

KOKE-DERA - A ZEN PARADISE NOT EASILY ACCESSIBLE FOR TOURISTS



One of Japan's greatly kept secrets is the Koke-dera, a beautiful Moss Temple which dates back to the 8th century. In order to protect it, local Buddhist monks changed the temple regulations and that is why it is quite a challenge to set foot in the Zen paradise these days.

Japanese gardens have stood the test of time and are very much admired, studied and copied all over the world. The skill of Japanese gardeners has developed into proper art and there are many fine examples to be found around the country of the rising sun. One of the most bizarre examples is the Koke-dera, located in Saiho-ji Temple.

The origins of Saiho-ji may be traced to the Nara Period in the 8th century. As years went by, the temple deteriorated, until in 1339, one of the Japanese most famous gardeners, Muso Soseki, restored it to absolute perfection. In fact, he was commissioned to recreate the entire Saiho-ji as a Zen Temple and Koke-dera - the garden - was considered a true Zen Paradise.

Over the centuries, nature took over and **the garden was gradually covered in moss - not just one but a striking 120 different kinds of moss**; Koke-dera has turned into a haven of peace and stunning beauty which needs to be protected. It comprises of the Golden Pond, in the shape of a Chinese character meaning 'heart' and is surrounded by a dry garden. There are three islands on the pond as well.

Until 1977 the tourists were floating in, however, the temple regulations had to change in order to protect the garden. Today, **if anyone wishes to pay a visit, they need to apply at least 20 days prior to their planned visit by means of a return postcard.** Upon arrival, visitors are expected to pay a 3,000 yen entrance fee and will then spend hours copying the sutra. Only after such an 'ordeal' are visitors worthy of spending 90 minutes on the grounds. However, it is likely to be one of the most memorable 90 minutes of their lives, well worth all the trouble.

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