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Konnichiwa Hasselt!

Mar 22, 2012

Diana Goodwin

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Hasselt's Japanese Garden turns 20 this year, making it an extra special place to witness the joys of spring

The Japanese Garden in Hasselt represents a small corner of the Far East in Europe, giving visitors a glimpse of the real Japan without having to leave Belgium. This year marks its 20th anniversary and there will be a year of events to celebrate it, starting with a grand opening on April 15. Activities for young and old during this one-day festival will include workshops and demonstrations on aspects of Japanese culture: manga, haiku, taiko drumming, traditional dance, samurai warriors and sake tasting. Guided walks will give an overview of the garden and a tea ceremony will bring this centuries-old art form to life.

The garden opened in 1992 as a symbol of Hasselt's bond with its Japanese sister city, Itami. Experts designed the garden according to strict principles of Sakuteiki – an 11th-century manual of landscape design. Every element in a Japanese garden, from the water to the rocks to the trees, has a symbolic meaning and must be carefully arranged. Craftsmen from Japan laboured for months to create the garden using traditional materials and methods. To celebrate its 20th anniversary, the garden is getting a new feature. The torii, or traditional Japanese stone gate, will be a focal point of the garden. The grand opening will culminate in a ceremony to dedicate the torii in the presence of representatives from Itami. A performance of taiko drumming – an art form that combines percussion with dynamic, athletic movements – will cap off the event.

Covering 25,000 square metres, Hasselt's is the biggest Japanese garden in Europe. Winding paths lead the visitor past sights such as a Japanese tea house, a stone lantern, a rock-formed waterfall and a tile-roofed ceremonial building overlooking a lake stocked with koi, or Japanese carp. The garden is designed to give visitors the most pleasing view of the miniaturised landscape from every vantage point. In spring, the garden is awash with delicate pink and white blossoms heralding hanami, the annual cherry blossom festival. The tradition of going out into the country to see sakura, or cherry blossoms, and picnicking under a blooming cherry tree dates back hundreds of years. The Japanese Garden will mark this much-loved holiday with events including a sake festival on April 8. Other events throughout the year include a bonsai exhibition on June 17, a lantern festival on August 18 and a chrysanthemum exhibition and festival from October 13 to 21. For kids, there's a children's festival (May 5 to 6) and a cosplay and manga weekend (September 8 and 9). For the

uninitiated, cosplay, or dressing up as characters from manga (comic books) and anime (animated films), is a popular hobby in Japan. The 20th-anniversary celebrations are being organised with the Japanese Cultural Centre, an initiative that seeks to promote Japanese arts and culture in Belgium. The centre organises workshops on traditional Japanese crafts such as ikebana (flower arranging), kimono (the traditional women's garment) and sumi-e (calligraphy), as well as classes in Japanese cooking.

Other venues in Hasselt will join in the anniversary celebrations with themed events and exhibitions. The National Jenever Museum will host Japan Theme Weeks with an exhibition on Japanese sake and whiskey. Hasselt, famous for its jenever, shares with its sister city in Japan a connection with brewing. Itami is the home of sake manufacturer Konishi, and is said to be where sake was invented. From April 27 to 28, Hans Rubens, a former employee of the Konishi brewery and the only certified sake advisor in Belgium, will host sake tastings in the Jenever Museum. For €15, a maximum of 25 participants will be guided through a tasting of five Shirayuki sakes, paired with hors d'oeuvres.

GETTING THERE

Hasselt is 75km east of Brussels, or an hour by car or train. The Japanese Garden is in the city centre and there is free parking

ESSENTIAL INFO

The Japanese Garden is open from April 1 to October 31

www.20jaarjapansetuin.be

Where to eat

Oishii is Hasselt's premier Japanese restaurant, serving traditional specialities: yakitori, sushi, sashimi, tempura and teriyaki

21 Zuivelmarkt

3500 Hasselt

www.oishiihasselt.be

Where to stay

De Groene Hendrickx is a charming hotel in the centre of Hasselt, within walking distance of the Japanese Garden. Rooms from €90 with breakfast

25 Zuivelmarkt

3500 Hasselt

www.lodge-hotels.be

Tip

While in Hasselt, you might want to stop by historic Herkenrode Abbey and visit the beautiful herbal park

based on the convent's original herb gardens

www.herkenrode.be

Other spring sights

1 The Royal Greenhouses in Laeken

These magnificent iron-and-glass structures were designed by the royal architect, Alphonse Balat, for King Leopold II in 1873. Notable from both an architectural and horticultural standpoint, the greenhouses are to the public for only a few weeks each spring.

Free, April 13 to May 6 (except Mondays)

Avenue du Parc Royal, Brussels

2 Floralia Brussels

This month-long festival on the grounds of a 17th-century castle attracts visitors from all over the world. It will showcase more than 500 varieties of bulbs, including 300 kinds of tulips. Other highlights include a rhododendron and azalea garden and an indoor exhibition of flower arrangements that will change weekly.

April 6 to May 6, 10.00-18.00

Castle of Groot-Bijgaarden, 5 Isidoor Van Beverenstraat

Groot-Bijgaarden, www.floralia-brussels.be



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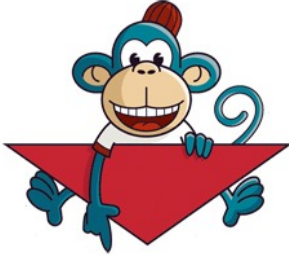
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