risk of disease and accidents always deterred me. Until now. Almost half a century after that interview with Sonny, I was persuaded that there is a clean, safe and luxurious way to visit India. I put myself in the hands of Western & Oriental, a tailor-made travel company. It promised to take me to see the real India... and return in one piece. My trip involved stays in Delhi, Chandigarh and Shimla, yet I was able to return from eight days touring the subcontinent with not even one insect bite. Western & Oriental arranged a trip that involved five-star hotels

STUNNING: The train to Shimla at dawn



and travelling in chauffeur-driven cars. I was given a 'minder' for all my public excursions. Every luxury touch was included: porters carried my bags everywhere (on their heads) and chilled towels, bottled water and safe snacks were always available. But this wasn't a sanitised view of India through the window of an air-conditioned limousine. I was taken to see the real India. I loved dodging the wild, random traffic of a 14-lane highway in a motorised tuk-tuk – and a cycle rickshaw ride through the smelly, noisy mayhem of Old Delhi market was one of the experiences of my life. I

saw temples, palaces, colonial buildings and parks, but also got close to the squalor of life for so many. Then I boarded a historic, narrow-gauge train. It twisted spectacularly up into the Himalayan mountains. The route links the hot Indian plains with the mountain city of Shimla. I stayed at Wildflower Hall, on a peak above the city. It's more than 8,000ft above sea level and I set my alarm for 5am and rose in a chilly, breathless dawn. Standing at my window, I watched as the sky turned orange over distant snow-capped peaks to the east. At last, I'd seen the sunrise over the Himalayas.

GETTING THERE

Western & Oriental (westernoriental.com, 020 3588 6130) offers a seven-night tailor-made journey to India from £2,999pp. This includes flights to Delhi, two nights at The Oberoi Gurgaon in Delhi, two nights at The Oberoi Sukhvilas Chandigarh, three nights at Oberoi Wildflower Hall near Shimla, all B&B with transportation by train and private car.