Japanese Garden trip to Kurashiki-Okayama-Takamatsu

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Report by Rob Jongman

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The idea and the organisation of this “Japanese garden” trip came from Mimi Nakagoshi. She sent us all information, so we knew that it would become a long and interesting day.

We travelled on a 5 person ticket with Sanyo train. That means we had an all-station train with a moderate speed. It takes time, but for the occasion it was nice to have a look at the landscape around us. Depart was at 8:48 from Saijo via Itozaki to Kurashiki (Okayama Prefecture), arrival 10:43. There we had a 1-hour walk in the historic town of Kurashiki. It is an interesting town, with a Kurashiki river as the core of the old town. Kurashiki is near the Seto inland sea of Japan, in the southern part of Okayama Prefecture and the south-eastern part of the Chugoku region.

In the Edo Period, Kurashiki prospered as “Tenryo”, a domain directly governed by the shogunate. Special local products were gathered in Kurashiki via rivers using takasebune, cargo boats, and many white-walled houses and storehouses of merchants line the Kurashiki River in the centre of town. It is now nostalgic scenery of white-walled storehouses together with narrow stone-paved streets that would have been crowded by carts in the old days. The Kurashiki Bikan Area is a place in which many traditional structures and buildings are preserved.

Except for some Camellias there were not yet spring flowers to see here. But tourists like the walk through town, the boats and of course a ride.
We returned back to the station to travel further to Okayama, the Prefecture capital. This was only a short ride. In Okayama we visited Korakuen Garden that is considered as one of the three most beautiful gardens in Japan, and a Japanese cultural heritage site.

The garden construction started in 1687, when Ikeda Tsunamasa, the daimyo ordered his vassal Tsuda Nagatada to set up Okayama Korakuen. It was completed in 1700, and kept more or less its original appearance from the Edo Period. The garden was used as a place for entertaining important guests and also as a retreat for the daimyo, although regular folk could also visit on certain days. In 1884, ownership was transferred to Okayama Prefecture and the garden was opened to the public. The garden suffered severe damage during floods in 1934 and World War II, but this has been restored in the period after. On the day we visited the park the entrance was free, that made the park full of people enjoying here the first blossoming of plums and children running around (not on the lawn, of course). The park has a beautiful layout surrounded by water and with a view on the Okayama Castle in the background and nice details made with rocks, waterfalls, streams and conifers.

We went back to the station by taxi and continued our travel towards Takamatsu. Therefore we had to cross the Seto inland sea over the Great Seto-Ohashi Bridge. It was a ride first through tunnels and then over the bridge crossing the sea.
In Takamatsu (Kagawa Prefecture) we visited the Ritsurin-Koen Garden. Ritsurin-Koen is a landscape garden, built by the local feudal lords during the early Edo Period. It has been started as a garden with medicinal plants and many of them are still there. It is considered one of the best gardens in Japan and people have suggested that it deserves a spot on the list of the "three most beautiful gardens of Japan" alongside Kanazawa's Kenrokuen, Mito's Kairakuen, and Okayama's Korakuen. The garden is different from the more ornamental garden of Korakuen and it has as a landscape garden, sites for all seasons, and a nice ground for walking. Here plums and apricots were flowering.

For the Uzbek students especially the well-trimmed pine trees and the Koi in the water were especially to admire. The spacious park features many ponds, hills, historic trees and beautiful pavilions divided into a Japanese style garden in the south and western style garden in the north. It was a place where you must take pictures as there are so many attractive sites. Therefore I agree with those who want to include Ritsurin-Koen in the top gardens of Japan (although I still have not seen most of them).
After the visit to Takamatsu the trip back to Saijo started over Okayama, where we had a short visit to an alternative shopping area (former harbour sheds). Then at 18:10 the direct train from Okayama to Saijo departed and arrived in Saijo at 20:20, spot on time, but stopping wherever was possible. It was a joyful day with great experiences and all were in the end tired but satisfied.

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