

Morikami Museum: Hidden Delight in Delray Beach, Florida

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

It's amazing how you sometimes come across things in the places you least expect to find them. Travel down the east coast of Florida to Delray Beach and you'll find the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens, a center for Japanese arts and culture. It's hardly what you expect from this part of the state.

As you drive up to it though, you realize immediately that you're leaving the Sunshine State behind and heading to the Far East. The gardens begin even before you enter, with a small display outside, which starts to give you some idea of the wonders that are to follow.

So how did this place start? Although it first opened its doors in 1977, its history dates back to the turn of that century. In 1904, Jo Sakai, who had been studying at New York University, returned to his home in Miyazu, Japan to organize a group of farmers who would settle north of Boca Raton in Florida. Help came from a subsidiary company of Henry Flagler's East Coast Railway and, with that aid, they formed a farming community, which they hoped would revolutionize farming in America.

Sadly, the experiment didn't give the results they were hoping for and the community dissolved around 20 years after it started, with families giving up and returning home to Japan. Only one Japanese settler remained, the man after whom this place is named -- George Sukeji Morikami, who continued to farm here and sell fruit and vegetables. In the mid 1970s, he donated his land to preserve it as a park and honor the memory of the colony that had existed here.

Today, the main draw is the Japanese Gardens, which take up a total of 200 acres. That's thanks to a massive garden and restoration project, which was only completed in 2001. This added a huge number of gardens, so that you can explore Japanese garden design from the eighth to the 20th century.

That may sound like one of the most boring history lessons ever, but in fact, the printed guides you're given when you enter help to bring to life what you're seeing and, as you walk through the gardens, you start to spot how they've developed over the years. If you're expecting to see specific gardens from Japan, you will be disappointed. These aren't replicas, but they are excellent interpretations of what you'll see if you make it to Japan. Having been there just a few months earlier, we could vouch for that fact.

You start by entering a Shinden garden that you would have found in the 9th to the 12th centuries, with zig zag bridges taking you in unusual directions and offering great photo opportunities of the gardens scattered around the massive lake in the center. From there, it's through the Kodai-mon, an ancient style gate and into the bamboo grove. Not far beyond here, you come across what's known as the deer chaser. It's something we've certainly seen before (including in Epcot's Japan pavilion), but had never known what its name was. Essentially water flows between two lengths of bamboo and, as one fills up, it drops to the ground, making a noise to startle off any deer in the vicinity.

The next section is perhaps the one that most people think of when talking about Japanese gardens. Here the rock gardens are sparse at best, often with just a few rocks and raked gravel around them. As we stood there, we were able to watch one of the gardeners raking the gravel and were finally able to learn the secret to how there are never any footprints in these gardens!

You pass through some more stages of garden design between the 17th and 20th centuries and then you begin to enter the museum area, with the Morikami memorial, a traditional gravestone for the man who gave the land to this museum and those who started the colony.

From here, it's a short walk on to Yamato Island, which is the site of the original Morikami Museum building. Here you can learn more about life in Japan; through the eyes of a child, with displays of Japanese school life, the high speed Shinkansen train, and even a Japanese home, complete with displays of Japanese food. It's a fascinating chance to step into a world that many people will never be able to experience first hand and it's perhaps not surprising that we saw a school party there, with children learning about life on the other side of the world. This is also the place to find out about the history of the site and the origins of the Yamato colony. It's a sad story, as disillusionment did set in for many of those who settled here, as they struggled to keep their Japanese heritage alive. It's perhaps a testament to Morikami that, in the end, he achieved that so well with the legacy he left behind.

It's not just the gardens and museum where the Japanese way of life lives on. At the American-sounding Cornell Cafe, the restaurant here, you can sample traditional dishes, such as teriyaki chicken or sushi and it's very authentic food. Something else that's authentic is the shop, where you can buy a wide range of Japanese products and souvenirs. Outside of the Mitsukoshi stores, such as the one at Walt Disney World, you're unlikely to find anything like this in America.

The cafe and shop are located in the main museum building that you

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enter through. This was opened in 1993 and is now home to exhibition galleries that house more than 5,000 Japanese art objects and artifacts, along with a 225-seat theater and authentic tea house with a viewing gallery.

It came as no surprise to me when I learned that the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens is ranked eighth amongst more than 300 Japanese gardens outside of Japan. It's truly a fascinating place to visit and one that, if you're planning explore the Gold Coast of Florida, you shouldn't miss.

The Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens can be found in Delray Beach, between West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale. It is open from Tuesday to Sunday between 10am and 5pm, but is closed on major national holidays. Admission is \$12/adults, \$11/seniors aged 65 or over and \$7 for children aged 6 -- 17 and college students. Children under six years old are admitted free of charge. <http://www.morikami.org>

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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