

Scene in the zen temple garden



IF YOU GO



How to get there:

There are three daily direct flights from Shanghai to Fukuoka. Air China, departing Pudong International Airport at 12:15pm; China Eastern leaving at 10am and 18:05pm. Flight time: 80 minutes. Upon arriving at the international terminal, take a free shuttle to the nearby domestic terminal. Then take the subway and reach downtown in 5-10 minutes.

Admission

Kyushu National Museum: 420 yen (US\$4) for adults, 130 yen for university students. Free for other students and those under 18 or over 70.

Where to live

Nishitetsu Grand Hotel: Single room, 9,000 yen (includes breakfast)
Hakata Green Tenjin: Single room 7,000 yen, double room 10,500 yen
Daiwa Roynet Hotel Hakata-Gion: Single room 13,000 yen, double room 16,000 yen

Fukuoka a charming slice of Japanese culture

Wan Lixin

As I checked in for flight CA915 from Shanghai to Fukuoka, Japan, on November 26, the young clerk behind the counter said that there were so few passengers that “you can lie down across the seats.”

There was no need on the 80-minute flight, barely long enough for a rushed, cold meal.

I landed in Fukuoka for the Kyushu-Asia Media Conference. Capital of Fukuoka Prefecture, Fukuoka is on the north shore of the island of Kyushu, one of Japan's four main islands.

With a population of 1.4 million (2010), it's the largest city in Kyushu. This year it was voted No. 12 of the world's most livable cities in Monocle magazine. Fukuoka may not be a well-known destination for Chinese, but it has its share of attractions: the season's koyo (red leaves), fresh sea air, ruins of feudal castles, Shinto mountain shrines, and matcha (powdered tea). It also has some of the best food and museums in Japan.

Due to its location, for a thousand years, it was Japan's main port of entry for Chinese and Korean culture.

Our first stop is Dazaifu Tenmangu, a shrine built over the grave of Sugawara Michizane, an exiled 8th century politician and scholar, calligrapher and poet. He is venerated by the Japanese nationwide as the Tenman-Tenjin (the deified spirit of Michizane), patron of literature or scholarship.

Today he is more a patron of eager students and their parents aspiring for their children's success in exams.

When they visit the shrines, they write their wishes on small, votive wooden boards (ema).

Shinto is an indigenous religion of Japan, distinct from Buddhism, which was introduced from China.

By one count, there are more than 80,000 Shinto shrines in Japan, one for every 1,500 people.

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Dainty desserts served before matcha

A senior Japanese host explained to me that the interesting thing about Shinto is that people come to the shrine for very practical purposes: success in examinations, employment or marriage. It seems to lack a system of formalized scriptures or doctrines ministering to spiritual improvement.

Perhaps observance of the prescribed rituals themselves can elicit a kind of high seriousness that's so important for any success.

Like many Japanese structures, Tenmangu is moderate in size. It afforded

us here and there a view of clusters of red leaves, one of the season's biggest attractions.

In fact, colorful leaves (koyo) are to the Japanese autumn what cherry blossoms are to spring, thus viewing of autumn leaves is a great event, whether in mountains or cities. As with all Japanese activities, viewing is governed by strict rules of etiquette.

It is so popular that the changing colors are closely monitored and included in routine weather reports.

So each year, starting in mid September, the “koyo front” slowly moves southwards — at 27 km a day — from the northern island of Hokkaido to the lower elevations of central and southern Japan towards late November.

We were just in time for the last glimpse of leaves in all their glory, but too early for the plum flowers. They take center stage from early February to mid March. In Dazaifu there are 6,000 plum trees, of 197 species.

Cherry blossoms will reign in April, Iris in June, and Cosmos in October.

Such has been the importance of Dazaifu, literally meaning administrative capital, that the Kyushu National Museum is next to the Tenmangu shrine. It's the fourth national museum after those in Tokyo, Kyoto and Nara.

It was from this old capital that Japan's first emperor set out to unify the country in the 6th century BC. It was here in the AD 4th century that Buddhism and Chinese characters were imported to Japan. And it was here that the natives of the island repelled Mongolian attempts at conquest, the most formidable in 1274 — thanks to intervention of a powerful storm.

At the entrance to the museum is a futurist vaulted edifice 160 meters long and 80 meters wide, with the apogee of the roof standing at 36 meters.

In the first floor atrium, children led by their teachers were enjoying themselves in stylized Ajippa Square, where small children can experience a wide

range of Asian cultural experiences.

We were privileged to be shown around the closed work area where we saw how exhibits are stored in strictly controlled conditions, and where damaged items are evaluated and repaired, using high-tech equipment.

Even here high-tech goes hand in hand with tradition. We saw where rice is stored, waiting to mature into glue — ready after exactly 10 years.

“Just like vintage wine — vintage glue,” a visitor marveled.

One of the most memorable sights is the Shofukuji Temple, the first zen temple in Japan.

Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism, which holds that enlightenment can be attained through meditation and intuition rather than faith.

Here we got an idea of how many slips there are betwixt the cup and lip.

Enjoying Matcha

The serving of matcha was preceded by a dish of dainty desserts, which were to be cut and consumed by using a toothpick-like tool called kuromoji.

The moves preliminary to the drinking of tea include: taking the tea bowl with the right hand; placing the tea bowl on the left palm and steadying it with the right hand; raising the tea bowl with the head lowered to express thanks; turning the tea bowl clockwise twice with the right hand in order to avoid its front; turning about 90 degrees, and the front of the tea bowl should be on the left when you drink matcha.

Matcha is processed so that it retains much of the bright green color of tea leaves, but none of the bitter smell. It is so thick that it tastes like bean soup.

In that overscheduled sight-seeing day, we also visited the Fukuoka Yahoo Japan Dome, home stadium of a professional league baseball team, and JR Hakata City, a shopping complex and transport hub.