

# TOKYO TALES

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be patterned with cherry blossom; summer brings a new motif with watery designs, while autumn kimono use autumnal colours and patterns of the Japanese maple or chrysanthemum. Winter decorations include bamboo and plum blossom. Apart from the seasons and the occasion, it's important to wear a kimono that reflects a woman's age and marital status. Young, unmarried women can wear the vibrantly

## The Art of Kimono

Say the word 'Japan' and most people instantly visualise kimono. Kimono is the epitome of Japanese elegance and is still the preferred garment for many occasions and for some people it's worn every day.

The word 'kimono' simply means 'something to wear' and the plural is also kimono. Kimono, as we know them today, have been the traditional dress of men and women since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the basic shape and construction hasn't changed since then. At one point, people wore as many as 12 or more contrasting coloured kimono at the same time. Nowadays there are just two layers.

A kimono is created from a single bolt of material measuring about 9 metres long and 30cm wide. Two full strips of fabric make up the body of the garment with a further two making the sleeves. Smaller bands from the same bolt make the collar and narrow front panels. Kimono are usually made from silk or cotton, although manmade materials are used more often now. Silk is always used for formal wear.

These days, a woman will probably own just one kimono, typically the one she wore for her Coming of Age ceremony on her 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. This formal kimono is called a *furisode*, which translates as 'swinging sleeves', and is the one we Westerners most associate with the image of kimono. The sleeves almost reach the ground. Other kimono are usually hired due to the astronomical cost, which, when combined with all the accessories, reaches several thousand pounds.

An incredible amount of symbolism surrounds the wearing of kimono. For example, seasons play a big role in Japan, and the clothing reflects this. A spring kimono is pastel coloured and may

coloured *furisode*, while older, married women choose muted colours, smaller patterns and shorter sleeves.

Getting dressed in the full regalia is extremely complicated and people can take classes on how to put on a kimono.

There are also professional dressers for hire. The *obi*, a wide belt that wraps twice around the body and then tied at the back is especially hard to master. Formal *obi* for women measure 4 metres long and 30cm wide and are made of silk brocade, often heavily embroidered. Young girls tie their obi in a butterfly bow, while older or married women use a simpler fold. Like men's bowties, you can now buy pre-tied *obi*.

As a final comment, I'd like to explain that a kimono should be worn like this; wrap the right side of the kimono over the body, then the left side wraps over the top. Right on top of left is only used to dress a corpse for burial.

So now you know!

