

Small shops and big park in Tokyo's Kichijoji neighborhood

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This Dec. 12, 2015 photo shows people walking through a traditional-style covered shopping area known as a shotengai in the Kichijoji neighborhood of Tokyo. (Linda Lombardi via AP)



This Dec. 12, 2015 photo shows steps leading into Inokashira Park in the Kichijoji neighborhood of Tokyo. The park has a pond and small zoo. Kichijoji is also home to a vibrant retail district with small stores and a traditional-style shopping arcade called a shotengai. (Linda Lombardi via AP)

(AP) -- Visitors looking to spend a few hours away from the tourist attractions of central Tokyo might consider taking the train to Kichijoji. Along with the usual department stores and chain retailers like Uniqlo that cluster around large Tokyo train stations, the neighborhood is home to smaller shopping areas, some uniquely Japanese, and a major park.

The JR Kichijoji train station is west of central Tokyo on the Chuo line, one stop away from the popular Ghibli Museum. The museum is devoted to the work of Studio Ghibli, which is known for

animated movies including "My Neighbor Totoro" and the Academy Award-winning "Spirited Away."

As you head from the station toward Inokashira Park, you'll find cute shops with a youthful vibe selling clothes and knickknacks on side streets. Restaurants offer outdoor



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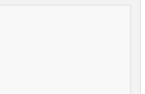
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seating, which isn't common in Tokyo. You'll actually have to look a bit for Japanese food in this part of the neighborhood, but one good choice is on the left as you head into the park: Toriyoshi, which has an English menu and specializes in yakitori (grilled chicken skewers). Nearby cafes specialize in French toast, waffles or crepes, and French and Italian food. At a Starbucks, locals hang out with their dogs and babies.

A flight of stairs leads down into Inokashira Park, full of big trees around a pond, where you can rent pedal boats and see street performers on weekends in nice weather. The park is also a good spot for viewing cherry blossoms in season.

Follow the bridge over the pond to a small zoo. The first section is mostly birds; it's a bit of a hike to the rest of the zoo, but it's a nice walk. Visitors from places where squirrels roam freely might be surprised to find squirrels living here in a walk-through enclosure. Admission to the zoo is 400 yen for adults (about \$3.35) and a small amusement park area has rides for children.

For a traditional Japanese shopping experience, on the other side of the station look for tall blue-green metal framework. This is the Sun Road shotengai, a shopping street covered by an arcade. It's like a shopping mall unrolled into one long row but a bit more practical, selling everything from eyeglasses to vegetables. Shotengai are fading in some parts of Tokyo, but this one is modernized and vibrant. You'll find boutiques, discount shops, shoes plain and fancy, books, coffee places, all kinds of clothing, drugstores, and restaurants, with more Japanese food in this area than other parts of the neighborhood. You can get an English brochure about the broader area at a tiny tourism booth (blink and you'll miss it) on the right.

For a trip back in time to the mid-20th century, don't miss Harmonica Yokocho, a warren of narrow alleys full of tiny bars and restaurants that's liveliest at night but worth a look any time of day. (The grid of alleys is said to resemble the reeds of a harmonica.) To find it, look to your left inside the Sun Road entrance; if you see tiny alleys that you're not sure are public, that's probably it. You can also access the alleys from the main road, directly across from the station. Some stores here are run by younger people, and boutiques are popping up. But there's also an old, cheap clothing shop and a restaurant with the dust of decades on its plastic curtain and paper lantern. That slightly scruffy atmosphere is part of the area's charm.

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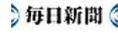
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