

Lost

Follow Your Nose

*Twelve hundred years ago
a Buddhist priest named Enchin, following a vision,
stumbled upon a place deep in the forest green
where a mist like a belt of white clouds hung over a waterfall.
On that spot was established Kiyomizu-dera Temple, Kyoto, Japan.*

Tourist pamphlet

When language barriers hinder communication, I am susceptible to not-quite-extinguished childhood fears about “getting lost.” If I am confused by the twisting, turning streets of Bangkok, Cairo or Istanbul, an anxiety attack might easily conjure up an assortment of imagined evil endings to my travel tale. Fortunately, I have learned that help is always at hand. For me it is a comfort to carry along the belief that I have extrasensory perception at my command when I’m alone in a foreign land.

I believe you can develop a traveler’s sixth sense that finds parks, palaces, post offices and policemen anywhere, anytime you need them. Despite disconcerting anxieties that you haven’t any idea where you are, you are not lost. All you need to do is relax and follow your nose, or your hunches, or your inner guide. Whatever term suits, it describes an uncanny ability to find your way even when incompetent map-reading skills have led you astray.

On one such occasion, in Kyoto, Japan, I was wending my way slowly up a narrow, windy road in a hilly neighborhood. I hoped to intercept a street that would lead to Kiyomizu-dera, the Clearwater Temple, which, according to the pamphlet I used as a guide, was to be found “nestled in the middle of Kyoto’s Higashiyama mountains on Mount Otowa.”





The city lay below in a hill-rimmed bowl under a cloudless blue dome, and a warm September sun blazed toward high noon. Along the way, children and small dogs played in crooked alleys and tiny Japanese gardens.

Then appeared a fork in the road. Rusty English lettering on a battered tin sign might have said "To Kyomizu..."; I couldn't be sure. It pointed to a weedy path trailing downward into a wooded gully.

Down the hillside, away from houses and chattering children, I followed the path, charmed for a time by the sudden transition from city clamor to country silence. It led to a meandering stream, crossed a rough wooden bridge, then shortly after reached an underpass tunnel that ran darkly and, in my mind, ominously beneath a multi-laned highway.

Common sense told me to pause and reflect. According to the directions, "the approach to Kyomizu-dera is an attractive winding road lined with colorful souvenir shops." Maybe, I thought, that scenario awaits somewhere on the other side of the tunnel.

On the other hand, a nasty urine smell exuded from this side, summoning forth creepy fears based in female vulnerability. Surely, said common sense, this is no place for a woman alone. I turned tail and went back up the path into the street I had recently left.

Up the road some, I noticed two women having a mid-morning gossip while their children played. I approached them smiling and pointing at my map. In heavily enunciated and, probably, overly loud English, I asked for directions to Kiyomizu-dera.

Neither woman spoke English, but somehow my intent was clear. They nodded, smiled, gestured and gave me to understand I should follow one twinkle-eyed, cherub-faced child of about eight or nine.

I smiled, nodded and vigorously gestured my thanks.

The tyke led me to a place where he stood smiling, nodding, gesturing and pointing. As we were at the exact same path from which I had just emerged, my thank-you's were less enthusiastic. But, in view of such cheerful encouragement, and not wanting to cause offense, I found no other choice than to head down the trail again.

Back at the offensive tunnel, I hesitated once more. But now common sense argued that after all, it was broad daylight and what's a little stink when you have one of Japan's most revered attractions waiting at the other end? So, holding nose and breath, I plunged in and hurried along, all the time half expecting some horrid, nameless thing to lunge from the shadows.

But nothing at all appeared, except the other side and with it, not an attractive road lined with colorful shops, but a long concrete stairway leading up and up and up the brush-covered mountainside before disappearing into a tangle of scrubby shrubs and spindly trees.

Fairly near to gasping, I eventually reached the top step, which culminated on a barely discernable path that in turn ended in a badly neglected cemetery. A cemetery! And still no sign of Kiyomizu-dera. With the only alternative being to go back down and face that tunnel again, I decided to press on through the weed and rubble-ridden graveyard despite biting gnats and killing midday heat. Over cracked and tumble-down gravestones I bumped on wondering if, like Alice, I'd wandered through the looking glass into some bizarre, imaginary world.

Minutes later however, I found and followed a proper stoned walkway. The landscape turned fresher with evergreen trees lining either side. But when I finally came face to front with a small, unimposing and totally deserted shrine, I was already three hours into this misadventure. I was hot, tired, and not impressed, even if confidence in my innate tracking ability had been restored. "So this is Kiyomizu-dera," I grumbled aloud. "Not much of a show and a lot of trouble to see it."

Solo sightseeing was a bust. Fed up, I figured it was time I got out the same way I got in, but first I sat down on a stone to rest while working up the courage to retrace my steps back through the cemetery, down the mountainside, and through that crummy tunnel yet again.

Then out of the silence drifted a muffled sound. It drew me to the forest and the edge of a steep ravine where a stupefying sight stopped me in my tracks. On the opposite hillside, about 200 meters distant, through a sun-dappled veil of tall pine trees, I saw a wide, gabled veranda overlooking a cascading waterfall. Fantastic pagoda shapes jutted everywhere between the tree tops.

Magnificent beyond imagination, Kiyomizu-dera Temple appeared, hazily at first, like a gigantic, exquisite, silkscreen painting coming to life before my eyes. Now I could see hundreds of people milling on the verandah's edge and along numerous pathways winding to and fro.

The temple grounds materialized gradually into my senses as if in a vision. The effect was enchanting. Lofty thoughts flew in my head while the scene held me transfixed. I felt as if some mysterious force had compelled me to come the way I had just as Enchin the monk had been compelled to come to this spot some 1,200 years earlier. Elated by the experience, I resumed the trail with revived energy and was practically skipping along when I emerged from the forest into what looked to be the temple keepers' compound.

Evidently I had found Kiyomizu-dera via the back door.

Perplexed gardeners stopped their tasks to give me curious stares as I bounced by. Possibly they wondered at the lengths some people go to avoid paying an admission fee. I smiled, nodded and bowed in passing and went on to roam the temple grounds and gardens.

Two or three hours later, feeling mellowed and relaxed, I departed Kiyomizu-dera by the front entrance. Stopping at the ticket booth, I gathered more curious stares while trying to explain why I was paying the admission fee on my way out.