

Women's Kimono Guide *Copyright © 2016 by Morgan Beard*

There are many, many rules for the wearing of kimonos. The following represents some general guidelines that I've picked up from wearing them and getting tips from people who know much more than I do. However, as with tea itself, there's always more to learn!

Because tea ceremony is such a traditional practice, you should also be conservative about following the rules. Be cautious of websites, magazines, or other sources that talk about current kimono trends – a lot of the things that they show you are fine if you're wearing a kimono around town but are not okay in the tearoom.

What you will need:

Kimono – details below

Obi – details below

Nagajuban – Kimono underwear. This is put together in the same general shape as the kimono itself, with long sleeves and (very important) a collar. There are two types: some are a single piece, and some are split so that the top is separate from the bottom. Either type is fine. A good nagajuban is made from silk and, ideally, is tailored to your measurements, but it's also possible to buy washable polyester nagajuban in standard sizes (which are much cheaper and more practical to maintain).

Hadajuban and susoyoke – Under-underwear. The hadajuban is the top and the susoyoke is the slip on the bottom. The purpose of these is to protect your nagajuban from your skin, and in very cold weather they also provide an extra layer of warmth. The easiest way to tell this from the nagajuban is that the hadajuban doesn't have a collar and is usually made from an absorbent cotton. Since nobody will ever see this layer, you can also substitute a low-cut shirt and regular Western slip or something similar rather than buying a set of these.

Tabi – white, split-toed socks designed to be worn with zori, the sandals worn with kimono. Tabi have metal closures at the back. If you see something that looks like tabi but that are stretchy rather than having the closures, these are actually tabi covers, which are for wearing on top of your tabi and keeping them clean if you're walking around outside.

Zori – Sandals worn with kimono; they have a thong that goes between the first and second toes like flip-flops. Note that the sandals with the wooden bottoms are called geta and they are not appropriate for tea.

Koshi himo (at least 3) – long ties, about an inch wide, that wrap around your waist. Sometimes these are plain cotton, and sometimes they are brightly colored.

Datejime (2) – waist ties that are wider than the koshi himo, about 4 inches wide, usually either silk or cotton with bright colors. Some types are made of a spongy synthetic material with Velcro closures. Either work fine.

Korin belt (1 or 2) – a long piece of elastic with clips at either end; used to keep your kimono collar from shifting (you can use the second one to keep your nagajuban collar in place, but it's not necessary)

Eri shin (1) – a long white piece of plastic that goes inside your juban collar to keep it from folding or wrinkling while you're wearing it.

Obi ita (1) – a curved piece of cardboard that's used to keep your obi from wrinkling once tied.

Obi makura (1) – a pad used to keep your obi knot in place

Obiage and obijime (1 each) – A colored silk cloth used to cover the obi makura and its tie (obiage) and a long braided cord, usually with tassels at the end (obijime). These are sometimes sold as a set. Unlike the other accessories described above, these are meant to be seen, and so the color should be chosen to match your kimono and obi.

Note: For tea ceremony it's not appropriate to wear juban collars (eri) of any color than white, or any kind of decorations on your obi.

Types of Kimono and Obi

Seasonal Variations

Awase – a lined kimono. Worn from approximately the beginning of October to the end of May. (Some variations are allowed depending on the weather and the climate in your current location.) During awase season you also wear a lined obi, juban with a standard solid collar, and winter obiage and obijime. (See below for a description of summer wear)

Hitoe – unlined kimono. Worn from approximately the beginning of June to the end of September. During hitoe season, you should also wear an unlined obi and summer juban, which has a collar with see-through stripes woven into it and the juban fabric is a ro material (looks like a fine mesh). A summer obiage likewise has see-through stripes woven into it, and a summer obijime is loosely woven so that you can see through it.

Ro – Kimono made of a fabric that is loosely woven so that you can see through it. This is optional wear during July and August. (That is, you can only wear ro kimonos during July and August, but you can also wear a hitoe kimono during that time.) There are also ro obis, and you may wear a ro obi with a ro kimono or mix a ro obi with a hitoe kimono or vice versa. The juban, obiage, and obijime are the same as hitoe. *If you are wearing a*

ro kimono with ro juban, you must wear hadajuban and susoyoke beneath it, because people will be able to see through your outer layers.

Judging Formality

Note: Any kimono that has a small crest at the back of the neck (montsuki in Japanese) automatically becomes more formal than a kimono of the same pattern without a crest. The crest is usually the person's family crest; if you're not Japanese and don't have a family crest, it's fine to buy a used kimono with someone else's. However, if the kimono has more than one crest on the back and sleeves, then it's too formal to wear for tea (see below under "tomesode").

Komon kimono – "Komon" means that the fabric has some type of repeating pattern on it. This is the least formal type of kimono and can be worn any time.

Houmongi kimono – This kimono will have some type of pattern (a landscape, for example) that runs continuously around the bottom of the kimono, on the sleeves, and sometimes on the shoulders. The rest of the kimono will be of a single color. These are best for celebratory tea gatherings or parties.

Iromuji kimono – Iromuji means that the kimono is a solid color; if the fabric has a pattern woven into it, the pattern will be of the same color as the rest of the kimono. Iromuji kimonos often have crests on the back of the neck. These are the most formal type of kimono that's appropriate for tea and are good for special gatherings / occasions.

Nagoya obi – An obi that is sewn in half for part of its length and left open for the rest. This is the least formal type of obi and can be worn for most occasions.

Fukuro obi – The most obvious way to identify this is that it's open for its entire length; the majority of the time these will also have metallic gold or silver threads woven into them. They are almost always lined. These are more formal than Nagoya obis but also okay to wear for most occasions.

Chanoyu no-nos

1. Yukata – A yukata looks like a kimono, but is made of cotton that is not finely woven or dyed, and usually has very bright, playful patterns on it. Yukata are too informal for almost all tea occasions.

2. Uchikake and furisode kimonos – The most obvious identifying feature of these kimonos are their very long sleeves. Uchikake kimonos are generally used for weddings, and furisode are also for very formal occasions. Both styles are too formal/specialized for tea.

3. Tomesode kimonos – Tomesode kimonos are similar to houmongi in that they usually have a pattern that runs continuously around the bottom of the kimono, with the rest of

the kimono a single color (usually black, but sometimes other colors). However, they have an extra identifying feature, which is that they have three larger crests, one at the back of the neck and one on the back of each sleeve. These are usually worn by family members at weddings, and again, are too formal and specialized to ever be appropriate for tea.

4. Maru obi – a maru obi has a pattern all the way up and down its length and on both sides (as opposed to Nagoya or fukuro obis, which usually have a pattern on one side and plain fabric on the other, and often will have a plain stretch on the patterned side where the fabric won't be seen because of the way the obi wraps around your waist). Like uchikake and furisode kimonos, this is only worn on special, ceremonial occasions.

Other Buying Factors

Sizing

In a perfect world, every kimono and obi you wear would be tailored specifically for you. As with Western clothes, the cost of this is prohibitive for most people, and it's completely fine to buy and wear used kimonos. However, depending on your body type, you may have some difficulty finding kimonos that fit you, particularly if you're taller than 5'6 or larger than a size 10-12.

Following are some approximate guidelines for sizing. Please note that a trained kimono dresser would probably be horrified by this; my goal is to give an idea of what you can realistically wear, with the understanding that some people have bodies that are far from a standard Japanese shape.

Length: Your height (to leave enough room to tuck the kimono up). If you're very tall and need to buy yourself some length, you can forego the tuck and just wear the kimono straight, in which case the absolute bare minimum length is the distance between your shoulders and the floor.

Width: A key measurement to figure out if a kimono will wrap far enough around your waist is the measurement across the two back panels. A reliable formula is this: measure the widest part of your hip; divide that measurement in half; add 4-5 inches. So if your hip measurement is 40 inches, then $40 / 2 = 20$, $+ 4-5 = 24$ or 25 inches across the back. However, it's possible to fudge that by a couple of inches in either direction.

If you're good at hand sewing, there's usually enough fabric at the side seams to make a kimono wider; however, there's almost never enough fabric at the hem to make it longer.

For obis: A fukuro obi is tied differently from a Nagoya obi, and therefore needs to be longer. A good rule of thumb for a Nagoya obi is your waist size x 3.5 to 4. For a fukuro obi, waist size x 4 would be the minimum measurement. As you can probably guess,

there's a lot of leeway in putting an obi on to either hide fabric or make the most of an obi that's a bit short for you.

Choosing Colors

There are two basic factors in choosing the color of your kimono or obi: Your age and the season.

Fashions change from generation to generation in kimonos just as they do in Western clothes, but a good general rule of thumb is that bright colors and playful or bold patterns are more appropriate for younger women, while subdued colors and patterns are better for older women.

As for which colors to choose, the single best piece of advice I've heard is to think about what colors you would see in nature during that season. During the fall you'd probably want yellows and oranges and deep purples, during the spring you'd go for pretty pastels, and so on.

However, if you're only looking to buy one kimono, then buy a color you like!

Seasonal Patterns

Some imagery in Japanese culture is associated with particular seasons. This is especially true of flowers. If you have a kimono with flowers on it, then you should only wear it in the season when that particular flower blooms (or just before) – an exception being cherry blossoms, chrysanthemums, or paulownias; although they are seasonal, they have other symbolic meaning as well and can also be worn at other times.

In general, if you're not certain what's being depicted, it's better to stick to abstract designs or patterns or to ask someone before wearing the kimono.

Matching Kimonos and Obis

Matching the colors in kimonos with obis can be tricky, because Japanese standards about what colors match can be very different from Western standards. Studying kimonos and looking at the colors that are mixed together in the same fabric (or looking at kimono books or magazines to see how their kimonos and obis are matched) will start to give you a taste for how it's done.

As a general rule of thumb, you can almost always match a color with a different shade of the same color, or even a matching shade of the same color.

Here are some other examples of color palettes:

Dark orange – yellow – light green or blue – dark blue accents
Light purple – light blue – white

Mustard yellow – brown – gray-blue – dark orange
Gray or very pale blue/green – red - white
Orange / peach – watery blues – dull metallic gold
Light purple – dark blue – dark red – gold
Bright orange – white – red - very dark blue or black
Pink – white – dark blue
Dark teal – light blue – dull orange and yellow
Bright pink – bright green
Yellow-green – white – black
Light yellow – darker purples or blues – dull pinks