

# *Sakura Heaven* – *Cherry Blossom Festival* *in Tokyo*

Text and photos by Dr Oh Jen Jen



**EVERY SPRING**, thousands flock to the Japanese capital to view its breathtaking *sakura*, which can only be enjoyed for two weeks of the entire year. The eagerly anticipated pink flowers herald the end of the harsh winter, but also symbolise clouds due to their nature of blooming en masse. The transience of the blossoms – strikingly beautiful prior to a quick death – is also associated with mortality and an enduring metaphor for the ephemeral nature of life. There are more than 100 cherry tree varieties in the Land of the Rising Sun, the most prevalent being the cultivated Somei Yoshino, which is light pink with five delicate petals.

Timing one's trip to coincide with the peak bloom period can be challenging, requiring a combination of educated guesses and plain good luck. Every year, the Japanese Meteorological Agency and the public track the *sakura zensen* (cherry blossom front) as it moves northward, but final confirmation may not be possible until mid-March, and foreign visitors cannot afford to wait as flights tend to sell out quickly. The year I visited, it was indeed fortuitous that I made a correct prediction. In fact, the day I joined a local *sakura* viewing tour, we landed right in the middle of the peak bloom period, and practically overdosed on the exquisite beauty which greeted us.

There are many famous viewing spots in Tokyo, but our tour focused on four main areas. The first stop was Tokyo Tower, a white-and-orange skyscraper modelled after the Eiffel Tower. It has two observatories which offer panoramas of the city, but our interest was more directed towards the nearby Shiba Park, where streets were lined by cherry trees bursting with vibrant colour, and locals partook in *hanami* – the centuries-old practice of picnicking under a blooming *sakura* tree. Remember to point your camera skyward to capture a memorable photo of the tower with a cluster of blossoms in the foreground.

Next was a cruise along the Sumida River, which snakes through the city. During a previous trip in November, the landscape was a monotonous dull grey and the weather was dreary. This time, however, we were greeted by a clear azure sky and 1,000 blooming cherry trees which flanked the waterway on both sides. As it was early afternoon on a Sunday, massive crowds thronged the area on foot and via ferry. We disembarked at Sumida Park, where thousands of locals celebrated beneath the flowers. There were quite a few major productions involving portable barbecue grills and hotpots, but despite the tight squeeze, it was still relatively easy to stroll around, snap pictures and soak in the festive atmosphere.



The highlight was definitely Chidorigafuchi, a moat adjacent to the Imperial Palace, with a few nearby parks. In spring, the 700-metre-long pedestrian path is canopied by 260 cherry trees of different species, creating a spectacular efflorescent tunnel and a truly magical ambience. At certain spots, the blooms hung at eye level, and we couldn't resist breathing in their sweet yet subtle fragrance. As we made our way towards the boat pier at the end of the path, we passed numerous young couples taking romantic boat rides, and I wondered how many marriage proposals had taken place here.

Our last stop was the Meguro River. Approximately eight kilometres in length and flowing through the Meguro, Setagaya and Shinagawa wards, its banks are extensively landscaped and serve as an urban green space. We were brought to a stretch near the Nakameguro residential neighbourhood at sunset, where *sakura* were bathed in the soft orange hues of twilight, complemented by rows of beautiful lanterns swaying among the branches. At the conclusion of a long and tiring day, we paused, spellbound, to appreciate the tranquil scene before us.

Aside from cherry blossom viewing, don't miss the countless *sakura*-themed product tie-ins, from pastries, mochi and ice creams, to jewellery, key chains and umbrellas. My favourite items? A range of perfumes and body shampoos from Pola (a renowned Japanese cosmetics brand), and a necklace from Mikimoto.

After the festival, Tokyo returns to its colourless state and the population's mood shifts back to serious mode, so the spring season is a rare opportunity to see the city and its people completely transformed. I'm no fan of human congestion, but the Japanese are disciplined and unfailingly polite, not to mention hyperexcitable upon learning you're a tourist. It is a country that is dear to my heart.

If you decide to make the trip, the ideal period falls between late March and early April. And to quote a famous line from *The Hunger Games*: may the odds be ever in your favour. ■



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#### Photos

1. Tokyo Tower
2. Chidorigafuchi
3. Somei Yoshino cherry blossoms
4. Boat pier, Chidorigafuchi
5. Sumida Park
6. Meguro River