

Kamishichiken District

[KITANO-NISHIJIN]

Kamishichiken is the oldest *geiko* (as geisha are known in Kyoto) district in the city. Its name means “Seven Upper Houses” and refers to the seven teahouses that were built here during the Muromachi period (1333–1573). The entertainment houses were constructed from materials left over when the adjacent Kitano Tenmangu Shrine, destroyed in fighting during the mid-fifteenth century, was rebuilt.

Kamishichiken flourished after 1587, when the Grand Kitano Tea Ceremony was held at Kitano Tenmangu. Hosted by the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), the most powerful man in Japan at the time, this cultured gathering served to heighten Hideyoshi’s status in the eyes of the ruling classes, thereby legitimizing his rule. The *dango* dumplings provided for the ceremony by the teahouses of Kamishichiken were praised by Hideyoshi, and the district’s fame spread rapidly.

Even today, visitors to Kamishichiken may be able to spot *maiko* (apprentice *geiko*) making their way down its alleys lined with traditional shops and teahouses. The *geiko* houses in the district are, however, only open to those who are invited by regular patrons.

The public can watch *geiko* and *maiko* shows at the Kamishichiken Kaburenjo Theater in the heart of the district. A showcase called Kitano Odori is performed at the theater every spring by the *geiko* and *maiko* of Kamishichiken. Held annually since 1952, it is one of the best opportunities to see these traditional artists in action.