

The Asakusa- Mukojima Cherry Blossom Walking Trail

Introduction

The Asakusa Kannon Temple (Senso-ji) was founded in 628 after two fisherman caught a 2 inch golden statue of Kannon in their fishing net. Kannon is the Buddhist god of infinite compassion. Originally a center of religious worship, today Asakusa is more of a bazaar than a religious center, attracting more than a million visitors each year.

The actual building has archaeological excavations tracing its existence back to the seventh century. The two front gates, main hall and pagoda are post war replicas, but Asakusa-jinja, to the right of the main hall, and the Nitemmon Gate are original structures from the 17th Century.

Mukojima, on the other side of the Great Sumida River, was in marked contrast to Asakusa.

Originally low marshland and farming land, it held few attractions to the new residents of Edo. But Mukojima took on its own identity, when, in the middle of the 18th century, Shogun Yoshimune set about to plant a series of cherry trees along its banks. As a result, it soon became a popular pastime to escape the heat and noise of the city center and take a stroll along the riverbank in the cool shade of the cherry blossoms. As Edo expanded ever outward, the areas close to the river became more developed with walking paths, outdoor cafes with beer and sake gardens, nighttime entertainment, of all sorts, and a hot spot for all the new dandies. River traffic had been limited to commercial shipping, but this soon expanded into private party boats and river taxis, as more and more of the shoreline was developed. Today, the Tokyo City Government, along with river front conservationist groups and other concerned citizen groups, have cleaned the water, given over areas to the planting of river reeds and marsh grasses that should help reduce water pollution, and imposed strict guidelines as to industrial run-off.

In 1603 Tokugawa Ieyasu became Shogun, and proclaimed Edo as the new center of government in Japan. As Edo (Tokyo) prospered and grew, it began to expand in all directions. The arts and entertainment industry flourished, and a large, very wealthy merchant class emerged. Castles were re-furbished, bridges were built across the Sumida and Tone Rivers while more and more canals were dug to increase the flow of passengers and goods in and around Edo. It was truly a land of plenty. Even after Ieyasu's death in 1616, many programs instituted by him carried on. An isolation policy was adopted. With only an occasional clan dispute, Japan entered a time of peace for nearly 300 years.

Getting there

Starting at Shibuya (渋谷) on the Yamanote Train Line (山手線) take the Ginza Subway line (地下鉄銀座線) 18 stops to the end of the line- Asakusa Station (浅草駅), about Y 230 / 32 minutes. Follow the signs for EXIT # 1. Come up to the street level. There are many other subway lines intersecting with the Ginza Line all over the city that provide alternate routes to Asakusa. Any subway map will clearly illustrate these. English language maps may be purchased at any of the major hotel shopping arcades, at most of the imported food stores, such as Mediya, National Azabu, or Kinokuniya. There are also bookstores such as Kinokuniya, Maruzen and Tower Records that are well stocked.

The trail

At street level (Compass heading 290) walk to Kaminarimon Koban (雷門交番 police box). It will be on your right directly in front of the Kaminarimon Gate (雷門) of Senso-ji (浅草寺), with a large red lantern hanging overhead (Point 1 on the map.). Look to your left, across the street, for an entertaining musical clock on the tourist information center. It performs on the hour.

(Compass heading 0) Turn right at the Kaminarimon Koban (雷門交番) and walk down the covered walkway of shops (a real delight). You'll discover all sorts of sights and sounds and even some great smells! From Samurai swords to sesame buns- it's a real treat! At the end of this covered walkway is the main temple Senso-ji (浅草寺).

Take a few moments to wander to your right and see the Nisonbutsu (二尊仏 pair of Buddhas Points 2 and 3). The one on the right is said to give mercy to worshipers and the one on the left to give wisdom

After exploring around the temple, go back to the front of the temple and face the front steps (Compass heading 110) turns to the right - exit the Nitemmon Gate (二天門 an original structure from the 17th Century Point 4 on the map) go straight to the 2nd traffic light then turn left.

(Compass heading 40) Continue down this sidewalk until you come to a police box at a 3-way intersection with the sign 6/314 (Point 5). Cross the intersection and stand facing the police box (Compass heading 126). Turn right, cross the street and walk toward the blue striped awning (Point 6). Turn right again (Compass heading 226). Walk to the corner, turn left (Compass heading 140). Walk to Sumida Park (隅田公園) entrance Don't go straight and cross the Kototoi Bashi bridge (言問橋) Instead, turn left into Sumida Park (Compass heading 40-44). Follow the gravel path (point 7) as it wings down to a short flight of stone steps. Go up these steps to the Sumida River (隅田川) Turn right (Compass heading 190-200) and go up another short flight of stone steps. Make a U turn to the left. Go down the stairs to the Sumida River walk (Compass heading 30). As you walk along, the Sumida River will be on your right (point 8) as you proceed toward the Sakura Bashi bridge (桜橋).

As you arrive at the Sakura Bashi bridge (桜橋 painted yellow) go up the steps. (Compass heading 300). At the top of the steps you will be facing a high school track. Turn right (Compass heading 30) Walk to a flower planter (Point 9). Turn right and walk across Sakura Bashi Bridge (桜橋 Compass heading 110). Follow the left side branch of the bridge. Note the large crane carved into the pyramid structure on the bridge (Point 10). This is the only bridge along the Sumida built for pedestrians and is used for strolling, watching fireworks, regattas and other seasonal events. Upon reaching the other side of the Sakura Bashi Bridge, turn left (Compass heading 30) and follows the sidewalk until you come to an old stone lantern, about 12 feet tall (Point 11). This lantern used to guide boats along the river. With your back to the lantern, face the river, turn left and walk back toward the Sakura Bashi bridge (Compass heading 220)

But don't re-cross the bridge. Instead, continue toward the steps. Turn right (Compass heading 310). Go down these steps to the river walk At the bottom of the steps, turn left (Compass heading 200). Follow the Sumida River (隅田川) toward the Kototoi Bashi Bridge (言問橋) which is named after a line in a poem " Koto Towamu " by Narihira. Built in 1928 for car traffic, it is heavily used. You will not cross this bridge, but instead, walk under it and through another section of the Sumida Park (隅田公園).

Go up the stairs on your left (Compass heading 240) and down again Turn right and follow the sidewalk through a construction tunnel Turn left (Compass heading 140). Here you will enter Sumida Park (隅田公園) Turn right (Compass heading 240). Follow the winding gravel path (Point 12) This is a quiet retreat, despite the overhead expressway, and for a few moments you can unwind. Shortly after entering Sumida Park (隅田公園) notice Ushijima Jinja (牛島神社 Point 13) to your left. This is one of the oldest shrines in Tokyo, dedicated to the tutelary god of the residents of this area. It's name means "cow island" A black stone cow (point 14) with a red neckerchief has

been placed in front of it. The time honored folk belief states that a worshipper with illness or injury needs only to rub the corresponding part of the cow's body to be cured.

Proceeding through the park you soon come to a garden pond on your right (Point 17). Sumida Park (隅田公園) extends on both sides of the river. However, this garden used to be the suburban home of the Tokugawas of Mito (水戸 徳川家), one of the three branches of the Tokugawa family, the head of the main branch being the shogun. The Great Kanto Earthquake and the WWII air raids mostly destroyed it. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government has restored much of its former landscaping. Just past this pond you will go to a large open ground, where there is a tall clock on long steel rods (Point 18). It is here that you will exit Sumida Park. Bear slightly to the right with the clock on your left, and the elevated expressway overhead on your right. Follow the path to the exit (Compass heading orient N 230 turns left). Cross the street. Walk under the railroad bridge and past an open air Asahi Beer cafe (Point 19). Cross a small pedestrian bridge over one of the canals where various party barges are docked (Point 20). Immediately after crossing this canal bridge, you will see the Sumida Ward Office (隅田区役所 Point 21) diagonally across the street on your right. Go to the crosswalk (Compass heading 300) cross the street. Bear to your right up the hill (Compass heading 190). Go toward the expressway and face the river. Turn left (Compass heading 250). You may walk on this high walk or go down the steps and walk closer to the river. Whatever your choice, walk to your left and you will see Azuma Bashi Bridge (吾妻橋 Point 22) in the near distance. This was one of the four bridges originally built in the Edo Period. The river commuter boats can be booked from the nearby depot for a 30 minute ride down the Sumida to Hinode Pier. From Hinode Pier, other connections can be made using other river commuters for a more extensive trip throughout Tokyo Bay.

As you approach the bridge and the corner, you will notice one of Tokyo's more unusual buildings. A large black building topped by "the 14 carat carrot" (Point 23). The Asahi Brewery previously owned this whole block of land. The brewery has since changed locations and now office buildings take up the space. A number of top floor restaurants are in this area, giving a great view on clear days.

After walking across Azuma Bashi Bridge (吾妻橋), you again find yourself adjacent to Asakusa Station (浅草駅). But if the day is fine, treat yourself to a ride on one of the commuter boats, or just stroll the wharf area and be entertained by the various street musicians.

QUESTIONS

- #1 What bird is engraved on the pyramid shaped structure on the Sakura Bashi Bridge?
 - #2 How tall is the stone lantern that use to guide riverboats along the Sumida?
 - #3 What color is the neckerchief on the cow at the Ushijima- Jinja Shrine?
 - #4 What is on top of that large black building across the street from the Azuma- Bashi Bridge?
- Space below for stamping