

Yanaka - Scenes of Old Tokyo

[谷中]

Introduction

Sometimes it seems that Tokyo is just a big concrete jungle without many signs of its history. The city has been badly damaged over the years by a series of fires, the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, and the bombing raids of World War II, and of course many old buildings have been torn down to be replaced by modern offices and homes. Yanaka is an area northwest of Ueno Park which largely missed these devastations and therefore preserves many old buildings along quiet streets. In fact Yanaka benefited from the great fire of 1657 as a number of temples were relocated to the area after the fire. It is a great part of the city to wander around and get a sense of the past.

Getting There

The starting point of this walk is Nishi-Nippori (西日暮里) station which is on both the Chiyoda (千代田) subway line and the JR Yamanote (山の手) line. The walk will take about 3 hours.

The Trail

Leave the Chiyoda line station at exit 1 (or walk to the subway exit 1 from the JR Yamanote line). After exiting the station, go left and then immediately take a second left up the red-paved street running uphill (compass bearing 140 degrees). Follow the street to the top of the hill. It will take a dogleg to the right before turning left again. This street is Suwadaï-dori (諏訪台通り), and the first three sites are all on the left side of this street.

The first stop is Suwa Jinja (諏訪神社 address Nishi-Nippori 3-4-8). The shrine was founded in 1322, but its biggest interest today is the large number of trains which pass by. The shrine is on a bluff above the Nishi-Nippori station and from the back of the shrine one can see 11 different train lines including the Shinkansen.

Next door to Suwa Jinja (out through the large concrete torii gate) is Joku-ji Temple (浄光寺). Immediately inside the temple gate on both the right and left side are a number of interesting statues. The most famous is on the left, a three meter high bronze figure of Jizo, the guardian deity of children. This statue was carved in 1691 by Kumu-shonin, a Buddhist priest, and is one of two surviving statues from a famous series of 6 Jizo, called the Rokujizo.

Further down the road is Yofuku-ji (養福寺). It is most famous for the large Niomon gate, which takes its name from the twin statues of Nio, or deva kings, who guard the temple against any evil spirits who may try to invade it. These statues were carved between 1704-11 by a master carver named Unkei.

Further down the road after Yofuku-ji, you will come to a large 4-way intersection. On the two near corners, there are interesting temples. Go first to the right corner, where there is Enmei-in temple (延命院). The most remarkable point about this temple is the enormous parasol tree (a kind of oak) on its grounds. The tree is 16 meters in height and 5.3 meters around the base and is about 600 years old. Notice that the two houses behind it have been built right up to the branches!

Now go to the left corner, which is occupied by Kyoo-ji (経王寺). The gate of this temple has five bullet holes from the Battle of Ueno in 1868. This battle was fought between the forces of the Tokugawa shogun Yoshinobu and the new Imperial army of the Meiji Emperor. Later on this walk we will come to the temple where Yoshinobu stayed during the battle.

On leaving Kyoo-ji, continue down the street toward Nippori station (日暮里駅). On the right side of the street is our next destination, the Yanaka cemetery (谷中霊園). Just before the station, there is a staircase going up to the cemetery. Walk along the stone walkway (compass bearing 170). After bending to the left at the end, and then to the right, you will come out at the new concrete gate for Tenno-ji (天王寺 address Yanaka 7-14-8). Inside the gate on the left is a large seated bronze statue of the Buddha, called the Yanaka no Daibutsu (the great Buddha of Yanaka). The statue was created in 1690 by Ota Kyuemon and is about 5 meters tall including the modern concrete base.

As you exit Tenno-ji, you are on the main street through Yanaka Cemetery. Walk along the main street, which is like a tunnel formed by overhanging cherry trees. On the left side just before the police box is an open area which is in front of a playground. In this open area there are a number of foundation stones for a 5 tiered pagoda, which was first built on this site in 1644, and was one of four 5-tiered pagodas in Tokyo. The Yanaka pagoda was destroyed in 1957 when a pair of lovers decided to commit suicide by burning themselves in the pagoda. In the police box there are black and white photographs displayed which show what the pagoda looked like while it was standing and while it was burning.

After the police box, continue straight to the end of the cemetery. At the traffic light, turn left (compass bearing 170) and at the next traffic light, turn left again. On the left side of the street you will come to the Shitamachi Museum Annex (下町風俗資料館付設展示場 address Ueno Sakuragi 2-10-6). This free museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 09:30 to 16:30. It is housed in an old sake shop, and displays posters and everyday goods from the past. On the left side of the shop there is a rubber stamp. Stamp your booklet here to show that you have been on this walk.

When you exit the museum, turn left and walk along Kototoi-dori (宮間通り). (Compass bearing 80). At the first traffic light, if you look to the right, you can see the green dome of Hyokkeikan, one

of the museum buildings in Ueno. Our next destination is just beyond the traffic light on the left. Jomyo-in temple (浄名院) was founded in 1666 to provide living quarters for some of the monks of the nearby temple of Kanei-ji (寛永寺) which will be our next stop. Jomyo-in is famous for the enormous number of Jizo on the grounds. Around 1850, the chief priest of the temple, Myoun Oshoo, pledged to put 1,000 jizo on the temple grounds. When that was achieved, the temple next pledged to make a total of 84,000 jizo, which was an auspicious number since King Asoka, the great Buddhist ruler of India in the third century B.C. is supposed to have erected 84,000 stone pillars inscribed with the Buddha teachings throughout his kingdom.

After leaving Jomyo-ji, go to the left on on Kototoi-dori (書問通り) (compass bearing 80) and you will soon come to Kanei-ji (寛永寺 address Ueno Sakuragi 1-14-11) on the right. This is one of the most important temples of Tokyo. In fact, what is now Ueno Park was part of the temple grounds before the Battle of Ueno in May 1868, when most of the temple buildings were burned down during the fighting. This temple is where the last shogun, Yoshinobu, stayed during the battle. The main hall, which is very impressive and is decorated at the top by the Tokugawa crest, was brought from Kita-in temple in Kawagoe in 1879 to replace the previous building which destroyed during the battle. In front of the main hall to the left (from the hall) is a sign in English marking a large stone called the Mushi-zuka (虫塚) where in the past services were held to commemorate insects who had died in a neighboring forest. Behind the main hall to the right are the mausoleums for 6 of the Tokugawa shoguns. There is a famous gate called the Chokugakumon (勅額門) or Emperor's Plaque Gate in front of the mausoleum of the fifth shogun, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi (1646-1709).

We will now retrace our steps back to the Shitamachi Museum Annex, and back to the intersection in front of the Yanaka Cemetery. Instead of going right which would lead into Yanaka cemetery, continue straight. After curving, the road will go downhill with temples on both sides. On the right side of the street is our next destination, Zensho-an (全生庵). Behind this temple in the back is a gilded 6 meter high statute of Kannon which was built in 1991.

Return to the street, and retrace your steps going uphill. On the right side of the street is an old wooden building, housing a 280 year old sake shop called Isego Shakaten (伊勢五酒店 address Yanaka 4-2-39). Turn right at the sake shop, and then right at the next intersection (Yanaka 4-1). The next destination, Zuirin-ji (瑞輪寺) is on the right. Zuirin-ji is famous for the steeply curved roof of its main hall, which can be seen well from the temple gate. The top of the roof is decorated with a red band with three white squares. Inside each square is a stylized leaf of a wild ginger plant, which is the Tokugawa family crest. The eaves under the main hall have fine carvings of dragons.

From Zuirin-ji, go straight out the gate (compass bearing 170) to the end of the street (Yanaka 1-6-20). Turn to the right, and then basically go straight through some small intersections. The next stop is the Daimyo Clock Museum (大名時計博物館), a small and very interesting/strange museum which is clearly marked in Japanese. (The first two kanji of the name, 大名, are very easy to recognize.)

The Daimyo Clock Museum (大名時計博物館 address Yanaka 2-1-27) is located in a metal building to the left side of a rather overgrown and deserted looking garden which is entered through a large gate. The museum is open from 10:00-16:00 Tuesday through Sunday during January 15 to June 30 and October 1 through December 24. Admission is 300 yen for adults and 200/100 yen for students.

Old Japanese clocks were very expensive, which is why they were usually owned by the aristocrats, or daimyo, and therefore were called daimyo clocks. In the past, the Japanese divided each day and night into 6 equal hours. Since the length of a day and night changes during the year, each day hour and night hour also changed during the year. Western clocks, which are designed to keep constant time, needed to be continuously adjusted in order to keep Japanese time, which varied each day. Japanese clockmakers found ingenious ways to build clocks which kept variable time, and this museum has a collection of such clocks. All of the exhibits are labeled in Japanese, but there is an English language paper that you can borrow which explains the clocks.

From the clock museum, it is now time to go to the last destination of the walk, the Nezu Jinja (根津神社 address Nezu 1-28-9). From the museum, go to the left, and then take the next left. Keep going straight past a major street (Shinobazu-dori 不忍通り), and Nezu Jinja will be on your right. This shrine is very old, since it is reputed to have been founded by Yamato Takeru no Mikoto around 1900 years ago. It is famous for its large azalea garden, and for the Enazka (胞衣塚) or Fetal Appendage Mound, which was built over the site where the membrane and placenta of the third Tokugawa shogun, Ienobu (1646-1709) was buried. Ienobu was one of the most powerful shoguns, and built the shrines at Nikko.

From Nezu Jinja, return to Shinobazu-dori (不忍通り) and go to the right to the Nezu (根津) station of the Chiyoda subway line.