



"A lot of our kimono we only wear for two months of a year because they're seasonal—in autumn, they have maple leaves," says Graham (at the Sensoji Temple in Asakusa, Tokyo, in December).

The Australian GEISHA

Sex, secrets and decadence are not what a geisha's life is about—the first Western geisha, a Melbourne-born anthropologist, debunks the myths



TURNING JAPANESE
"My eyebrows have been plucked to death," says Graham (on a rickshaw, left, and at a banquet, right). "Western eyebrows are long. My eyes have a crease, and Japanese often don't."



What does a geisha wear on her day off? The first Western woman to graduate in the 400-year-old vocation, anthropologist Fiona Graham, is sporting a ladylike grey floral top and ruffled knee-length skirt for an early evening drink—sparkling water—in the lobby of her Sydney hotel. Home in Australia to visit family, she is keen to expose one common misconception about the mysterious tradition. "It's not about sex—full stop," says Graham, whose geisha name is Sayuki (which means transparent happiness). "Japanese never make that mistake. People who have no knowledge of Japan don't turn up in tea-houses [looking for sex], so I don't need to worry."

Instead, she says, the world of a geisha is "a life of dedication. Geisha means artist." For Japan's roughly 1,500 geisha, life revolves around perfecting traditional arts such as dance and painting, and specialising in one to entertain people with at banquets. Because Graham's speciality is the *yakobue* (bamboo flute), she compares being a geisha to her job while at Tokyo's Keio Gijuku University. "I used to do my hair up in elaborate 'dos and wear cocktail dresses and play flute in European restaurants and cocktail bars. I loved that job: you play beautiful music and everyone praises you."

As a geisha, she also serves tea and food to businessmen and women at the banquets she says are "like going to Moscow and having a private dinner with a ballerina who dances for you then sits and talks to you." Geisha are from "all kinds of backgrounds" and are by no

means subservient: "Geisha were independent businesswomen long before women's lib came to be in the west," says Graham. "You don't divorce yourself from modern life. Some geisha have got websites and everyone's got a mobile phone. Sometimes I get calls and I've pulled my wig out and the mobile's stuck out underneath it and I'm tottering along the street holding my kimono in the other hand."

Graham, who won't give her age, lives in her own flat instead of her geisha house in Tokyo's Asakusa district, where she spends mornings honing skills, and afternoons learning dancing, conversation and how to wear a kimono correctly, and "sometimes preparing for a banquet or two in the evening."

"Some geisha have websites, and everyone's got a mobile"

—Fiona Graham

Her love affair with Japan began at age 15 when she left her family's Melbourne home as an exchange student, and finished high school and university in Tokyo. She became an economic journalist, studied management and social anthropology at England's Oxford University and made documentaries and wrote books about Japanese festivals and wannabe British politicians. In 2006, Graham decided to become a geisha, planning a documentary and a book. Using her fluent Japanese, contacts and artistic skills, she became a trainee, joining a house where the geisha mother guided her to her debut in December 2007. "It's been hard—only a third of girls who start to train make it through the first year," says Graham. "It's a constant procession of making mistakes. People go in

for various reasons but if they don't love one of the arts, they're not likely to stay."

The pay-off? "I love performing and I love wearing kimono. Kimono shopping is absolutely addictive," says the anime fan. "In off-time, I'm in Western dress but most days I have classes so I'll wear everyday kimono. For a banquet we're in about \$10,000 worth of clothes." What about love? No current geisha are married, but "some have boyfriends," says Graham. "I don't have one at the moment. At some point, living the life increased in importance, and it ceased to be just a project."

■ *By Annette Dasey*
Visit sayuki.net.



"White people have small, narrow heads and it doesn't look nice in kimono if you don't have your hair puffed up, so there's a lot of padding inside my bun," says Graham (out shopping).