

What Is a Geisha?

The word geisha comes from Japanese and literally means “a person of art.” While geishas are often mistakenly associated with prostitution, their work is completely different. Being a geisha is an art form that seeks to embody the illusion of female perfection through grace, talent, and refined manners. Interestingly, at first, geisha were men, but over time, the role became dominated by women and gained recognition as an important part of Japanese culture.

Geisha are well known for their striking appearance and elegant performances, but the discipline and training behind their work are often overlooked. To fulfill their role, geisha must master the art of conversation, music, singing, and dancing, all while maintaining an air of poise and charm. Becoming a geisha requires years of rigorous training. In the past, girls began their studies as young as five or six, but today, training usually starts after junior high school. New trainees first become maiko, or so-called apprentice geisha. Each maiko is guided by an experienced geisha, learning by observing her mentor and gradually building her own network of clients before making her debut as a full-fledged geisha.

Both geisha and maiko wear a kimono that reveals the neckline, considered one of the most elegant and sensual parts of the body in Japanese culture. Maiko are easily recognized by their colorful kimono, long sleeves, red collars, and intricate embroidery or hand-painted designs. Their wide, elaborate obi (sash) is tied in a style that requires assistance to put on, and they wear tall wooden clogs called okobo to help them move gracefully in their long kimono. Maiko also style their own natural hair in five distinct ways to mark different stages of apprenticeship and wear the traditional white makeup with red lipstick applied only to the lower lip—a look that distinguishes them from geisha.

After becoming a full geisha, a woman replaces her red collar with a white one, swaps her tall okobo for sandals called zori, and often chooses lighter makeup or even wigs instead of elaborate hairstyles.

Being a geisha is far more than just performing for tourists—it is a lifelong dedication to an art that has witnessed centuries of Japanese history. Within this unique community, geisha, maiko, and the okasan (the woman who manages the geisha house) form close, family-like bonds. Their years of training, discipline, and devotion are comparable to those of any demanding profession, even that of a doctor. This is the true life and spirit of a geisha.

Keywords: prostitution, poise, embody, apprentice, apprenticeship, full-fledged, embroidery, clog

Instructions: Read the article on page 1 and use the information you learnt to complete the following three parts.

Part A. Multiple Choice

1. Which of the following is TRUE about the training process of a geisha?
 - A. Trainees are required to master the art of singing, music, drinking, and conversation.
 - B. Trainees don't start their training until graduation from senior high school.
 - C. Trainees first serve as maikos before they advance to become geishas.
 - D. Trainees build their own clients after they become a full geisha.

2. What changes take place in a woman's outfit after she becomes a full geisha?
 - A. Red collar, tall okobo, heavy makeup.
 - B. White collar, zori sandals, light makeup.
 - C. Red collar, wooden clogs, elaborate hairstyle.
 - D. Wig, white makeup, wide obi.

3. Which is not true about geishas?
 - A. Geishas were initially men before the profession became mostly women.
 - B. Being a geisha involves using female perfection to create illusions for men.
 - C. Geisha's work is challenging and requires dedication and perseverance.
 - D. Geishas have tight and strong connections with the society behind them.

4. Which word in the second paragraph carries the meaning of "strict, intensive and hard"?

Part B. Fill in the blanks.

Differences between Maiko and Geisha

	Maiko	Geisha
Makeup	1. Traditional _____ makeup 2. Red lipstick on the _____ lip	_____ makeup
Kimono	1. A kimono that shows the _____ 2. _____ collar 3. _____ sleeves	1. A kimono that shows the _____ 2. _____ collar
Obi	_____ and wide	More narrow ones
Clogs	_____, which is tall and wooden	_____, shorter
Hairstyles	1. Uses her own _____ 2. At least _____ different styles	Uses a _____ instead of real hair

Part C. Watch the dance scene in *The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House*. Check (✓) the boxes that match what you see for Performer A and Performer B.

Observation Checklist: Who Is the Geisha and Who Is the Maiko?

Observation Item	Performer A: Wearing brown	Performer B: Wearing Yello
Red Collar		
White Collar		
Colorful Long Sleeves Kimono		
Simple Kimono		
Long and Wide Obi		
Shorter Obi		
Red Lipstick on the Lower Lip		
Simple Makeup		
Who do you think is the Geisha, and who is the Maiko? (Please write down “Geisha” or “Maiko” in the blank.)		