

Rebel in the Mountains¹ - Kōzen-ji (興禅寺) and the 'Garden for Appreciating Clouds' (看雲の庭) by Graham Bowyer

The Kiso Valley had been on our 'must visit' list for some time. On our last trip to Japan in October 2017, we wanted to travel from Kanazawa to Nagoya, so we decided to take a scenic route and drive to Matsumoto via Shirakawa and Takayama. After a couple of days in Matsumoto, we drove through the Kiso Valley to Nagoya. It is a rather large detour, but the several days we spent in the mountains proved to be very rewarding, and included the discovery of an important garden, previously unknown to us.

Nakasendo

The Kiso Valley is a long and narrow valley running from the northeast, near Matsumoto, southwest

towards Nagoya. In the Edo period (1603~1868), the road through the valley was part of one of the principle routes connecting Kyoto to Edo (now Tokyo). This route was called the Nakasendo, literally the road through the mountains. The other principle route was the Tokaido, the east sea road, that followed the coast for much of its length.

The Tokugawa shogunate, based in Edo required the daimyō (local feudal lords) to reside in Edo during alternate years. As there were some 300 daimyō, each of whom travelled with an entourage of several hundred samurai and retainers, there was a considerable amount of traffic on the roads. The

entourage walked, except for the daimyō himself and perhaps a few senior samurai who were carried in palanquins.

Post towns were established along the highways to provide services to the travellers. Check stations (sekisho) were also established to enable the authorities to monitor the movement of people and goods. The daimyōs' wives and children, who were obliged to live in Edo and were effectively hostages of the Tokugawa shogunate, were not allowed to leave Edo. Guns were not allowed in.

Kiso-Fukushima (木曾福島) was an important check station on the Nakasendo.



Figure 1: Kiso Valley.



Figure 2: Garden leading to the Treasure House.

Kiso Valley

As the Kiso Valley is rather narrow, with limited flat land, the towns are linear, stretching out along the old highway. Today there is a modern road and a railway running through the valley, but, where possible, these bypass the old towns. The towns continue to provide

services to travellers, though today they are tourists who have come specifically to see the old towns and the mountains.

The valley provides some wonderful scenic views (Figure 1). In the towns one can imagine being transported back to the 19th century, though today the shop keepers

are quite happy to take modern plastic in exchange for goods.

Kōzen-ji

The landscape and the old towns were what we had come to see. However, a visitor leaflet for the town of Kiso-Fukushima, mentioned that a temple, Kōzen-ji, had



Figure 3: Dry waterfall.



Figure 5: Pond garden.



Figure 7: Tea house.



Figure 4: Treasure House interior.



Figure 6: Waiting arbour.



Figure 8: Garden for Appreciating Clouds.

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gardens, so after breakfast we headed off to see what was there.

The temple dates back to 1434. Through the centuries, fires have destroyed the buildings on several occasions. In the last century all the buildings were lost to fire in 1906. The replacement main hall was again lost to fire in 1927. Gradually the buildings have been rebuilt, with the last, the accommodation building, being replaced in 1962.

On entering the temple grounds, the visitor is directed to turn left through a pleasant garden. To one side of the straight pathway is an irregular area of gravel, beyond which is a large area of sculptured planting (Figure 2). This is mostly evergreen azalea, with patches of enkianthus, which colours to a deep red in the autumn,

contrasting with the green of the azaleas. Planted in the gravel are several acers. Within the azalea planting, there are occasional trees including several pruned cryptomerias and several large rocks. A dry waterfall provides a central focal point. (Figure 3)

This garden leads to the Treasure House, which also acts as the entry ticket booth. This is a modern building, with a pleasing wooden interior. When we visited there was a display of beautiful turned wood products. (Figure 4)

Following the path, the visitor finds themselves at the end of a long terrace made from square tiles of two colours laid in a chequerboard design. To the left side is the entrance to a small pond garden with waiting arbour and tea house. (Figures 5, 6, 7). The clipped shrubs are mostly

azalea and enkianthus. The feature trees are clipped pine and acer.

Garden for Appreciating Clouds (看雲の庭)³

Behind the terrace is a modern temple building, which looks out over a dry stone (karesansui) garden (Figures 8, 9, 10). The wandering lines of concrete in the gravel make this instantly recognisable as a Shigemori Mirei garden. After our visit we eagerly sought out a wifi connection to find out more about the garden; the visitor leaflet having no English.⁴ We learned that this is indeed a Shigemori garden, built in 1963.

The garden is a perfect rectangle with tiled walls on three sides. A low bamboo fence separates the terrace from the gravel and stones. The raked gravel with groups of



Figure 9: Garden for Appreciating Clouds.



Figure 10: Pine with branches extending into the garden.

stones remind us of Ryoan-ji, that most famous of dry stone gardens in Kyoto. However, Shigemori has added the lines of white painted concrete that are immediately recognised as indicative of cloud formations. It is clear that we are looking out at a sea of clouds, with just the tops of the mountains peeking through the mists.

The garden reflects the sky and clouds above. At an elevation of circa 790m⁵, the air is very clear and the garden seems to be closer to the sky above than do gardens built in cities at lower elevations.



Figure 11: The pine tree shown in Figure 10 but viewed from the other side of the wall and fence.

The garden looks out across the Kiso Valley. The distant hills are unusually close as the valley is rather narrow. The boundary wall is just tall enough to exclude most of the town and road that lie beyond the temple. The closeness of the hills provides an unusually powerful connection between the garden and the natural landscape.

Immediately outside the garden wall is a line of trees including podocarpus clipped into lollipop shapes and pines, some of which have extended limbs protruding into the garden. The boundary trees soften the garden. However, Tschumi suggests that this may not have been part of Shigemori's design. Today the trees form a significant part of the view from the terrace.

When we visited, the gravel was raked lightly and in sympathy with the concrete lines, but not exactly following them (Figures 8, 9). A stronger raking style with wide bands of gravel raked in parallel to the concrete can be seen in the photographs at: oniwa.garden/kozen-ji-temple-garden. The date of this photograph appears to be October 2015.



Figure 12: Looking back along the exit path. Pine with extended limb

Beyond the Clouds

Beyond the Shigemori garden is a long narrow garden through which runs the exit path, but also containing several splendid rocks and trees, including one of the pines that reaches into the gravel garden. (Figures 11, 12)

Access

The town of Kiso-Fukushima has a train service from Nagoya. The Shinano Limited Express takes 84 minutes with one service per hour. The train continues to Matsumoto and Nagano. The trains have wide windows affording excellent views of the wonderful countryside.

For those interested in railway technology, this is one of Japan's tilting trains, enabling it to operate at higher speeds on the old and twisty narrow gauge tracks. You can see it in action on a YouTube video at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_3GUsDw3TY

If you are starting from Tokyo, the total journey time is around 3 hours and 14 minutes taking the Shinkansen to Nagoya and then the Shinano Limited Express to Kiso-Fukushima.

References

¹ With apologies to Christian Tschumi for plagiarising the title of his book, 'Rebel in the Garden'.²

² Mirei Shigemori – Rebel in the Garden by Christian Tschumi ISBN 978-3-7643-7748-9 Published by Birkhäuser Verlag AG in 2007.

³ The characters have a variety of possible interpretations. Tschumi translates them as 'Garden for Appreciating Clouds', which we use here.

⁴ Kōzen-ji visitor leaflet (Japanese only).

⁵ Elevation from Google map data using "FreeMapTools". In Tschumi a figure of 1200m is quoted.