

Cherry blossom festival renews life for Japanese

BY MATTHEW FISHER, CALGARY HERALD APRIL 8, 2012

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A young woman takes pictures of fully bloomed cherry blossoms at a park Saturday in Tokyo, where citizens are flocking to the best spots for viewing the beautiful blooms.
Photograph by: Yoshikazu Tsuno, Afp-Getty Images , Calgary Herald

The annual explosion of cherry blossom blooms is such a huge national obsession in Japan that television networks send squadrons of helicopters aloft over the capital to provide live bulletins as the first white and pink buds burst open across the city.

Not to be outdone, national newspapers publish complicated maps and graphs of the Japanese archipelago. They forecast when the cherry blossoms should flower as they do so at different times every year between March and May according to temperature, winds, latitude, altitude and how much or how little snow had fallen over the past few months.

This year's Hanami, or "flower viewing," had been keenly awaited because it had been a particularly harsh winter and because it follows by a year the earthquake/tsunami/nuclear disasters in northern Japan, which caused nearly 20,000 deaths. As the country was not in much of a celebratory mood, many cherry blossom festivities were cancelled last spring.

As big a deal as I knew cherry blossom viewing to be in Tokyo, nothing quite prepared for the scene Saturday as tens of thousands of Japanese swarmed the Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden in the heart of the city for a first glimpse of this year's blooms. The grounds were so crowded that it took about 20 minutes to squeeze in through the main gate and enter the park and another 20 minutes in a second long queue to shuffle out the gate.

Nor was there much more space to walk around once inside the park. There was often gridlock on the foot bridges that span several ponds. Picnickers who had staked out prime territory hours in advance sprawled everywhere under the trees. Photographers lined up three or four rows deep to take pictures of the most spectacular blossoms and the especially beautiful weeping cherry blossom trees.

Sharing the glories of nature with so many others at the same time is not a particularly Canadian thing. But what can you do? Cherry trees are revered in Japan, the blossoms are an awesome sight and they are only in bloom for about one week. Anyway, with about 30 million people living in the Greater Tokyo Area, there is competition for space almost every waking minute, not just during the brief Hanami season.

One of the favourite vantage points to take in the blossoms in Tokyo is along the banks of the Sumida or Meguro rivers. Another is among the cherry trees at the Yasukuni Shrine, the sometimes contentious Shinto memorial that commemorates Imperial Japan's 2½ million war dead. Or nearby at Chidorigafuchi, where the cherry trees are clustered on the far side of a moat surrounding the emperor's Imperial Palace and are spectacularly lighted at night.

The most raucous of the Hanami parties may be at Tokyo's Ueno Park.

There, unlike Shinjuku Garden and many other places, which encourage families and elderly visitors and ban alcohol, a much younger, rowdier crowd plays loud music and drinks sake or beer with wild abandon.

Despite the crowds, there were parts of Shinjuku Garden that were still miraculously tranquil on Saturday. There it was policy to contemplate in relative privacy the delicate majesty of the 1,300 cherry trees of 65 different varieties that were in bloom and to steal a few moments of respite from the throbbing pace of what may still be the most dynamic megalopolis in the world.

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