Nikko: Power Spot

Straddling Fukushima, Tochigi and Gunma Prefectures in eastern Honshu, Nikko National Park is arguably the most beautiful in all Japan.

ALEX HENDY

Mountainous and thickly forested, habitat for bears and monkeys, location of lakes, ravines and waterfalls, Nikko National Park is a place of outstanding natural beauty.

At Lake Chuzenji in Oku-Nikko (inner Nikko), some of the famous falls of Nikko can be seen close up from hiking trails that wend through forests and along precipitous ravines. The sweeping marshland vistas of Senjogahara and Odashirogahara nearby, partly traversed on raised wooden boardwalks, are breathtaking in the fall, when the grasses turn a russet red and the surrounding larch forests yellow gold.

Nikko attracts throngs of visitors at this time of year, when the forests, thick with Japanese beech, Mongolian oak, maple and other trees, put on one of the nation’s most celebrated koyo (colorful...
the climb to the first Shogun’s mausoleum was surely also by design.

Toshogu, like many of Nikko’s sacred sites, lies at the foot of Mount Nantai, also known as Futara-san, itself considered sacred since ancient times. At the Futara-san-jinja shrine next to Toshogu, a well-known “power spot” founded by the Buddhist monk Shodo in 767, visitors climb through cleansing hollowed-out tree trunks, throw quoits to test their fortune, wish for better luck in love, and drink water from a spring said to restore lost youth, improve eyesight and confer wisdom.

One of the first travelers to “discover” Nikko was British diplomat Sir Ernest Mason Satow (1843–1929), who wrote a guide book on the area in 1875 and was among the first of many dignitaries to build a villa on the shores of Lake Chuzenji, in 1896.

“If the traveller is learned in the old history and mythology of Japan,” wrote Satow, “he can spend days in examining the temples, shrines and other objects of interest in the sacred grounds…. If he prefers nature, he can be equally interested in exploring the neighbourhood, and whichever way his steps lead him, he will find points of attraction. … Add to this a delicious atmosphere, bracing and health-giving, and no more is needed to stamp this place as one of the pleasantest resting-places in Japan.”

Satow’s words are as true today as they were at the turn of the twentieth century.

leaves) displays. In the winter, the slopes of towering Mount Shirane are a popular destination for skiers, with Yumoto, Kinugawa and other onsen resorts providing hot spring accommodation below. Walkers relish the challenges and rewards of the active volcano zone that is Nasu-Shiobara to the northeast of the National Park year round. With forested hiking trails leading to waterfalls and suspension bridges, the area epitomizes the deep natural beauty of Nikko.

For all its natural splendor, it is for the Park’s man-made structures, in particular the dazzling Toshogu shrine, that most visitors come to Nikko.

Toshogu was built in 1617 (rebuilt in 1636) in honor of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), one of the “three unifiers” of Japan and founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868). Flamboyantly decorated with brightly colored lacquer, gold leaf and thousands of exquisite wood carvings, the complex demonstrates the reverence in which Ieyasu was held and is a testament to the skills and creativity of Japan’s elite craftsmen. Imagined elephants, bewhiskered dragons, a “sleeping cat” and “three wise monkeys” (see photos) … the visual experience is almost psychedelic, the artistry overwhelming. The knee-numbing effect of