

Teramachi Shopping Arcade

An ever changing world of Buddhism, history and shopping

Teramachi (or Temple Town) Street, one of Kyoto's most popular shopping streets for the past 400 years, was originally called Higashi Kyogoku-oji. Said to be 32-meters wide, it was the most eastern avenue in the original design of Heian period Kyoto (794-1185). East of it lay the river and then the wild and lawless forests that led up to the valley's eastern ridge. For a long time the street, which ran next to the Kamogawa River, was a location favored by aristocrats for their villas.

For the first 200 years, a time of great prosperity, cultural expansion and peace, Heian-kyo, as Kyoto was then called, was a paradise. However, from middle of the eleventh century, the capital entered a long period of decline. The 13th and 14th centuries were unusually unkind to Kyoto in terms of natural disasters. In the 13th century alone, huge sections of the city were destroyed by earthquakes, floods, and fires on nearly 20 occasions. Naturally, the flooding of the Kamogawa River, just east of Higashi Kyogoku-oji, was a huge problem. At times the city streets were home to bands of robbers, who robbed and pillaged and generally terrified the citizens so much that they formed crafts guilds and special neighborhoods to protect themselves.

As a result of the eleven-year-long Onin War (1467-1477), fought mostly in Kyoto, nearly all of the city's major central temples and villas were destroyed. Higashi Kyogoku-oji was renamed Teramachi in 1590, when the warlord Toyotomi

Hideyoshi ordered about 80 of Kyoto's most popular “downtown” temples to relocate along the east side of the avenue. By putting them all together, they were easier to watch and control. And since the east side of the city was where most attacks came from, the temples would be attacked first. Almost all of these temples continue to exist today, giving the street a special atmosphere. At the same time, many of the guilds that were centered in the downtown area—most of which did much of their business with the temples— moved to Teramachi Street. The presence of these guilds is still quite obvious today.

In the peaceful Edo period (1600-1867), Teramachi Street, with its many temples and related shops, became a flourishing business center. In particular, merchants who handled books, Buddhist rosaries, brushes and medicines, and paper craftsmen and shamisen (a three-stringed Japanese guitar) set up their homes and businesses along the street.

Kyoto’s bustling Sanjo Teramachi intersection is said to be the true end of the highly important Tokaido Highway, which linked the political capital of Edo (Tokyo) with the imperial capital, Kyoto, via a chain of 53 post towns. And this is the reason Teramachi is such a famous street throughout Japan.

Today, nearly 400 years later, Teramachi is as busy and bustling as ever. The heart of Teramachi is the 2-kilometer-long covered shopping arcade (see C/D/E-6, pg 11 map) which is lined with some of the city’s oldest and most interesting shops. In 1990, the street’s shop association had a compass design, made of pavement bricks, placed in the street. The compass was chosen as symbol to guide visitors

into an ever changing world of crafts and arts, amusement, and fashion. Here, the visitor can find everything from the old traditional shops and restaurants to the latest fashion boutiques and souvenir shops.

Experience the heart of Kyoto—explore the Teramachi Shopping Arcade: a world of ancient, old, new and highly modern attractions.

Content courtesy of Your Japan Private Tours (www.kyoto-tokyo-private-tours.com): going on 30 years of private travel and tourism industry experience in Japan.