



Fiona in her Western clothes...



...And as a geisha

International Exclusive

'I'm The First Western Geisha'



Fiona Graham made headlines around the world when she became the first Westerner to complete the

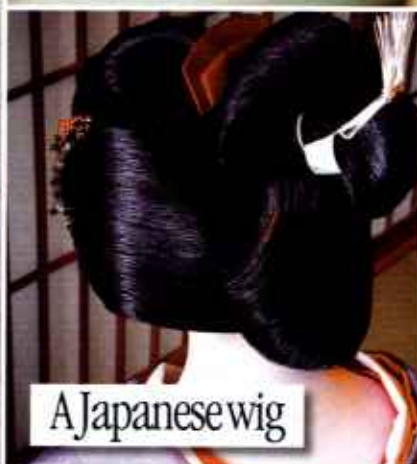
harsh training regime and qualify as a geisha in Japan. Now Fiona reveals how she landed one of the most secretive careers on earth.



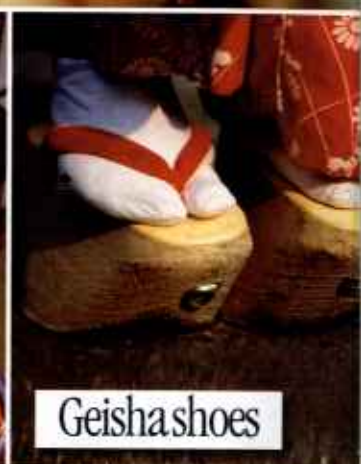
As a geisha, Fiona visits teahouses and restaurants



Applying make-up can take up to an hour



A Japanese wig



Geisha shoes

I was only 15 when I first visited Japan. I was an exchange student and the plan was to experience life with a Japanese family and go to school there for a year. Even though it was incredibly hard leaving my friends and family behind in Australia at such a young age, I was so excited.

I knew nothing about Japan before going and I couldn't speak the language, but as soon as I moved in with my Japanese family in Tokyo, I loved it. They made me

in Australia, and they often visited, too. I honestly didn't miss my old life, as I thought my new one was so exciting and unusual. When I graduated, I'd been in Japan almost 10 years and knew everything about its culture. In particular, I was fascinated by geisha, and their secretive lives.

After leaving university, I became a documentary filmmaker, and when I was 25, the film *Memoirs Of A Geisha* was released. I really wanted to make my own film about geisha – a

'I missed home and all my friends and family'

documentary – and decided the best way to do that would be to become a real geisha myself.

However, I had no idea what becoming a geisha involved or how I'd even go about looking into it. So, in late 2006, I got in touch with some contacts at Keio University, to see if they could help.

Geisha-in-training

I knew getting inside the geisha world wasn't easy, and it took six months of meetings with people high up in the geisha community. Many of the meetings were to see how serious I was about becoming a geisha, and whether I'd keep their

feel welcome and they could speak a little English, but I picked up Japanese very quickly. I was only meant to stay a year, but I didn't want to leave. I'd travelled the country and my new family had made me feel like one of their own.

I missed home and all my friends, but I'd made new ones too, and I loved Japan so much I stayed on with my new family and finished high school there. I then got a place at one of Japan's oldest universities, Keio University in Tokyo, to study social psychology. I was the first Western girl to be admitted full-time, so I felt very privileged. I went home twice a year to see everyone back

GEISHA: THE FACTS

■ Geisha means 'a person of art'. Geisha have entertained rich and powerful people in Japan for around 400 years, but were most popular in the '30s, when as many as 1,000 geisha lived in one district of Tokyo alone.

■ In 2000, the harsh training regime meant there were only 700 geisha and apprentices left in Japan. In desperation, several geisha houses went online to recruit newcomers. Together with the fact that traditional customs, like wearing kimonos and drinking sake, are becoming 'cool' again, being a geisha is now seen as a worthwhile, well-paid

career. There are now up to 2,000 geisha, and applicants are being turned away.

■ Many confuse geisha with prostitutes, but a true geisha is 'perfect but unattainable' – sex is not on the menu. Companies and businessmen often hire geisha to impress their guests.

■ Apprentice geisha move into an 'okiya' or geisha house, owned by a geisha 'mother', where they begin training, which can take anything up to five years. They are expected to do housework and study everything from dance to how to walk daintily, sit with their feet tucked beneath them and make polite small talk.

■ A geisha party can cost £100 to £150 per guest for every two hours the geisha are present.

■ Geisha who want to marry are expected to leave the profession, although several single geisha continue to work today aged 90 or older.

■ The 2005 film *Memoirs Of A Geisha* sparked outrage among the Japanese public for its misleading portrayal of the entertainment geisha provide, and because Chinese actresses were cast in the leading roles.



An apprentice geisha in Kyoto, Japan

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traditions. I never got feedback – it was like being under continuous scrutiny – but eventually, in April last year, I was invited to become an apprentice and move into a geisha house with a geisha 'mother' in Asakusa, Japan.

My geisha mum was amazing – from the moment I met her, I respected everything about her. I understood the gamble she was taking by hiring me. She was risking her reputation by training a Western girl – something that had never been done before.

I knew my training would be a challenge, but I was determined

I needed a geisha name, so I tried to find one with an English translation, so family and friends knew what it meant. In the end, my geisha mum named me 'Sayuki', meaning 'transparent happiness'.

Daily routine

During my training, I'd wake up and run errands for the higher geisha before getting ready. Putting on my daytime kimono and doing my hair and make-up was a fine art and took about an hour, but watching the other geisha helped. I'd spend my days going from a music class to a

'Geisha helped me into a £10,000 kimono'

to succeed as the world's first Western geisha. I knew I'd have to leave normal life behind but I was ready for it, and my friends and family were really supportive. I got a book deal to write about my experiences as soon as I started my training, and thankfully that paid for all my lessons.

I inherited a kimono from a Japanese family I'd known for a long time. It was very expensive – kimonos can cost as much as a new car and I'd never have been able to afford it without their help.

dancing class to a singing class. By evening I was exhausted, but I still had to help the older geisha get ready for parties at teahouses – where business people meet, drink tea and sake, and geisha perform. As my training progressed, I was allowed to go with them to watch.

As time went on, I felt transformed. I became really ladylike, but I also had to learn to be a performer. A geisha isn't Japan's version of a prostitute like everyone assumes – I was trained to play instruments including the drum, the samisen and the fue until I was note-perfect, and taught to perform Japanese dances. 'Trying to balance dancing in a kimono while being elegant and feminine was hard, but I practised constantly. I wasn't a natural, so it took a long time and my legs have got so toned because I have to keep them bent to balance.

But surprisingly, the hardest part of training was the discipline and the hierarchy between geisha. The attitude they have towards one another is nothing like what we have in the West and it was difficult to get used to. Forgetting which geisha was more important was the worst thing I could do. If I greeted a lesser geisha first, my geisha mother was so disappointed – it was the worst punishment, because letting her down made me feel awful.

I never got any extra help because I was a foreigner. In fact, I was probably pulled up more, because my teachers often forgot I wasn't word-perfect in Japanese.

Fiona plays the fue



Playing Instruments

Geisha must learn to play several musical instruments perfectly, including the samisen (a three-stringed lute), the drum, and the fue (a bamboo flute).

There were many times I felt like giving up because I wasn't sure I'd ever become a real geisha. But I just worked as hard as I could to impress my geisha mum, because my future lay in her hands.

The big debut

Eventually, after eight months of hard work and life-changing experiences, I was told I was ready to make my debut. There were no tests involved, it's down to your geisha mother to decide when you've had enough training.

In December last year, other geisha helped me get ready in a beautiful blue, white and gold kimono worth nearly £10,000. I felt amazing. I introduced myself as a new geisha to important people like government officials,

barristers and lawyers, visiting about 100 teahouses, performing and being the perfect geisha to prove my training was complete. Tourists and locals were fascinated. At the end of the day, I collapsed on my futon – a traditional flat Japanese bed – exhausted but relieved my training had paid off. I was a bona fide geisha. It was a fabulous feeling to have accomplished something so rare.

The last step was to sign a contract with the Geisha Association to be able to work. By signing I agreed to follow the code of behaviour and never talk about my customers, give their names, or discuss conversations.

Now, I work as a geisha full-time. It's a great honour and I have to pinch myself daily, as I

Making The Geisha Grade

In order to be accepted as a maiko or 'apprentice geisha', women must meet the following requirements:

- **Be single.**
- **Be shorter than 5ft 3in** – any taller and it's believed they won't be a graceful dancer.
- **Weigh at least 6st 11lb, to cope with dancing in heavy kimonos.**
- **Commit to up to five years of intense training.**
- **Have their parents' permission to become a geisha.**
- **Accept the traditional Japanese lifestyle, including wearing kimonos and sleeping on futons rather than a bed.**
- **Agree to obey their geisha 'mother' and 'sisters' at all times.**

Duties Of A Geisha

Geisha undergo hours of training a day to ensure they're skilled at different tasks...



Dancing

Geisha are skilled in traditional Japanese dances, which often involve very slow, measured movements and poses, and usually tell a story.



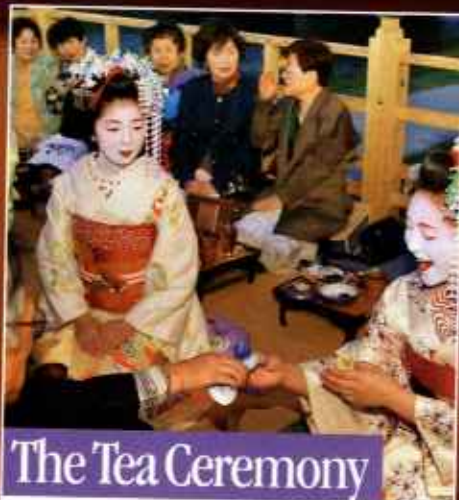
Singing

A geisha must also be able to sing a variety of traditional songs beautifully, while other geisha accompany her on various instruments.



Etiquette & Small Talk

Successful geisha are witty and intelligent. They must know how to flatter a shy man, smooth over arguments, make small talk, and talk knowledgeably about current affairs.



The Tea Ceremony

This ancient Japanese tradition involves preparing and serving tea in a strict ritual lasting anything from one to five hours. Geisha must learn to perform it flawlessly.



Flower Arranging

Learning Ikebana, the ancient Japanese art of flower arranging with only a small number of flowers, shows a geisha is in touch with traditional culture.

can't believe I'm doing something I used to read about in books.

I have a lot of lie-ins now, because we often have late nights after a party. Then I'll put on my daytime kimono and do my hair and make-up by about 11am, before going to classes. I'll need

'I felt like giving up, but I just worked harder'

these as long as I'm working, to make sure my singing, dancing and instrument playing are perfect.

By about 5pm, I start getting ready for a party. I'm the newest geisha, so I only attend about four parties a week, earning £140 for two hours. My pay varies every

week, depending on how many parties I go to, but if I'm really low on funds, my geisha mother will help me out. I normally have to pay a monthly association fee and the rest of the money goes on more lessons and day-to-day living.

During a party, I serve my

customers sake, making sure everyone's glass is always full, and perform. I'm there to entertain and look beautiful.

The customers are mixed and we get as many women as men, with a lot of foreigners eager to learn about geisha. Thankfully,

I've never come across anyone who believes geisha are prostitutes. The parties we go to include customers who already appreciate who we are. My customers have also been very supportive of the fact I'm not a typical Japanese geisha – they don't mind as long as I stick to tradition.

Some nights I don't have parties because I'm new and haven't got many customers who personally request my services yet. But the longer I'm here, the more people will get to know me and then I could have three parties a night. In the meantime, I sit at home in case I'm called as a last-minute replacement. I watch TV, but I'm trying to be dedicated so I practise my routines. There are never any real days off – it's a lifestyle.

The future

My family and friends are so proud and many of my friends have seen me perform. I don't have a boyfriend, but I'd love to meet someone. I'm allowed to date men, but if I marry, I'd have to leave my geisha life behind.

I don't know how long I'll be a geisha, but for now, I'm happy. This journey began because I love Japanese culture and wanted to make a documentary and write a book, which will be finished next year, but now it's gone so much further than that. Being a geisha is my life, and although it's very different from other women my age (as a true geisha I'm not allowed to reveal my age), I wouldn't change it for the world."