



Fully restored, Ashikaga Gakko—Japan's oldest school—is set among moats, pine trees and angled earthen walls.

When Travel is an Education

You won't find Ashikaga in any guidebook, but just 50 miles north of Tokyo is a sleepy town of textiles whose center of learning predates those in North America and most in Europe. Some say "school," others "university"; but Ashikaga Gakko is Japan's oldest. One theory dates its founding to 832. More reliable records show that, by the early 1400s, it was in full swing.

Ashikaga Gakko attracted some 3,000 students, not an insignificant number at a time when limited-express trains didn't crisscross the hinterlands. The school gained a reputation in Europe after 1549 when Jesuit-founder Francis Xavier hailed it as "the largest and most renowned university of Eastern Japan."

You have only to climb the pedestrian bridge outside the tourist office for a panoramic view of what impressed the Spanish missionary. Thatched roofs are in sloped harmony with the mountainous horizon of Tochigi Prefecture. Fully restored to its period architecture, Ashikaga Gakko's moat and angled earthen walls surrounding the complex further isolate this patch of land that modernity

has bypassed. You don't have to look far to appreciate the contrast. Rising behind traditional roofs are concrete rectangles typical of Japan's cookie-cutter school design.

Long before JETs and ALTs preached the importance of pronouns to Japanese students of English, Confucianism and Chinese medicine were the subjects of the day. Although teaching ceased in 1872 after the Meiji Revolution, Confucius maintains a statuesque presence in a shrine dedicated to this ancient Chinese philosopher. Built in 1668, Japan's oldest Confucian shrine has an annual festival in November celebrating his legacy. The school's centerpiece, however, is the main hall (classroom) and living quarters that overlook a garden with pine trees and sculptural grassy mounds.

Behind the school and over another moat sits Bannaji Temple from the 13th century. Pigeons cooed from wooden perches on the temple's southerly main gate, warming in the afternoon sunlight that cast dramatic shadows on spiritual grounds. Only a temple gong interrupted the

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stillness, refreshing to eardrums ordinarily beating from the din of the capital.

Across the street from the birds stands a weathered building with distinctive architecture. Multi-layered shutters built into the walls around the windows accent a fireproof storehouse from the earlier Edo Period (1603-1868). Constructed of unfired clay bricks with bamboo, the structure's 1ft- (30cm-) thick walls were built to outlast fires and earthquakes, thereby safeguarding the prized possessions of villagers.

After watching the sunset from the hillside Orihime Shrine, a friend and I headed back to the station by cutting through the now-darkened precincts of Bannaji. Walking away from the temple down cobblestone Daimon-dori, we searched for a snack before the two-hour train ride back to Tokyo. Sure enough, a colorful collection of animals painted on rocks outside of Amakaraya Café lured us inside.

A polite question about their production turned into a deep hour-long conversation with the affable café-owner and painter, Tamura-san, who didn't hesitate to demonstrate that there was more than met the eye with his creations.

An egg and felt marker arrived with our cheesecake and coffee. The artist drew big ears, small eyes and curly tail on the oval canvas. We drew forkfuls of cake. No sooner had we guessed, "mouse," than a new nose and set of eyes appeared on the other side.

"Panda," we shouted with our mouths full as he rotated the egg again. A rabbit and crow joined what was turning into a zoo. The incarnations were a metaphor for Tamura-san's philosophy that an egg isn't just an egg; that life is open to interpretation.

Ashikaga's communal spirit remains intact like the shared storehouse. The day prior to our visit, he recounted how shopkeepers along Daimon-dori made *mochi* and passed it out to children, just like he does with his "pets." He said that these acts of kindness – through painted rocks or rock-like sweets – maintain the old values of doting on children.



Bannaji Temple—a tranquil retreat.

A meaningful chat in a cheerful café was just the antidote to business as usual in time-pressed Tokyo. We had learned a lesson about the essence of a country town with ancient educational roots.

Getting there

Ashikaga can be reached from Shinjuku via the Shonan-Shinjuku Line, with a transfer at Oyama for the Ryomo Line (¥1,890). Tobu Ryomo trains from Asakusa are faster (¥1,940), but drop you at Ashikagashi Station, about a 15-minute walk from the more central JR Ashikaga Station.

Jeffrey Tanenhaus is a freelance writer and photographer based in Tokyo.

