

An Entertaining Night in Tokyo
By Patricia Arrigoni
Gannett News Service

TOKYO – On my last evening in Tokyo a few months ago, I picked up an evening tour called the “Shogun Night Tour” sponsored by the Japanese Gray Line. The itinerary included a sukiyaki dinner, a visit to the Kabuki-Za Theater and a “Geisha Party.” It turned out to be a delightful evening.

After being picked up at my hotel by a guide, I joined the main group of about 30 people for the sukiyaki dinner. We were taken to a “Tatami” room upstairs in a restaurant, where we removed our shoes and sat down at a very low table. I was surprised to find that a square hole had been cut out from under the middle of the table to provide room for our legs.

The food was cooked in a pan set on a burner right at the table. We had beef, onions, glass noodles and a green vegetable that was served with a bowl of rice. Each guest was also provided with a thimble-sized cup of warm sake, a clear, sweet drink made from fermented rice.

After dinner we visited the Kabuki-Za Theater on Harumi-dori Avenue in the Ginza District. The 2,600-seat theater was in a handsome new building constructed in a mid-16th century style with a tile roof and upturned eaves.

We climbed to the third floor, walked past many small shops and were shown to our red-velvet seats in a balcony only half filled. The seats were very tiny and my knees banged into the seat in front of me.

Kabuki is a classical drama that traces its origin to a 17th century shrine. It is pure melodrama with exaggerated gestures and posturing. Women have been barred from performing in Kabuki drama, so their parts are played by men called “onnagata” or “oyama.”

Two shows are performed daily, running five hours each, a bit long even for Kabuki enthusiasts who often come just for the climactic scenes.

Before the 18th century, Kabuki involved simple erotic dances, acrobatics and short plays. Now it has been elevated to serious drama. Red makeup highlighting the muscles of the face is used to portray heroes, and black is painted on villains.

We had a 30-minute bus ride to the geisha house following the theater. We arrived in a well-kept neighborhood of what looked like single family homes. The geisha house was at the end of a short dark sidewalk. We entered a courtyard and went into a wooden frame house where we were greeted by a fully costumed, authentic geisha girl who bowed and greeted us.

We had been taught a return greeting on the bus, something like, “kon-ban-wa,” meaning “good evening.” We all gave short bows or nods, removed our shoes and put a blue and white cotton kimono over our clothes. Our party was ushered upstairs into a sparsely furnished space with low tables and mats.

Our guide introduced two geisha girls who were beautifully costumed. Drinks were ordered, and the two women danced and sang to the strumming of a Japanese harp. I would guess one was in her 30s and the other in her 50s. Although photographs were prohibited at the Kabuki Theater, there were no such restrictions in the geisha house.

The group, a little stiff at first, soon got into the party mood and learned the “Cherry Blossom Song.” More drinks were ordered and a contest was organized to find who could most quickly use chopsticks to pick up small balls from the floor.

The women performed stylized dances with fans, and then invited us to learn a geisha routine. I found myself learning to twirl, pulling up an imaginary fish net and throwing it over my shoulder.

A little while later, one man and one woman were chosen to be dressed up in traditional costumes. The woman was dressed in a long undergarment called a “nagajuban,” and then an elegant silk kimono. This was closed by a sash called an “obi” supported by an “obiage,” which was tied in the back with a special bow.

The geisha girls were adept at making everyone feel at ease. During one dance they pulled out some outrageous masks and had everyone laughing heartily.

Visiting a geisha house is a new experience being offered to tourists in Tokyo. It offers a beginning understanding of a foreign custom and will, perhaps, if the tour proves popular, open a new avenue of income for Japan’s traditional geisha girls.