

Every day feels like a festival in Nankin-machi, Kobe's colorful, bustling Chinatown

KOBE'S SLICE OF CHINA

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Opposite page & left: Nankin-machi's main plaza is a prime spot for people watching and picture taking
Below: Street vendors sell a variety of snacks, but Kobe's Chinatown also has more than 40 restaurants of the bamboo handle



Pass under the imposing Changan Gate, and you're catapulted from the Japanese port city of Kobe into the colorful swirl of Nankin-machi. Chinatown is one of the city's most popular destinations, where domestic tourists thrill at the chance to see an exotic neighborhood without having to leave the country. When I visit, however, I am usually on a mission. As the proud aunt of twins adopted from China, I'm always on the lookout for adorable cheongsam, the body-hugging Chinese dresses only the thin can pull off, to replace the ones my nieces have quickly outgrown since my last shopping spree.

Of course, one thing leads to another, and before I know it, I often find myself standing in Nankin-machi's main plaza, savoring a barbecued pork bun bought from a street vendor and watching the parade of people pass by. I like the neighborhood for its lively street scene and its sidewalk vendors hawking dumplings, pork buns, ramen, sweet pastries and other snacks. Chinese restaurants dish out everything from seafood and *jiaozi* (pork dumplings) to stir fries, while open-fronted souvenir shops sell Chinese clothing, chinaware, souvenirs and hard-to-find spices.

One of only three designated Chinatowns in Japan, Nankin-machi is neither as large as Yokohama's nor as intertwined with local culture and cuisine as Nagasaki's, but it is infinitely more lively and ornately decorated. With sightseers and vendors packing the streets, it can seem like there's a festival going on most days of the year. Visit during the Chinese New Year or Mid-Autumn Festival and it's even busier, as the clashing of Chinese cymbals fills the air, lion dances snake down the streets, and stalls hawk special foods and pastries, such as the Mid-Autumn Festival's moon cakes.

Nankin-machi was established in 1868, after Kobe, Yokohama, Nagasaki, Hakodate and Osaka were opened as international ports following more than 200 years of self-imposed isolation during the shogun's rule of Japan. Unsurprisingly, these port towns were magnets for the country's first foreign settlers. In Kobe, Americans and Europeans settled along the slope of the Kitano district in grand Victorian- and Gothic-style homes, about 20 of which are now open to the public as museums, shops, restaurants and other venues.

Likewise, Kobe's Chinese immigrants—many of them hailing from Shanghai and Hong Kong—settled just west of



Left: The elegant Changan Gate is one of three ornate entrances to Nankin-machi
Above: Pedestrian lanes make the area popular for shopping, even at night
Left: A street vendor does bustling business



the business district. Others came to the city from Nagasaki, where a small Chinese community had been allowed to live and conduct business throughout Japan's long isolationist period, making its Chinatown the oldest in the country. Those with experience in trade, accounting and shipping became instrumental in Kobe's development as a port town, while the ones who took up jobs as tailors, barbers and cooks added to the social and economic fabric of this growing community. In 1869, 500 Chinese resided in Kobe; by 1900, that number had grown to 1,600.

Although Kobe's overseas Chinese came from different towns and walks of life, they joined together to form a number of business and social organizations, as well as to establish a Chinese school, cemetery, social hall, temple and the Sun-Yat Sen Memorial Hall. To this day, Kobe's reputation as a cosmopolitan destination is heavily dependent on its Chinese population: Of the more than 100,000 foreign residents who call the city and surrounding Hyogo Prefecture home, over a quarter are Chinese immigrants or of Chinese descent.

Nankin-machi is the most obvious expression of Chinese life in Kobe, boasting almost 100 restaurants, food emporiums, teashops, souvenir stores and other businesses. A

Navigator

Nankin-machi is the only Chinatown in the Kansai area, making it a popular destination for day-trippers hoping to eat at one of its 40 restaurants or to browse its 50-some souvenir shops and other stores. Most restaurants and food vendors post photographs of their main dishes and are open from about 11am to 9pm. Some close in the afternoon or one day of the week, but there are always restaurants open.

The Kobe Convention & Visitors Association website has information on Nankin-machi and surrounding attractions:
www.feel-kobe.jp/_en

ACCESS

>> Nankin-machi is a five-minute walk south of Motomachi Station. The City Loop bus, which travels to major tourist attractions, also stops at Chinatown

compact neighborhood in the center of town, it's bisected by two main pedestrian streets, with colorful Chinese gates heralding entrances on the east, west and south and a pair of lions guarding the entrance on the north.

At Nankin-machi's center is a plaza adorned with a Chinese pavilion and 12 stone statues representing the animals of the Chinese astrological calendar, which is a good spot for people watching. Nearby are the not-to-be-missed public toilets (no joke), sporting a dragon-relief façade that depicts a famous Chinese tale. They're called Garyoden, which translates as the "palace of a secluded wise man." I leave you to draw your own conclusions on that one.

As for my perennial shopping mission for cheongsam, those days may soon be over as my nieces grow into teenagers and T-shirts. But I'm a sucker for barbecued pork buns, and in Kobe, I know right where to get them.

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