



The entrance to the Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon. | CHRISTINA SJOGREN

TRAVEL

Leave ordinary life behind at a Japanese garden in Oregon

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The narrow path that winds off into the cushion-like shrubs doesn't look as astonishing as the way ahead, where a Buddhist stone pagoda stands tall and there is an alluring sound of a waterfall in the distance. However, there is something about that winding path that piques my curiosity, and as I follow it through the rolling bushes I suddenly get the sensation that I am walking among clouds.

Surprised by this feeling of floating lightness I wander back and forth, before letting the path lead me out to a veranda overlooking a lake formed from glistening white gravel, the green clouds I just walked through easing around it.

On the wooden bench next to me, here in the flat garden (*hira niwa*), there is a young man sketching. Respecting his moment, I silently absorb the stillness of the softly raked ripples around the islands in the lake.



Walking through the Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon sometimes feels like walking among clouds. | CHRISTINA SJOGREN

Later, on a bench in the natural garden (*zoki no niwa*), which is the most laborious for the gardeners but also their favorite, we meet again. His name is Daniel Nowell, a 28-year-old architect living in town. At least once a month he comes here to leave ordinary life behind and engage his senses in the subtleties of nature.

He bought a membership at the garden after a trip to Japan.

"To remember and to keep the bond," Nowell says.

The membership lets him enjoy the quiet hours in the morning before the crowds come, crowds that total about 400,000 visitors a year.

It has taken the garden 50 years to grow to this moment. Not only have the shrubs, moss and the trees now reached the maturity of the vision of its creator, professor Takuma Tono, but in April earlier this year, a 1.4-hectare expansion of the garden was inaugurated.

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The Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon contains a village-like square that boasts a cafe, library and exhibition space. | CHRISTINA SJOGREN

At the top, the new buildings welcome the visitors with open doors and walls of glass under vegetated roofs, inviting them to stop for *genmaicha* tea and a *manjū* confection, appreciate the work of contemporary Japanese artists or learn a traditional craft.

The architect behind the new entrance and village-like square that boasts a cafe, library and exhibition spaces, is the world-renowned Kengo Kuma. Although busy designing the national stadium for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, he was too enchanted by the authenticity and the ambition of the Portland Japanese Garden to turn down its invitation, his first commission in the United States.

Kuma worked closely with the garden's curator, Sadafumi Uchiyama, a third-generation gardener from Fukuoka. Being the same age, and having grown up catching frogs and fish in the same environments, they easily agreed on what they wanted to create.



A cafe at the garden serves cups of genmaicha tea and manjū confections. | CHRISTINA SJOGREN

The new entry garden is a trail zigzagging up the hill, like a path leading up to a mountain village in Japan. It is a journey where the buzz from the city highways fades out with the sounds of tinkling springs, as the lushness pulls you deeper into its soothing embrace.

The Portland Japanese Garden was originally created by the city as a means to heal the wounds between Japan and the United States after World War II. It was designed not to showcase a Japanese garden, but different gardens through history. Its mission to strengthen the relationship between people through cultural understanding and appreciation has since expanded to include other expressions of Japanese arts and trades.

A 56-meter-long *ano-zumi* (a massive dry-stone wall used to protect the castles of the shoguns) holds back the slope where the garden ends and the native forest continues with its tall spruces and Oregon maples. The wall is the first of its kind outside of Japan and was built by Suminori Awata, a 15th-generation stonemason from the city of Otsu in Shiga Prefecture.

Back at the bench with Nowell, I am intrigued by a small fern shooting out, bright green and full of life, from a mossy stone. His favorite spot in the natural garden I passed by without noticing, so I go back and take the time to sit down in the hut placed there. Then I see the scene unfold, like a perfectly composed photograph framed by the hut itself.



Sadafumi Uchiyama, garden curator at the Portland Japanese Garden. | CHRISTINA SJOGREN

Except for the stepping stones and stairs moving up the hill like a snake, everything is green, infinite shades and shapes of green. Maple leaves are illuminated by the sun shining through them, and form a roof held up by graceful limbs connecting to the carpet of moss, its softness enhanced by grass tussocks and dense, rounded bushes.



The flat garden at the Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon. | CHRISTINA SJOGREN

Moving back in the history of Japanese gardens I make my way to the sand and stone garden (*karesansui*). Here, the Zen Buddhist values are communicated through a dry-stone landscape, and the only thing growing is the moss on the rocks and the forest surrounding the garden wall.

A tall stone is erected in the gravel, seven smaller ones seemingly moving toward it. It represents Buddha sacrificing himself to seven starving tiger cubs, symbolizing his compassion for all forms of life.

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It is an unusual Japanese stone garden because its designer, Tono, used seven rocks of the same size for the tiger cubs instead of forming a balance of asymmetries through different sizes. Nevertheless, he has successfully created a dynamic harmony.



A sand and stone garden at the Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon. | CHRISTINA SJOGREN

Around the park the lone strollers and hand-holding couples have now been joined by other members of the general public. Children play while their parents admire a lace leaf maple, its leaves floating like a veil over the crooked branches.

A group of Japanese tourists watch the sun rise over Portland and Mount Hood, reminding us all that we are actually in Oregon.

“It’s a wonderful garden, similar to Japan but a little bit modified and mixed,” says Harunori Nakatsuka, a tourist from Otsu.

Through his guide, acting as a translator, Nakatsuka explains that he just came from the stone garden.

“It has a more modern design and I think it is a good idea to represent more than just the traditional Japanese philosophy,” he says.

Portland is almost on the same latitude as its Japanese sister city, Sapporo, but the Columbia River brings warm air inland so it rarely snows here. It rains a lot, though, creating a vivid world of mosses unique to this region.

Two magnificent redcedars, a species of conifer — not part of the cedar family — that is called the “tree of life” by some native peoples in the region, create a natural gate to the path leading to the strolling pond garden (*chisen kaiyū shiki teien*). I patiently let an iconic view from the arched bridge wait, and follow some stepping stones into the shrubs by the shore.

Almost hidden in the bushes, there is a granite snow lantern, standing on three paws. This lantern came as a gift from the mayor of Yokohama in 1954, with the city’s first Portland-bound commercial ship after World War II. “Casting the Light of Everlasting Peace,” the inscription on the lantern reads.



A strolling pond garden at the Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon. | CHRISTINA SJOGREN

The insects’ play on the pond’s surface lightly shimmers the reflection of the sky and the abundant greens surrounding it, adding a different perspective. With every step, walking around the pond and following the stream down to its lower part, another thoughtful interpretation of nature is revealed.

From a bridge, weaved criss-cross over the water, I watch carps swim and their scales glimmer like coins in a fortune well. The sound of the waterfall has come closer.

Finally I stand in front of it: the Heavenly Falls. Symbolizing the Milky Way, it flows gently from the native forest and passes mossy rocks before dissolving into the pool. A volunteer guide says that Tono stood listening with his back toward the water while an assistant moved rocks until the sound of the water falling was perfect.



A moss-covered statue lies next to a path in the Portland Japanese Garden. | CHRISTINA SJOGREN

Around the pool, a snow lantern is accompanied by local and Japanese maples, pruned in layers thin as rice paper, allowing the shape of every leaf to be expressed.

Wandering back through the natural garden a maple leaf of the size of a palm suddenly halts me. It is lying alone on the stone steps, glowing yellow against the rock and the surrounding moss. Its rogue appearance is a revelation of the garden's tidiness; so meticulous, it becomes invisible to the visitor.

The crumbling leaf is out of place, yet perfectly placed. It is a spontaneous urge from uncontrollable nature. An ephemeral greeting from the unstoppable cycle of seasons, now moving toward autumn.

Leaving the garden I realize that what I have experienced today is life in microcosm: its winding paths and myriad layers, its constant change and ancient solidity, and, last but not least, its beauty.



A stone lantern at the Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon. | CHRISTINA SJOGREN