

The sharp end: Empty spaces and dual meanings – the magic of Japanese gardens

Japan's historic gardens are unfamiliar and elusive, writes Stephen Lacey.

By Stephen Lacey

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"The sound of one nightingale makes the evening more silent," quoted my guide. So Japanese. I have just returned from my first-ever visit to Japan, and I don't think I have been anywhere I have felt more foreign, or where it was harder to get a grip on what I was seeing. Everywhere, and especially in its most famous garden – the late-15th-century rock and raked gravel Zen garden of Ryoan-ji – concepts are unfamiliar and meanings elusive. The rocks may represent islands or maybe a tiger swimming with its cubs, I was told; Ryoan-ji is a garden for, and a product of, meditation, and everyone must complete it for themselves. As for the enclosing walls, "it is only when it is closed off that your mind can open up".

Kyoto, which was the capital of Japan from 794 until 1868, has the greatest concentration of historic villa and Buddhist temple gardens, and you need a lot longer than the three days I had in order to visit even a small percentage of them. So I asked Mark Hovane, an Australian long-time resident of Kyoto who runs garden tours, to help me draw up a list and accompany me to some of them.

You have to apply in advance to get into the Imperial Villa (Katsura Rikyu), where there is an extensive and visually stunning "stroll garden" of woods, lake, tea houses and slim mossy bridges, dating from the 16th and 17th centuries. But with a member of the Imperial Household behind you, breathing down your neck and muttering whenever you adopt a pace less than a forced march, the term "stroll garden" becomes rather ironic.

The fine-tuning of such compositions is remarkable, not just all the building and framing of the views and the meticulous maintenance and pruning of the plants (the uniformed gardeners in soft-soled, cloven shoes for minimal impact on the moss), but even the positioning of the stepping stones so that periodically you have to concentrate on where you are putting your feet and then, when you look up, a new surprise is sprung.

Elsewhere in the smaller, purist tea gardens, such as at Koto-in in the wonderful Daitoku-ji temple complex, such intricate walkways are part of the mind-cleansing, meditative process preparing you for the tea ceremony.

Everything in these historic gardens is ordered and controlled, even down to the sound of the garden, where the flutter of a maple may be chosen over the rustle of a bamboo. But the effect is floaty. Design is asymmetric, free of distracting clutter, and often with long, meandering diagonal vistas. Buildings make elegant right angles and structural lines to contrast with all the “natural” forms” but, with their natural colours and materials and rice paper walls fully open in summer, they are hardly there.

Often you can look right through them.

There is also lots of open, empty garden space, whether gravel, moss, wall or water, which, Mark stresses to me, is to the Japanese mind charged with energy and as important as the filled space. It is the space in which light, time and imagination travel and, like the rocks symbolising immortality or mystical mountains, it can evoke oceans and even man’s journey through life.

What about flowers? Well, the forests, which run unspoilt down Japan’s hill and mountain chains (thanks to Shinto and its reverence for nature) are a treasure trove: I met all sorts of things from wisteria to epimediums. As for the gardens, having missed the cherry blossom, I thought I would at least catch some azaleas in bloom. I was promised some at the Shisen-do Hermitage — but it was not quite the anticipated spectacle. Each day the flowers are painstakingly picked off by the gardeners to reduce their brilliance.

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