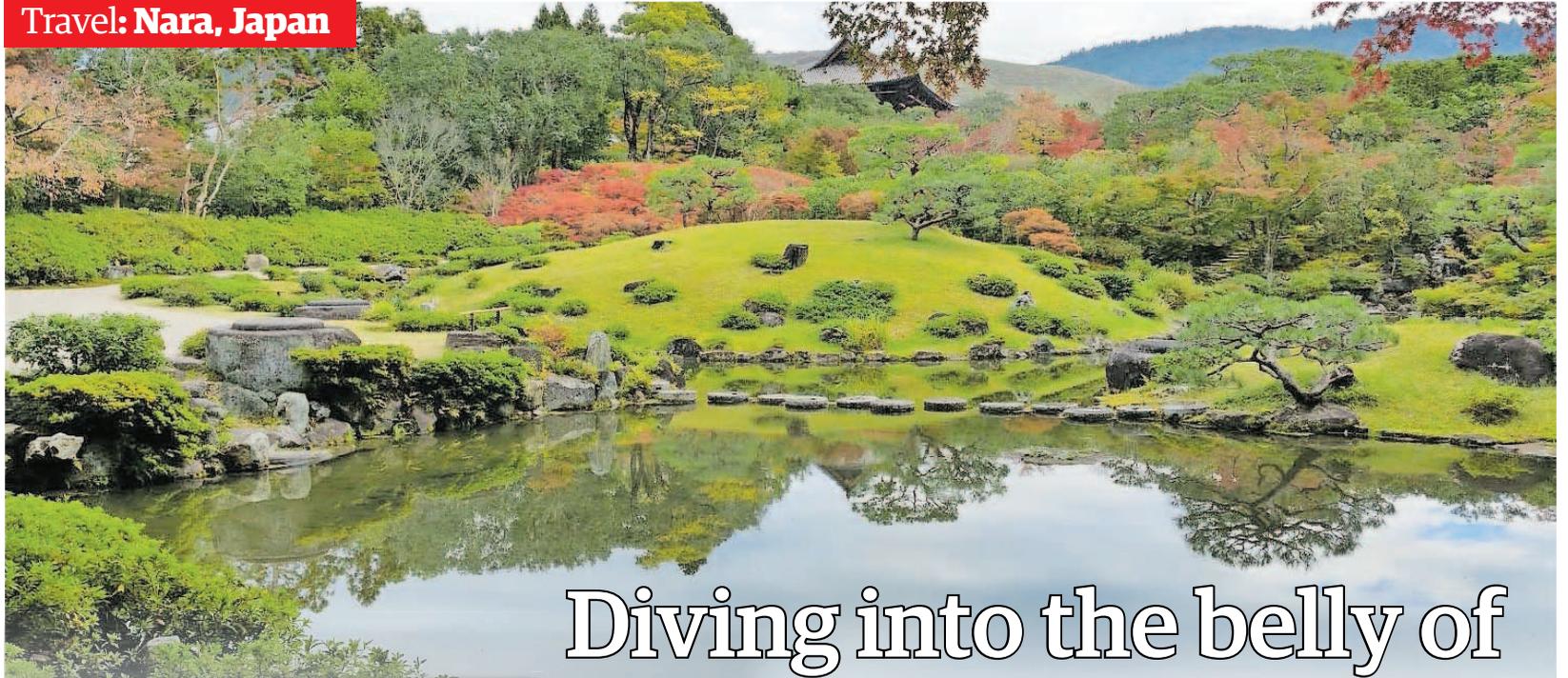
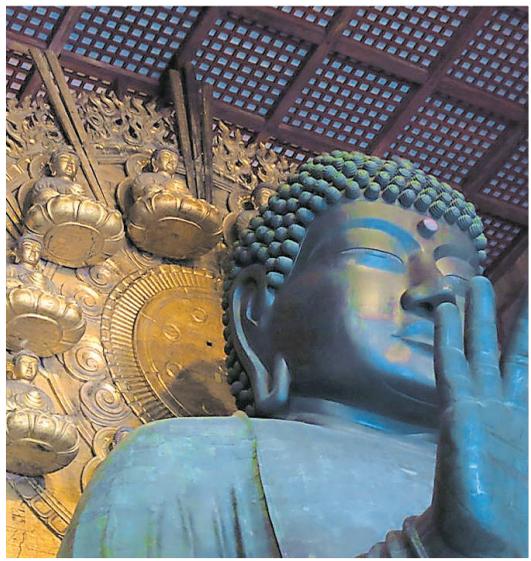


Travel: Nara, Japan



# Diving into the belly of Japan's ancient city

Nara is famous for its magnificent temple and beautiful gardens, but this old capital still packs a few surprises for a first time tourist, says Jenny Woolf



■ Above: Isuien garden. Inset: Inside Nara's Todai-ji temple

I thought I knew a bit about Nara. I knew, for instance, that it had a thousand-year-old temple with a 15-metre tall gold Buddha inside. I knew it had been the capital of Japan 1300 years ago, I knew about the thousands of wild deer which wandered freely over its parkland, and I even knew that its guardian deity was a chubby infant wearing a pair of antlers.

What I didn't know was how to manage the cafe in Nara railway station. It had been a long trip from Tokyo, and the unpretentious station cafe seemed ideal for a cheap meal. So we settled in at our plastic table, the waitress gave us an English-language menu, we chose, and waited for her to return. And waited. And waited. Eventually, the man at the next table politely said that she would never return to take our order. We should have ordered and paid at vending machines outside the door. Yes, that was the way they did it here. One more surprise for Westerners in Japan.

Nara's other surprises, though, were all pleasant ones. The hundreds of deer are well known but they were larger than I'd expected, and there were more of them. Although they are wild, they are completely used to people, spending their time foraging beneath the parkland's maple, ginkgo and camphor trees, or mobbing visitors who buy rice-crackers and feed them by hand. It is a pleasure to walk so freely among so many big wild animals, and just as fascinating, too, to watch how other people relate to them.

Top of my list of things to see was Nara's greatest architectural attraction, the Todai-ji temple, which was established over a thousand years ago. Its Buddha hall, or Daibatsuden, is one of the largest wooden buildings in the world, and the gate of the temple compound is

guarded by large warrior statues, one with an open mouth, one with a closed mouth – for between them these two fierce figures are pronouncing the sacred Buddhist word “Om.” Walk down a long path, climb the high steps to the towering doors at the entrance, and then the spacious darkness within the temple swallows the chatter of the visitors, and all is serene. The Buddha image is too large to see in its entirety from inside the temple but a man-sized bronze butterfly rests at its feet, and great statues of bosatsu (saint-like human figures) trample upon equally huge demons nearby. A touch of normal human life is provided by a pillar with a hole in it, situated at the back of the hall. The hole is only about half a metre across, and it is said to be the size of the giant Buddha's nostril. Those who wriggle through may, apparently, expect enlightenment in the next world, and certainly plenty of people want to have a go, to the amusement of their friends.

The Daibatsuden is not the only hall in the temple complex. At the very top of the hill is the smaller but equally imposing Nigatsudo hall, popular with those who want to watch the sun setting over Nara.

The noisy groups had all gone home by the time we began to climb the steep, straight flight of steps that led into Nigatsudo's shadowy environs. It was getting so dark that it seemed quite possible that a magician might be hiding in a corner of the courtyard, or a dragon might have curled round one of the latticed bronze lanterns that cast pools of yellow light as we climbed even more steps onto the temple's carved wooden balcony. Incense curled from a sleepy cauldron, bats zipped unneringly from the temple eaves out into the night, and far below, deer slumbered at the bases of grave columns that lined the path.

We stood and watched the sky's

light fade, and it was not until it had become completely dark that we walked all the way down the steps again and made our way to our inn along a quiet country road.

The next morning I was eager to see the Isuien gardens, which date from the 17th century. Japanese gardens aim to create an idealized version of nature, with every turn in the path disclosing an apparently natural but in fact carefully planned view, often with symbolic elements. Isuien's appearance includes what is called a “borrowed landscape” – a vista of three faraway mountains which have been incorporated into the garden's design. Wherever you are, there is also sound and sight of water, a symbol of life's constant changeability. The main pond, shaped like the written character for “water,” is home to cranes and tortoises, both symbols of longevity, and abalone shells decorate the thatched tea-houses as a water-charm against fire.

Unfortunately the garden's tea houses were shut, and there were no eating places in the vicinity. So when the hunger pangs struck, we left Old Japan behind and headed back into town to visit the mall next to the station for okonomiyaki, a dish whose name means “whatever you like.” The basis of okonomiyaki is a sort of mixture of omelette and pancake, cooked on a hotplate at your table and garnished with, well, whatever you like. So long as you can understand the menu. Which we could not. Eventually, we ordered a combination of pumpkin and prawns. It was an interesting choice, and tasted good. I'm also glad to report we weren't expected to pay at a slot machine at the door.

■ To get from Tokyo to Nara, Jenny Woolf used a Japan Rail Pass supplied by Japan Experience. Visit [japan-experience.com](http://japan-experience.com)

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