

Japan Journal (Part Two)
10-5-17

The next day we headed to the Path of Philosophy and the sites that surround it. The first stop was Eikan-do. This turned out to be one of our favorite spots. The setting is gorgeous and one can imagine what it must look like when all the leaves have turned colors. Apparently, impossible to get through the crowds when the leaves are in full glory so we were happy to be there just before when it was quiet, and we could still see a few fall colors.



Eikan-do is famous for the statue of Amida Buddha looking over his shoulder.

According to legend, in 1082 Eikan the head monk was walking around the statue reciting sutras when the statue of Amida, that was originally facing forward, came down from his pedestal and joined in the walking prayer in front of Eikan. When Eikan stopped in amazement, Amida turned his head and over his shoulder said, "Eikan! You are slow!" To share this experience with others, Eikan had a three-foot tall Amida carved with its head half turned to the right. Amida Buddha is the central figure of Pure Land Buddhism, a Mahayana sect popular in Japan, China and Korea. It is believed that before his enlightenment, Amida offered rebirth in the Western Paradise (or Pure Land) to anyone who calls on his name in faith. I love the stela with the little monks huddled together.



We spent a leisurely morning at Eikan-do and then had lunch at a nearby tofu restaurant run by Buddhists connected to the temple. The central dish is tofu placed in a bowl and heated over a fire in a stone vessel. Small bowls of condiments are provided – ginger, pickled vegetables, soy sauce, wasabi, a special Japanese pepper powder to sprinkle on the tofu – yummy! Skewered grilled tofu, rice, a yam soup and a small plate of tempura vegetables rounded out the meal. The food was beautifully presented and delicious. Really lovely experience!



Thus fortified, we continued along the philosopher's path (tetsugaku-no-michi), named in honor of a 20th century philosopher, Nishida Kitaro, who is said to have meandered there, lost in thought. The tree-lined canal is lovely and apparently full of color in fall and spring. We saw this small shrine along the way, little stones with aprons – I guess a Shinto shrine. The path got more and more crowded as we passed people coming from the other direction and we were glad we started at the other end.



The crowd was coming from the Ginkaku-ji Temple or Silver Pavilion. Constructed as a villa by Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, it was converted to a Zen temple after his death. Our guidebook describes it as “an enclosed paradise of ponds, thick moss, classical Japanese architecture and swaying bamboo groves.” The crowd was so packed that it was hard to see, although I did get some photos that give a sense of

the place. The raked cones of white sand are called kogetsudai and are designed to reflect moonlight. That would be interesting to see but we did not.



We woke up to rain on our last day in Kyoto. We packed up our suitcase to store at the hotel. Then, after coffee at our usual place, we took a bus to Kinkaku-ji, the Golden Temple, also built as a retirement villa for a shogun and then later turned into a Buddhist Temple. Unfortunately, the rain did not dissuade the crowds. At the entrance, all we could see were umbrellas.



Fortunately, I was able to get some photos that don't have umbrellas in them! The temple is quite a spectacle - our guidebook called it "eye candy" and it is really something to see. The top two stories are covered with gold leaf. Imagine this with the fall leaves in all their glory!



We caught a bus back to the center, and met a young Chinese couple from Chongqing, where SUNY-New Paltz is building a relationship. I asked them if Japanese people were friendly to Chinese people. The young woman replied, "They are very polite." We know from our friend from Nanjing, where Japanese soldiers killed thousands of Chinese people during the war, that there is still animosity among some. However, Japanese businesses and tourists are everywhere in China these days so it is a complicated relationship.

After lunch at our favorite vegetarian spot back in the center, we picked up our luggage and boarded the train to Nara, to be continued in Part Three.

Sayonara, Lee

