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The Zen of Nara

By Asif R. Chowdhury



Japan is a popular vacation destination for expats living in Singapore. When I ask my expat friends about their Japan itinerary, most of them include big cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, or historic Kyoto. Others may go to colder regions, such as Nagano or the northern island of Hokkaido looking for a break from the perpetual heat of Singapore. Interestingly, one place that is almost invariably missing from their itinerary is Nara. Yet Nara is home to eight ancient temples, all of which are UNESCO World Heritage sites. More importantly, all eight of these UNESCO heritage sites are located within a radius of eight kilometers and some right inside Nara Park, a beautiful open space where over a thousand people-friendly deer roam freely. A day of sight-seeing in Nara can provide a great opportunity to visit and understand Japanese history.

I had originally heard about Nara from my dad when I was in fourth grade. While he was telling us his many wonderful stories about Japan, his description of Nara struck a chord with me. I was simply awed to hear about herds of deer wandering among the many traditional Japanese temples dating back over a thousand years – and his photos were even more

mesmerizing. Many years later, during my four-year expatriate assignment in Japan, I would find myself visiting Nara many times. It turned out to be just as intriguing as I had imagined when my father shared those stories and photos with me as a child. Having travelled extensively all over the country, I can't imagine a trip to Japan complete without a visit to this ancient city.

Nara was the capital of Japan during the Nara Period, from AD 710 to AD 794. This period is a significant part of Japanese history as the economic and administrative system, language, literature and religion flourished, and the system of a permanent capital city was established. Prior to this, the practice was to move the capital with the reign of each new Emperor – the belief was that the Emperor passing pollutes the city and, hence, could no longer serve as the capital. Nara was modeled after the then Chinese capital of Ch'ang-an, or modern-day Xi'an. During this period, the Chinese characters were adopted into the Japanese writing system which, in turn, led to the first ever official written history of Japan in two different compilations, known as *Koji-ki* and *Nihon Shoki*. It was also then that the first ever collection of Japanese poems, *Manyo-shu*, was

produced, and Buddhism became wide spread as the Emperor embraced it as a key religion and philosophy.

Each time I visit Nara, I always start my self-directed and almost-perfected city tour at the Nara Park, usually opting for the 30-minute walk from the station. Even though I have visited the 502-hectare park a number of times, it's always 'love at first sight' all over again. Once inside, my first stop is Todai-ji temple, a short distance from the park entrance. As I work my way through the gates and arrive at the courtyard, I am overwhelmed by its vastness and the architectural grandeur of the of the main hall. Founded in AD 728, it's considered one of the main Buddhist temple complexes in Japan. The original structure was rebuilt twice after being damaged by earthquakes and fire, with the current structure having been reconstructed in 1709. Even at a third of the size of the original building, the main hall of the Todai-ji temple is one of the world's largest wooden structures

Also world-beating in size is the bronze Buddha statue, or *Daibutsu*, housed in the main hall. At over 15 meters high and weighing over 500 tons, it's jaw-dropping sight, whether for a repeat or first-time visitor. According to



The Great Buddha Statue.



Kasuga-Taisha shrine.



Horyu-ji temple.



Deer in Nara Park.



Todai-ji temple.

historical records, over two and half million people helped to construct the statue, completed in AD 752, over a period of approximately five years. Rumor has it that the construction cost of the *Daibutsu* almost brought Japan to the brink of bankruptcy.

After taking in the grandeur of the Todai-ji temple, I take a leisurely 30-minute walk to my next stop – the Kasuga-Taisha shrine. With lush green trees and grazing deer everywhere, this corner of Nara Park exudes serenity. Turning into the long, slightly up-hill pathway leading to the shrine, it's difficult not to be struck by the three thousand stone lanterns lining the path. This spectacular Shinto shrine, an ancient structure from AD 768, is awash with bright orange and adorned in intricate designs which can be seen all over the temple complex. The interior of Kasuga-Taisha shrine is well-known for its many bronze lanterns. I can only imagine how beautiful they would look along the path and inside the shrine when lit at night.

As I head back towards Nara station, I am stunned by the 122-foot, five-story pagoda adjacent to the Horyu-ji temple located at the edge of the Nara park, another 30-minute walk from the Kasuga-Taisha shrine. The pagoda remains the oldest wooden building in the world today, even though it was built over 1,400 years ago. While the other buildings of this temple are no less spectacular, the pagoda is truly a sight to behold representing all that is quintessentially Japan.

There are four other notable UNESCO heritage sites worth visiting while in Nara, and are within easy reach from the city

by bus or taxi. Yakushi-ji temple is one of the most famous imperial Buddhist temples, then a 10-minute walk away is the Toshodai-ji temple. Both showcase impressive Japanese architecture and are not to be missed.

A short distance from these temples is UNESCO heritage site, the Heiji-kyo Palace. This was the imperial residence and administrative center during most of the Nara period. Finally, the lesser known site of the Kofun tomb, is located close to the Heiji Palace. These are ancient burial grounds of Japanese emperors from the 3rd to early 7th century which, from the air, resemble key-holes. Visitors are not permitted to enter the burial sites, but can experience them from outside. In fact, no westerner has ever had inside access to them and they remain protected by the Imperial Household Agency.

With its ancient history, rich culture, grand traditional architecture and abundance of natural beauty, Nara emanates an almost Zen-like aura. Even a day trip to this old capital city provides a unique glimpse of ancient Japan unlike any other Japanese city or town.

Getting There

Flights from Singapore to Osaka depart daily, from where a train can be caught to Kyoto. Nara is less than an hour away from Kyoto by train, which run almost every hour.

Photos by Asif Chowdhury



Asif is part of the executive management at a global semiconductor company and has written for various trade journals. Asif spent four years as an expatriate in Tokyo, Japan in business development, which led him to travel extensively over the country. He currently lives in Singapore with his wife and son, while his daughter is studying for a BSc at Purdue University, Indiana.



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