

# HIDDEN GARDENS OF JAPAN

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*Some of the less advertised locales in Japan are not far out of Japan's traditional capital of Kyoto*

From the top of Tokyo Tower, peering through a grey haze spans a view of concrete and glass as far as the eye can see. At street level you find yourself bustling along busy walkways and dodging the other 20 million city inhabitants going about their own business who all seem to be travelling in the opposite direction. Rising into the clouds are thousands of tiny studio apartment blocks barely big enough for one at a pinch, capsule hotels where your accommodation consists of only an enclosed bunk-style bed and countless bars as big as your kitchen at home. On what one would think would be a quick and refreshing walk through the main streets of Tokyo to the local convenience store, begins with the sounds and smells of congested motor and people traffic, the musical tones from chiming from the pedestrian crossing and the loud clatter of thousands of ball bearings coming from the many gambling houses called Pachinko halls scattered about the city.

As I fight my way through the unrelenting human traffic of this city that never sleeps, I find myself wondering about what else Japan has to offer. With this in mind a looked for a way to escape the metropolis.





Japan's public transport system consists of buses, trains and some trams in various locations. By far, the trains are used most widely in transporting people from A to B. This would be my vehicle. All that is spoken and written about rush hour in Tokyo where people are forced into packed trains all unbelievably true! Though the system is generally convenient with a high frequency of arriving and departing trains, they constantly overflow from door to door.

This is a typical scene for the busy metropolis of the capital of Japan, one that would make any newcomer to this way of life cringe. After talking with some knowledgeable tour operators and friendly locals over few bottles of *Saké*, they helped me discover that you do not have to travel far to escape the city's 24/7 tension.

I boarded the *Shinkansen* (bullet train) and headed west. The landscape quickly transform into open spaces, rice fields and small villages that hardly earn a spot on the map. Two hours later I arrived in the old capital of Japan, Kyoto. Kyoto has a vast variety of things to see and do but the real reason why many visitors travel to Kyoto is to experience it's ancient eastern culture and tradition.





Whether you choose to visit some of the 1600 temples and 800 shrines, attend a local town festival, dine at an authentic Japanese restaurant, visit an old *Samurai* castle or sip green tea while looking out over a landscaped garden, you can envisage how Japan used to be centuries ago, painting quite a different picture and pace than that of the cities of today. But I wasn't at my destination yet.

Tucked away in a quiet corner of the Kyoto countryside and along the Takano River, a one-hour bus drive from Kyoto Station will bring you to *Ohara-machi*, situated at the base of *Mount Yakisugi*. It's the home of a purple-coloured sweet potato called *Murasaki Imo*. Fields of Murasaki Imo, local vegetables and rice paddies line the roadside giving the Ohara landscape a country feel.

The village, not yet influenced by the modern accents from nearby Kyoto City has retained much of its heritage. Original century old houses made from mud and unpainted raw timber still stand. Like most of Japan's smaller villages, two-way streets can be as wide as your car and elderly Japanese women, bent over at the waist from years of garden labour and pulling around carts from shop to shop supplying them with fresh local produce.



Without question the most impressive part of Ohara and their biggest asset, are their many teahouse gardens. The Japanese have designed and constructed gardens to suit moods, ceremonies, and traditions. Mostly built around a temple they also are designed in pond styles, dry rock and tea-house varieties. Each steeped in tradition, motivated by nature's landscape and usually serving a specific purpose. Here are four gardens that brought me closer to ancient Japan.

### SANZEN-IN

三千院

From Ohara bus station, a lush mountain path led me past numerous indoor and outdoor restaurants, snack shops and souvenir stands right up to the shrine of *Sanzen-In*. There are three different gardens within its grounds. The famous priest Buddhist *Saicho* (also known as The Great Teacher Dengyo) founded the temple nearly ten years before Kyoto was established as the first capital city of Japan. Marking the entrance stands a stone statue of the God of Music and at the rear is the God of Mercy. Directly to the east lies a forest area of some 3000 hydrangea shrubs that colour the area in soft shades of pink, blue and violet in early summer.

“*O-jo-go-ku-ra-ku-in*” or “Garden of Pure Presence” is the name of the second garden inside the walls of *Sanzen-In*. An unbroken blanket of rich green moss covers the ground to the edge of its pond named “Charity Pond”.





Tall cedar trees give the garden a sense of space. In autumn, Japanese maple trees transform the garden into vibrant splashes of red, orange and purple.

The third garden is named “*Shu-he-ki-en*’ or “The Garden that Gathers Green” and situated on the south side of the temple grounds. From the reception hall, which the head monk traditionally resides, the scene opens out on a promenade style pond garden intended to give the impression of painted silk picture scroll.

No space is spared between perfectly sculptured trees and bushes. Hand carved stone lanterns and traditional drinking fountains are scattered about the garden and an old wooden decking provides a perfect viewpoint from where you can soak up the history. Although you are prohibited from walking through the garden, from the decking you can still get a sense of being in the middle of it.

Other attractions of *Sanzen-In* include royal artefacts, a miniature replica of Kyoto’s Imperial Palace, praying halls, sliding door paintings and the Soundless Waterfall which is said to have inspired students penetrating the mysteries of *Shomyo* Buddhist chanting.



勝  
林  
院SHORIN-IN

A five-minute walk from *Sanzen-In* and smaller in comparison, is the Tea house/Pond style Garden of *Shorin-In*. In the main hall stands a statue of one of the Buddhist Gods named *A-mi-da-nyo-ra-i*. He stands prominent, arm raised with his palm pointing to the sky.



This garden gained its fame from two well-known monk's name *Honen* and *Kenshin* who visited the main hall. It is said that when the monks were discussing Buddhism, lightning emitted from the statue's had in agreement with the monk *Honen*.

In addition to the entrance fee of 600-yen, you are also served traditional Japanese green tea that is prepared in front of you. The tea used is a rich green colour and comes in powder form. It is whisked with a hand-made bamboo whisk called a *chasen* and served in a small soup-size bowl. Nothing more is added but to make the somewhat bitter taste more palatable, red-bean sweet cakes are provided before the tea is served.

The sliding doors and windows are removed from the viewing area, so one can sit on the straw *tatami* mats and gaze out upon the garden while sipping the hot tea, traditionally reserved for special ceremonies and occasions. To me the memory of this moment was one that would stay with me for a long time.

## 宝泉院

HOSEN IN

Pulling myself away from the tranquillity of Shorin-In, I walked further down that path coming across Hosen-In. Originally built for students studying Buddhism in 1502, this tea-house garden is now a popular place for local visitors. Displayed through the tea-house, are ancient era artefacts including pottery, scrolls and Japanese swords, all kept in pristine condition reminding us of feudal Japan.



Unique to *Hosen-In* is a feature many non-Japanese who have not yet mastered the language overlook. When looking out into the garden, look up to the roof. The wooden boards used in the construction of the ceiling are the actual floorboards from the nearby *Fushimi* Castle. If you look closely, you can still see dark bloodstains spilt from many *Samurai* battles centuries ago.



In the corner of the garden stands an impressive 5000-year-old pine tree the directly translates in Japanese as “*Go-yo-ma-tsu*”. The actual garden area goes by the name, *Ban-kan-en*, meaning the “garden too beautiful to leave”. However, to the local residents of Ohara, it went by the name of “*Ga-ku-bu-chi-tei-en*” which translates to the “picture frame garden”.

The locals adopted this name because of the impressive view through an open window frame. On standing back, the timber window frame forms the edges of a living photograph that includes a Japanese drinking fountain, a small bamboo forest, a 5000-year-old pine and in the background Mount Yakisugi.



As normal of Ohara's Tea-house gardens, the 600-yen admission includes a bean jelly sweet and a cup of green tea. Serving traditions are followed and you are served by a woman perfectly delivered and dressed in traditional *kimono*.

実  
光  
院

### JIKKO IN

The fourth garden I visited on the path is a close neighbour to *Sanzen-In*. The Tea-house garden of *Jikko-In* was built by a Buddhist monk who travelled to China and returned with intentions of teaching his Buddhist students how to add a rhythmic harmony to the Chinese-style sutra chanting.

On display inside the Tea-house, are various musical instruments that were used to accompany chanting and prayer. The thing that makes this temple the most renowned all over Japan is its unique cherry blossom.





Every spring in Japan, usually April and May, cherry blossom trees or *sakura* bloom and transform the landscape into a blanket of beautiful pink and white flowers. This time is one of the most popular times for travelling. When in full bloom, it is difficult to find a tree without a group of picnicking Japanese under it.

Each year in Kyoto the sakura comes and goes around April but at *Jikko-In*, it works in a different cycle. This unique sakura named "*Fu-dan-za-ku-ra*" blooms between October and March. This abnormal blooming time allows one to view the pink sakura together with the changing shades of autumn.

This is the only place in Japan where these two of nature's spectacles can be appreciated at the same time. Like the others, 600-yen will cover your admission, green tea and red-bean sweet.



These are but a few of the less publicised gardens open to the public in Kyoto's Ohara-machi. It is a place that instilled in me a feeling of how Eastern culture once was and thankfully is still visible today. The popularity of Japanese gardens grows on a global scale, each no better or worse than the last and offering something unique. To the caretaker, tending to a Japanese garden takes commitment and dedication of perfecting one's art, a life-long pursuit. In Japan alone, one could spend years travelling domestically from garden to garden, private to public, season to season and come out with a true appreciation of this art form. Many books have been documented on this topic. To the Japanese, a garden is a place to get back to the basics. Minimalist and uncluttered landscapes are prominent features that promote calmness, flow and inspiration. These are just some of the moods these landscapes engender.

To appreciate the full experience of the Japanese garden, your goal should not be to rush around and see as many as the day's light permits, but to spend more time soaking up the atmosphere in a select few. After this single day, I walked away relaxed and refreshed. I was content with myself in that I had been lucky enough to experience even a tiny piece of what ancient oriental cultures have held sacred for hundreds of years before me. ☺

