

The Art of the Japanese Garden

by Jim Fogarty

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The history of [Japanese gardens](#) extends way back into Shinto belief where often clearings would be made in forested mountain areas, and gravel and sand spread for ceremonial purposes. With the introduction of Chinese cultural influences during the Nara period (710-794), we see the creation of what is known as the first cultivated garden in Japan at the Nara East Palace garden which had strong influences of Chinese gardens. But at this stage gardens were only for the extremely privileged and were more for entertainment. Through the years and with the capital moving to Kyoto around 794, we see more Japanese influence into gardens where materials became more natural in colour, and buildings became less prominent and set back in the periphery, often hidden by foliage.

With the influence of Buddhism, temple gardens became sacred spaces and more contemplative, and gardens became something to look at for meditation, not to walk through. As tea drinking entered Japanese culture that changed with Tea Roji gardens where part of the tea ceremony experience was the journey you made through the garden. And completing the full circle we get to the Edo Period (1600-1868) where larger strolling gardens were created by feudal lords that included more western influences, and gardens revert back to being more about entertainment again, and less about religion.

It is impossible to list my favourite experiences in Japan but here are a few highlights:



Tofuku-ji (Autumn & Spring Tours)

Tofuku-ji is a large Zen temple in SE Kyoto that is particularly famous for its spectacular autumn colours, but is worthy to visit at any time. It was created in the Kamakura period (1185-1333) at the behest of the powerful Fujiwara clan when samurai warriors took over the aristocracy and Zen Buddhism began to flourish.

The Hojo (Abbots Hall), was founded in 1235, destroyed by fire in 1880 and rebuilt in 1890. The surrounding gardens were designed in 1939 (Showa Period) by landscape artist and sculptor Shigemori Mirei (1896-1975). The gardens around the Hojo are a combination of tradition and abstract modern art, something that Mirei Shigemori is famous for. At the time the temple was deeply in debt, so Mirei worked for free on the proviso that he had completely free reign on the design. Mirei knew that gardens at temples would last possibly a very long time so he was prepared to take the financial risk as he gambled it would be good for his reputation, and it paid off. The gardens at Tofuku-ji are Mirei's first gardens in Kyoto and remain as his most famous work.

To the North of the Hojo, the checkerboard paving stones by Mirei are scattered from left to right suggesting a sense of motion. The design is based on a traditional checkerboard design called ichimatsu which was often used in Kimono designs. Mirei thought that Autumn leaves were the most beautiful when they were falling, so here the checkerboard pattern is a depiction of falling autumn leaves. The north Hojo garden is considered to be the garden which finally broke the mould of the traditional Japanese garden, which is incredible to think given it was designed in 1939.



Adachi Museum (Autumn Tour)

The Adachi Museum of Art was founded by Adachi Zenko in 1980 as a way of combining his passions for Japanese art and garden design. He hoped that viewing the gardens and artwork together would expand peoples' appreciation and interest in Japanese art.

The 10-acre impressive gardens are intended to be like living paintings to be viewed only from within the museum buildings and not to be entered. As you walk through the museum the garden unravels much like a picture scroll. The gardens were designed by Nakane Kinsaku in 1969-72 who incidentally designed the Japanese garden at the Melbourne Zoo and the famous Japanese garden in Toowoomba QLD.

The most photographed part of the garden, The Dry Landscape and the White Sand Garden, are partly in the karesansui style. The waterfall 200m in the background cascades 15m & provides movement in an otherwise unchanging environment. This part of the garden is said to be a tribute to the works of Yokoyama Taikan. It depicts the masterpiece nihonga artwork called 'Beautiful Pine Beach.' The Nihonga tribute is intended to be a piece of fantasy- it looks so manicured it is literally living perfection, almost an impossibility in gardening. There is so much stillness in the garden that the sense of motion is heightened eg water movement, birds flying, clouds moving, raindrops on water, even the movement of shadows. For me it is one of the most impressive Japanese gardens I have seen.



Historic Kanazawa

Kanazawa is considered one Japan's best-preserved Edo-period cities. The feudal atmosphere of Kanazawa still lingers in the Nagamachi district, where old houses of the Nagamachi Samurai line the streets that once belonged to Kaga Clan Samurai.

In Kanazawa we visit the restored Samurai residence of Nomura, which gives an insight into the lifestyle and artifacts of the Samurai era, and also includes a very impressive small scaled garden.

The striking part of the garden is the water feature that appears on the left as a simple drip then it falls down a 1.6m rock cascade in the centre to a much lower pond. Like water coming down the mountains it starts small like a trickle and ends up via a waterfall as a wide river. The flow of water provides a sense of release of thought and emotion and I often ponder if it is a way for Samurai to cleanse the acts of war or to relieve stress and tension from conflict.

Kanazawa is also famous for one of Japan's best known Daimyo strolling gardens from the Edo period, the gardens of Kenroku-en. Kenroku-en is one of Japan's three Most Beautiful Gardens during the Edo period. The garden is spread over 28 acres, located on the heights of the central part of Kanazawa and next to Kanazawa Castle. Kenroku-en was developed over 200 years from the 1620s by the Maeda clan, the Daimyo who ruled the former Kaga Domain (known today as Kanazawa Domain). It took the overseeing of 9 Daimyos to complete.

The Maeda clan were seen as outsiders by Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu and were under close scrutiny. To avoid suspicion, rather than build a big castle which would raise more suspicion, they spent their money on building a huge garden and they also spent money on arts & crafts. This is why the Castle was never overly impressive and was never heavily fortified. When the castle was destroyed by fire in 1881, the castle was not rebuilt. This also explains why Kanazawa is known for its historical Arts & Crafts. Kenroku-en is beautiful to visit at any time of the year but particularly impressive to see in Autumn and during Cherry Blossom season.





Nakasendo Highway

The Nakasendo Highway sits in the heavily forested and picturesque Kiso Valley. Developed by Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (Edo Period) it is one of the five main highways linking his capital Edo (Tokyo) with the rest of Japan. On the Autumn & Cherry Blossom tours we walk a part of the Nakasendo (weather permitting) which can be quite rugged and steep at times, but incredibly beautiful.

The most famous part of the Nakasendo route links Magome, which means 'horse-basket', to Tsumagowich is a restored traditional Edo-era mountain village and widely photographed by adventurous travellers. Along a section of the route we see ancient stands of *Cryptomeria japonica* (Japanese Cedar or Sugi), Hinoki Cypress, Fullmoon Maples, Japanese Maples, Trident Maples and forests of Giant Bamboo. If you look closely, you might even see Wisteria climbing wild up tree some trunks.

This is only a snapshot of what you can experience when you travel with me to Japan with ASA tours. As well as the many gardens we experience, we also visit multiple museums and art galleries. And did I mention the food?



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Article images

Adachi Museum Gardens by Nikane Kinsaku, courtesy Jim Fogarty

Tofukuji- Checkerboard Garden by Mirei Shigemori, courtesy Jim Fogarty

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