

The Japanese-style Garden at Hasselt, Belgium by Keiron Carroll

In August this year (2015) my wife and I were fortunate to be given a nice surprise by my daughter, newly residing in Belgium. It was to be taken to the nearby Hasselt Japanese garden in the far north east of Belgium. To quote from the very informative booklet given out at the entrance, the garden was a joint co-operation between the twinned cities of Hasselt and Itami, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan. In 1990 Hasselt presented the city of Itami with a belfry carillon¹ and, in exchange, Itami were

deeply involved in the creation of the garden which was opened some two years later: a great exchange in my view. Now 23 years old, the garden opens from the 1st April to 31st October each year and is used for various Japanese festivities throughout this period. It is spread over 6 acres and based on a 17th century garden design.² I have to say I was pleasantly surprised as to the authenticity of the garden. Much thought and design had gone into such a large space and with that in

mind maintenance is also key. But it was beautifully maintained, clean neat paths, shrubs and trees pruned, pines shaped, landscaping generally superb.

A short walk from the entrance, besides a stream full of Koi carp, brings us to a large traditional yatsushashi (zig-zag bridge)³. Following on along this most impressive bridge one comes to a waterfall inspired by the one at Tenryu-ji temple, Kyoto. The layout has huge stepping stones in front, their size a grateful implementation as



Koi carp view



Zig-zag bridge



Pine support



Waterfall



Pine support

there is no support when walking across these large stones. Large rocks abound, which look up at a cascade of running water forced between two even bigger vertical rocks either side of the fall. The rock on the right hand side, seen in the picture, is said to be some 14 tons. Keeping to the onward path we see the care and attention given to training the pines. Bamboo is used readily to support the branches of many trees, again attention to detail is noteworthy. Then along this path to



Shaped pine

the left up a small hill we come across a tea ceremony house where the tea ceremony is carried out for visitors. It is mainly built with dark clay walls with little light entering. A distinguishing feature is the round window built into the clay wall with its lattice of twigs.

Back to the main path leads us to the other bigger, main tea house called 'Korokan' which means a place of rest and shelter for travellers.⁴ It is a beautiful building, seemingly half on land and half out in the



Tea house

lake. It is surrounded by neatly clipped trees, a hedge, and a stepping stone pathway. All materials used in the construction are natural, namely wood, bamboo, natural stone, clay and paper. The roof is made of clay tiles and pure copper slates. Again it is used for festivities during the months that the garden is open. On the opposite shore one can see a stone lantern, modelled on a lantern in the Sennyū-ji temple in Kyoto,⁵ the burial place of one of the emperors.⁶



Stepping stone pathway



Tea ceremony building



Tea House



Tea house and lantern

Japanese-style Garden at Hasselt.....continued

Just past this tea house and over an arched bridge we divert into a forested area where we find a small Shinto shrine, a house for Nature's Gods, a replica of the jinja in the beautiful Shukkei-en garden in Hiroshima.

Starting our journey back we come to the lake shore with more Koi carp on show and beautiful views both left and right. We are now on the opposite shore and on the pathway back to the entrance. This side is more of a stroll garden, full of acers and beautiful foliage: the colour really must be a magnificent sight in late autumn. Views of the main tea house across the lake are majestic from this pathway as are the beautiful trees all around and the waterfall across the other side. Of note is the sheer amount of rocks placed strategically along the river banks, pathways and in the water.

Overall a great day out in a beautifully maintained Japanese garden that will thrill those who appreciate all the elements that make up such a fine garden worthy of the tag 'Japanese'. Also the considerable efforts made make Hasselt Japanese garden well worth a visit when visiting Belgium. And at 4 Euro entrance fee it's an absolute bargain.



Shinto shrine

Notes

¹ A carillon is a musical instrument comprising at least 23 bells played from a keyboard. Carillons are usually installed in a tower together with the keyboard.

The carillon in Itami, one of five in Japan, is a 43-bell carillon named "Furandoru no Kane," or "The Bells of Flanders".

² See <http://toerisme.hasselt.be/en/482/content/3742/japanese-garden.html>

³ A type of low bridge built over a shallow pond or marsh using wooden planks in a zig-zag pattern. Although the name yatsubashi translates as a bridge of eight planks, the term is also used for bridges of greater or fewer planks. [From the Japanese Architecture and Art Net Users System dictionary - <http://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/>]

⁴ During the Heian period (794-1185) guest houses for foreign diplomats were set up in three locations: Heiankyo (Kyoto), Namba (Osaka), and Chikushi (Fukuoka). The one at Chikushi was renamed in Chinese-style as "Korokan" in the Heian era. The ruins may be seen at the



Stroll garden

Korokan Historical Museum in Chuo-ward, Fukuoka City. [Taken from the Fukuoka / Hakata Tourist Information site - <http://yokanavi.com/eg/landmark/index/675>]

⁵ In the booklet available at the garden, this temple is named "Senyn-ji". However, this is a typographical error: the temple is Sennyū-ji.

⁶ Emperor Shijo was buried at Sennyū-ji in 1242. Since then, fourteen Emperors and several other members of the Imperial Family have chosen to be buried there.



Stroll garden

