

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto

“Ukai-cormorant fishing”



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People pass the HOT Kyoto summer in many ways to cool down through the senses, such as splashing water, having cool-looking sweets, enjoying dinner over the river, feeling elegance in the sounds of the wind-bells, etc. One of the pastimes of cool-breeze-enjoying is watching Ukai or cormorant fishing.

With a lit of the torch reflecting on the river under cool breeze at evening with the sound of water in darkness, watching a created magical view of Ukai takes people’s minds off from the heat of the

summer. Ukai is a traditional fishing method in which fishers use well-tamed “U” (for Uji) or cormorants to catch Ayu (sweetfish) with over 1,300 year history. A fisher manipulates cormorants with leashes on a torch-lit boat and let them dive and prey fish. The fishers skillfully guide them by their voices and pull each leash every time of the catch to take away the collected fish out from their throats. The fishers show great fingerworks without tangling them each other. The fishers take care of their cormorants as family, so they show a perfect combination.

Since such a great performance and magical atmosphere, watching Ukai was a special pastime amongst mostly aristocracy in ancient times. It is held for mainly a tourist attraction today. In Kyoto, Ukai can be seen in Uji city and Arashiyama area almost every night during the season (from June or July depending on the places to late of September). Although the fishing method, style and the outfit of



Female cormorant fishers

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fisher with such a long cap (for protecting hair from fire) and a water repelling straw skirt on the wooden boat have remained in traditional way, a new breeze starts blowing in this history of Ukai. In Uji, 2 women perform this traditional art that was historically regarded as a profession of men. And in 2014, Japan’s first artificial incubation of cormorants was succeeded, until then all cormorants were captured wild birds. Hope for this cultural preservation in shaping for the future.

How about escape the heat of summer on the river and enjoy the fantastic world while speculating on ancient times.