

Centuries of Culture Come to Life in Epcot Japan Pavilion

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Along the shoreline of Epcot World Showcase Lagoon, a bright red torii gate, patterned after one in Itsukushima, welcomes visitors. A plaque inscribed in calligraphy proclaims “Japan.”

Japan is one of 11 international villages around World Showcase at Epcot, the Walt Disney World theme park of discovery.

Near the open-air entrance to the grounds stands the blue-roofed, five-story Goju-no-to pagoda, inspired by a shrine built at Nara in 700 A.D. Topping it is a bronze, nine-ringed sorin, or spire, with gold wind chimes and a water flame.

An oasis of serenity extends from the pagoda: a hill garden which is a Japanese art form at least 1,000 years old.

Careful arrangements of waterfalls, rocks, flowers, lanterns, pebbles, foot paths and rustic bridges form a story. Multicolored koi fish in the pond create living images of Japanese art.

Further west, to the right of the courtyard, stands the Shishinden, inspired by the ceremonial and coronation hall found in the Imperial Palace grounds at Kyoto.

Inside the Shishinden, guests can browse through the world-famous Mitsukoshi Department Store, which offers everything from ornate kimonos, vibrant-colored robes designed after the traditional Japanese dress, to Japanese toys and dolls, bonsai trees and authentic Mikimoto pearl jewelry.

On the second level, guests can sample a variety of Japanese dining experiences in Tokyo Dining and the Teppan Edo teppanyaki dining rooms. Chefs working with flashing knives demonstrate tableside cooking. Chicken, shrimp, scallops and beef are chopped and sautéed with fresh vegetables. The preparation is a feast in itself.

Beautiful lacquered screens and traditional decorated alcoves — tokonoma — set a mood for each room.

The restaurants and shops are presented by Mitsukoshi, one of the oldest and largest department stores in the world (founded in 1673).

On the east side of the courtyard stands the Yakitori House, a small version of the Shoken-tei in the Kyoto Imperial Villa gardens. This rustic building with its thatched roof serves as a restaurant, offering Japanese cuisine and refreshments.

The massive wood and stone Nijo entry castle with its huge sculptures of mounted samurai warriors beckons guests through the courtyard.

Passing through it, visitors cross a wide bridge spanning a moat to the Himeji or White Heron Castle with its curved stone walls, white plaster structures and blue tile roofs. Its style dates from the mid 1300s.

Japan’s neighbors on World Showcase Lagoon are Canada, United Kingdom, France, Morocco, The American Adventure, Italy, Germany, China, Norway and Mexico.

Across the lagoon is Future World, exploring technology in Universe of Energy, Spaceship Earth, Test Track, Mission: SPACE, The Seas with Nemo & Friends, The Land, Imagination! and Innoventions.

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