



President of APIC, Ambassador Toshinori Shigeie (third left, sitting) and APIC Secretary-General Megumi Araki (standing at right) with the CARICOM visitors invited to Japan for the Japan-Caribbean Friendship Year 2024.

# Japan - a cultural experience

By **Gercine Carter**

The Japan National Tourism Organisation (JNTO) estimated the number of international travellers to that country in October 2024 at close to three and a half million.

I was one of them, invited by the Association For The Promotion of International Co-operation (APIC), along with eight others from CARICOM countries, for a cultural visit as part of APIC's Caribbean cultural Invitation Programme arranged for the "Japan-Caribbean Friendship Year 2024".

The group, comprising Dr Janet Dyer and Dr Livingston White from Jamaica; Dr Nicole Roberts and Kimmy Stoute from Trinidad and Tobago; Louis Wade and Isani Cayetano, from Belize; Gaelle Caeser from Haiti and Dr Sheron Johnson and I from Barbados, was privileged

to be exposed to a cultural experience which has left an indelible impression about the way Japan is using culture to

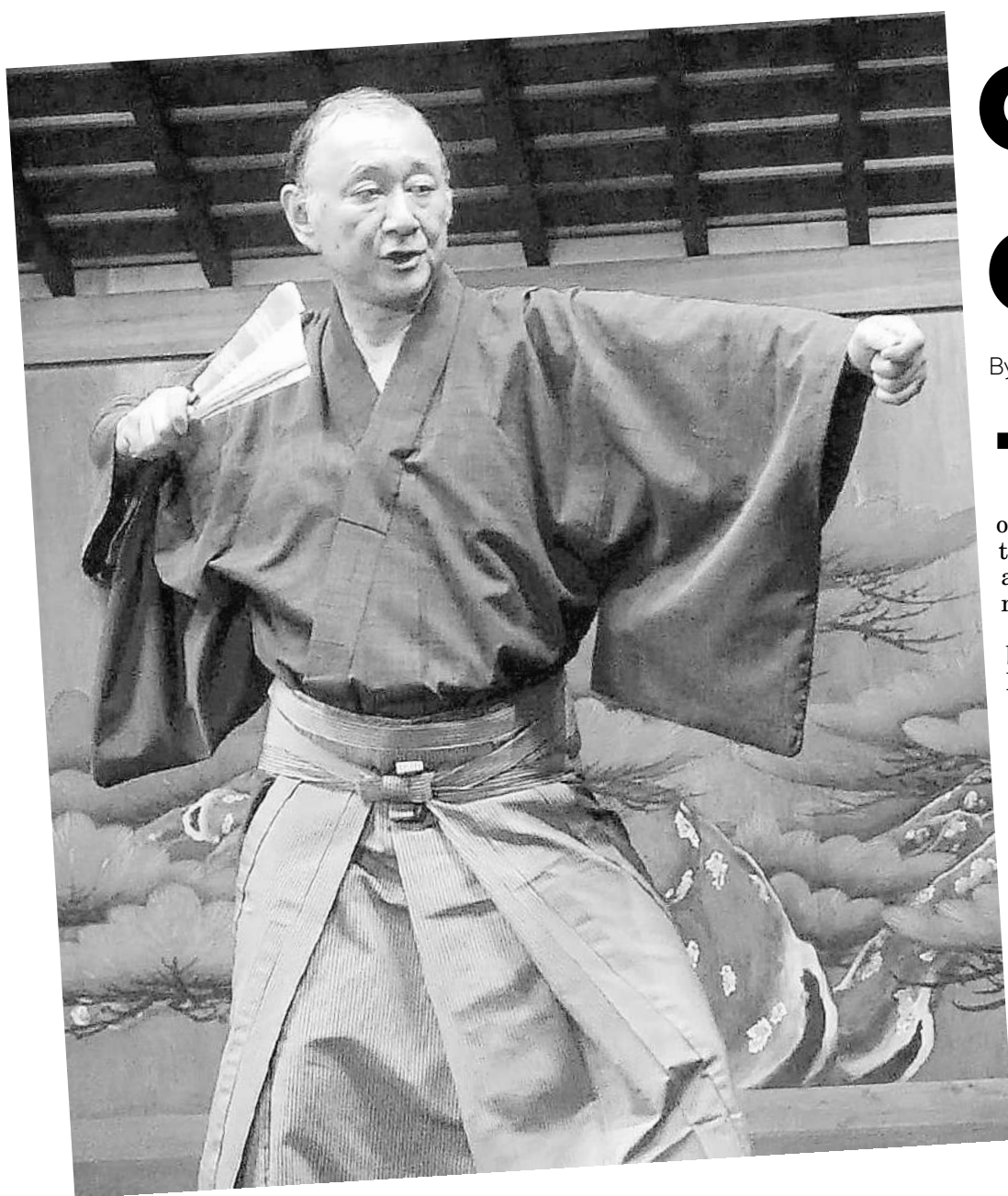
build bridges of understanding between peoples.

The week-long tour covering the Japanese cities of Tokyo, Kyoto and Kanazawa, afforded the opportunity to see first-hand the woven tapestry of a country steeped in history and cultural traditions which are being preserved and consciously promoted and passed on to successive generations.

After a delightful 13-hour flight aboard a well-appointed Japan Airlines, we arrived at a bustling Haneda Airport in Tokyo where we were met by Japanese English-speaking escort and translator Yukiko and escorted into a world in sharp contrast to the Caribbean, a country where young and old go about their business together though at their own pace and active appears to be the buzzword.

Our tour began in Japan's capital city of Tokyo, where on the first morning of the visit, we started off with a briefing about the APIC programme at the APIC headquarters, by its president Toshinori Shigeie. The former Japanese diplomat spoke briefly about that country's post-World War II efforts to reach out to the world, saying: "Culture is a very important element

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A Noh theatre actor demonstrating the ancient Japanese theatre art form. (Pictures by Gercine Carter.)

# Move afoot to increase birth rate

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when we talk about any nation or region . . . culture is about what we are and it reflects the national values embraced by the people . . . Japan attaches great importance to its own culture and tries to preserve it as well as to develop it. Culture evolves through international interaction.”

Japan’s declining population which currently stands at around 123 million was another issue Shigeie shared, while pointing out that the Japanese Government was attempting to increase the birth rate, since one third of the population was currently 70 years or older.

Next, we were off to Digital Hollywood University, one of the leading animation universities in Japan specialising in film, animation, and video game design and the producer of some of the world’s best known animators. Professor Takahashi Misuteru walked us through the basics of animation and fielded questions from the group.

We moved on to visit the ancient Senso-ji Buddhist temple in Tokyo, one of the most important and popular temples in the city, that attracts thousands of visitors daily.

In the evening we attended a Kabuki performance at the Kabukiza Theater in Tokyo’s posh Ginza neighbourhood. Kabuki is a classical form of Japanese theatre, mixing dramatic performance with traditional dance and is known for its heavily stylised performances, glamorous, highly decorated costumes, and the elaborate kumadori make-up worn by some of its performers.

Early the next morning, we departed our base hotel, Tokyo

Green Palace and headed for Tokyo Central Railway Station to take the Shinkansen Bullet Train to Kyoto, one of the country’s ten largest cities known for its Imperial Palace and classical Buddhist temples. Travelling by one of the world’s fastest bullet trains capable of reaching a top speed of around 200 miles per hour was a dizzying experience, from the boarding to the disembarking process, which has to be done in 90 seconds on the dot. Japanese are sticklers for time and the saying “time waits for no one” is evident.

In Kyoto we met with the Agency for Cultural Affairs where on-going work is being done to ensure that the many facets of Japanese culture stay alive and continue to be an integral part of the living experience which Japanese embrace and expose to the world, sharing with millions of visitors whose numbers are increasing exponentially.

## Heritage sites

From the Agency for Cultural Affairs, we were off to visit attractions such as the World Heritage site Kinkakuji Temple, also known as The Golden Pavilion, which is a Zen temple originally built as a retirement villa of a shogun; Ryoanji Temple, the site of Japan’s most famous rock garden, and the impressive Kyoto Imperial Palace complex where Emperors resided before the Imperial Palace was relocated to Tokyo where it now stands.

Noh (Noh Theatre), one of Japan’s oldest theatre art forms dating back to the 14th century and a UNESCO Intangible Heritage, is a form of Japanese drama performed in masks



Donned in traditional Japanese dress at Toei Kyoto Studio Park.

and costumes, featuring voice and very slow, precise, movement. We were given an impressive lesson on Noh theatre which is structured around song and dance with themes related to dreams, supernatural worlds, ghosts and spirits and treated to a demonstration of the art form together with a lecture by a Noh actor in the intimate setting of his theatre. Noh is passed from generation to generation and as we entered the theatre, on stage was the actor’s son rehearsing with a grandson.

The following day the group departed Kyoto for Kanazawa, renowned for its stunning seasonal beauty and attractions such as well-preserved Sumarai residences and

modern museums that showcase the city’s historical and cultural heritage. We visited one of the country’s largest museums of contemporary art as well as Kenrokuen, one of Japan’s three landscaped gardens.

A highlight of Kanazawa, the last leg of our Japan trip, was our visit to the studio of lacquer artist Kitamura Tatsuo, observing him and his team at work creating and refurbishing expensive masterpieces, employing the lacquer method. Lacquerware is a tradition in which the surface of a created object pieces is covered with the refined sap of the Japanese lacquer tree on which beautiful, intricate gold-leaf designs are painted.

To indulge in traditional Japanese cuisine with its many facets is to take an exhilarating culinary adventure. Each day we had a new experience, feasting on sashimi, tempura, savouring a traditional Bento Box dinner in our seats at the theatre; enjoying Washoku, a traditional Japanese dinner that typically includes rice, soup, a main dish, and one or two side dishes; Gyudon (Japanese Beef Rice Bowl); miso soup and drank sake, the Japanese rice wine.

As an officer at the Agency for Cultural Affairs said during that agency’s briefing: “For the past ten years Japanese culture has been spread out across the world . . . Everyone is now rushing to Japan and this won’t be stopping maybe for the next 5 years. In-bound visitors. Japan is trying to cultivate more friendship and ties with other nations through public diplomacy and cultural exposure.”



Visitors flocking to the historic Senso-ji Buddhist Temple in Tokyo.