

# In a Kyoto Garden

*John Lander*

Inspiration to poets for centuries, there is no better place to experience nature than in a Japanese garden. More than just a collection of trees, shrubs and plants, the aesthetic of gardening was raised to an art form as early as the 12th century in Japan, where refinement and detail meant everything. Over the centuries, Japanese gardens have evolved into many forms: strolling gardens such as Nanzen-in; the Zen, dry gardens at Ryoanji; landscape gardens such as Tenryuji; scholars' gardens like Shisendo, and even personal backyard retreats.

Visiting a Japanese garden, we ask ourselves what is deliberate, what is accidental. Does it really offer hidden meaning behind those rocks or ponds? To enjoy the hushed silence of a Kyoto garden is to appreciate the Japanese aesthetic, which puts great value on what is implied not explicit. In Kyoto, most of these gardens are found within temple compounds, as they were designed, enjoyed and maintained by monks as a form of meditation.

## Nanzenji and Nanzen-in

Nestled in a pine forest at the foothills of Higashiyama, Nanzenji's most important gardens are open to the public (smaller sub-temples' gardens within the complex require special permission to enter). The principle garden is the dry Zen type, with a large rectangle of white sand. The view of the adjacent pine forest combines with the garden's rocks and plants to form one tableau. Though some of the garden's rocks are huge, they merge with the plants and forest behind. Altogether, the composition induces the kind of contemplation long associated with Zen Buddhism—the garden's original purpose. Next door, Nanzen-in is a more fanciful strolling garden composed around a pond. Less austere than Nanzenji's main garden, the centerpiece of Nanzen-in is a large rock in the pond representing Mt Horai, a mythical dwelling place of immortal sages.



Hoshun-in at Daitokuji

(Author)

## Shisendo

Set in the northern hills of Higashiyama Kyoto, the perfection of Shisendo is in the details: winding streams, sculpted bushes, raked sand surfaces with mountains in the background. Originally the private villa of an exile, Ishikawa Jozan, Shisendo evolved as Ishikawa's piece de résistance. Here he studied tea ceremony, philosophy and garden design putting his personal taste and stamp on Shisendo. This individualistic refinement at Shisendo has been called scholars' style. For example, the murmuring of a small waterfall is punctuated by the clacking of the *sozu*. A garden feature unique to Shisendo, the *sozu* is a bamboo stem that fills with water from the stream—when full, it tips to strike a rock and clack, empties, then repeats the process. Originally the *sozu* was meant to scare away wild deer and boar, but has remained in the garden as a poetic feature of Shisendo that serves to punctuate the silence of the garden. Another special feature of Shisendo is that—thanks to its distance from central Kyoto—it is more peaceful than many of the more famous and convenient gardens in Kyoto.



Shisendo

(Author)

## Ryoanji and Kinkakuji

The most celebrated of all Zen gardens is Ryoanji, composed of an ocean of finely raked gravel. The carefully placed stones represent islands, mountains, even ideals. Ryoanji is composed of 15 of these rocks in a mostly empty rectangle of gravel. Not all can be seen at one time, though it is said that if you can you are on the cusp of enlightenment. The beauty of Ryoanji lies in its austere, elegant simplicity of borrowed landscapes. In the neighborhood of Ryoanji lies Kinkakuji, or The Golden Pavilion, set in a garden pond that was once the domain of shoguns. Destroyed by fire on several occasions, Kinkakuji has been lovingly rebuilt each time. Both Ryoanji and Kinkakuji are UNESCO World Heritage sites.

## Daitokuji

Made up of 23 sub-temples, Daitokuji has some of Kyoto's most unique gardens all within walking distance of each other. Another attraction of Daitokuji's gardens is that they are less frequented by tour bus groups, allowing some sort of contemplation without having to share it with too many others. The showpiece of Daitokuji's gardens is Daisen-in where the essence of nature is expressed only by rocks and sand in a tiny space. You may have green tea at Daisen-in's teahouse from where you can admire its small but magnificent Zen garden. Ryogen-in, the oldest garden at Daitokuji, features a stone center surrounded by moss, representing the center of the universe. Less famous but just as dramatic is Zuiho-en with its turbulent wave textures, or Koto-in with a single stone lantern as its centerpiece. Daitokuji has the largest concentration of gardens in one single area, making it ideal for visitors with limited time.

## Saihoji Moss Garden

Bathed in an eerie green, the atmosphere is quiet and moist. Saihoji is one of the oldest gardens in Japan with origins going back to the 8th century. It is unique in Japan and the world through its extensive use of moss where 120 types create this ancient wonder.

The garden centers around a pond shaped in the Chinese character for heart. The path around the pond offers an adventure, passing by a tea-ceremony hut, tiny islets, lanterns, and bridges. Take some time to admire the gardeners painstakingly manicuring the moss with their rough-hewn brooms and bamboo baskets, gently nurturing the garden's textures. Though most of the original temple structures vanished long ago, the feeling of an ancient sacred place is left—and is what makes Saihoji so special. Don't be discouraged if you can't make out the character for heart, just take it for granted that it is there.



Bamboo fountain  
(Author)

## The Path of Philosophy

Though not a formal garden in the classic sense, the Path of Philosophy is nevertheless a masterpiece of landscaping. Over the path is a canopy of trees that connect various temples and shrines in residential Kyoto. Take the afternoon off and just wander up the Path of Philosophy and breathe in the scenery by the babbling stream, observe the passersby in quiet contemplation or stop by one of the many cafes along the way. Though you might not hit upon the meaning of life while there, you will surely enjoy your rest from urban Kyoto.

## Tenryuji and Arashiyama

Arashiyama is a pleasant district of bamboo groves and thatched teahouses in the western outskirts of Kyoto. Its landmark is the slightly arching Togetsukyo Bridge, with forested Mount Arashiyama, literally 'storm mountain', in the background. Unlike some of the more famous temple districts in urban Kyoto, Arashiyama's sights are surrounded by natural scenery as they were originally intended. Making the most of the terrain, Tenryuji is one of Japan's best known gardens. Tenryuji or 'Temple of the Heavenly Dragon' was designed in the 13th century by the renowned Buddhist monk gardener Muso Soseki and has been preserved in its original state. The composition here is of a pond with rock 'islands' carefully laid out against the hillside for added contrast. To add to the mystique, visitors may also have a Zen Buddhist lunch at the vegetarian restaurant on the temple grounds. Though you probably won't glimpse any dragons at Tenryuji, the landscape certainly is heavenly; so much so it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995. Tenryuji is flanked by the dreamlike Arashiyama Bamboo Grove just behind the temple complex—a favorite place for a stroll after visiting the temple. Basho, the wandering Japanese poet, stopped for a time here in the late 17th century. He stayed in a hut called *Rakushisha*—the hut of the fallen persimmons, which has been rebuilt. Basho found the scenery around Kyoto and Arashiyama so impressive that he wrote,

Tomorrow I leave the hut of the fallen persimmons  
and nostalgia hangs over my heart.



**John Lander**

Mr Lander is a freelance photographer and writer living in Hayama town, Kanagawa Prefecture, the site of one of Japan's 100 best beaches. He has published many articles in travel and airline magazines worldwide.