

A woodland forest and Shinto shrine in busy Tokyo

By Linda Lombardi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Just steps from one of the busiest, most modern parts of Tokyo, it's a soothing surprise to feel like you're in the heart of a primeval forest. It's maybe a bigger surprise to learn that the trees are not at all as ancient as they feel.

Slip out of the crowds in Tokyo's Harajuku neighborhood and head into the grounds of Meiji Jingu shrine and you'll immediately find yourself walking through a woodland of enormous trees. At first, a raucous bird cries and the sound of the wind in the branches competes with noise from the nearby Yamanote Line train station.

Gradually, though, the sounds of the modern world fade as you walk along the wide path. With lots of broadleaf evergreens, there's green here even in cold seasons. If this forest doesn't convert you to the ancient Japanese belief that spirits dwell in features of nature like large trees, at least you'll understand why they felt that way.

Meiji Jingu shrine is no secret as a tourist attraction, but the history of the grounds is less well known. It's hard to imagine it when looking at the huge



mature trees, but a hundred or so years ago, this was all essentially bare ground. It was planted carefully by experts to give a natural succession of tree species and is now a functioning ecosystem, home to many birds and other animals and native plants.

The shrine itself, dedicated to Emperor Meiji and Empress Shoken, who died in

1912 and 1914, is not so much serene as solemn. It's also generally quite full of people. If the mood doesn't suit, move along, because what we're here for is really the grounds. The route from Harajuku is always well populated, although the broad, long path can swallow up quite a number of people without feeling too crowded. But other paths leading out from

PEACEFUL PATHS. Visitors walk at Meiji Jingu, a Shinto shrine in Tokyo, in this December 10, 2015 file photo. The shrine, located just steps from one of the busiest, most modern parts of Tokyo, includes a woodland filled with enormous trees. (Linda Lombardi via AP, File)

the shrine tend to be relatively empty even a short walk from the shrine precincts.

The site is not a place where you sit and contemplate so much as a place where you walk and meditate. There are some benches in the shrine precincts but generally not along the paths. There are also places to sit and rest in the small inner garden, a more typically manicured Japanese garden with a pond, for an admission fee of 500 yen. The pond has water lilies and the garden is famous for irises that bloom in early summer.

If all of that walking leaves you calm but too hungry to make it all the way back to Harajuku, sustenance is available on your way out at a full service restaurant and a small food court offering ramen, curry, and other casual Japanese favorites.

Note that shrine visits are traditional on certain Japanese holidays and these days are probably not a good time to visit unless your idea of serenity includes crowds like what you'd find in Times Square on New Year's Eve. In fact New Year's in Japan is one of those holidays.

China city holds dog-meat-eating festival despite protests

By Peng Peng
The Associated Press

YULIN, China (AP) — A city in southern China went ahead with an annual dog-meat-eating festival despite heavy criticism and protests from animal-rights activists.

Vendors slaughtered dogs and cooked their meat in dozens of restaurants across the city of Yulin, in an event that has come to symbolize the cruelty and potential for spreading disease associated with the largely unregulated industry.

Activists bought dogs from dealers who had been planning to slaughter them, while local residents complained that outsiders were ruining what they consider a local tradition.

"We came to Yulin to tell people here dogs are our friends. They should not kill dogs in such a cruel way and many of the dogs they killed are pet dogs," said Yang Yuhua, a volunteer from the central city of Chongqing.

An estimated 10 million to 20 million dogs are killed for their meat each year in



China, and the Yulin event has become a lightning rod for criticism.

Many of the dogs are believed to have been pets stolen from their owners or simply picked up off the street. They are stuffed in cages and trucked to the city

about 1,250 miles south of Beijing in the province of Guangxi, often without food or water.

Cats eaten at the festival are subjected to similar ill treatment.

The local government has in recent years sought to disassociate itself from the event, forbidding its employees from attending and limiting its size by shutting down some dog markets and slaughter houses.

"The so-called dog-meat-eating festival has never been officially recognized by government or by any regulations or laws," said an official reached by telephone at the city government's general office.

"We hold meetings every time before the so-called festival, discussing counter measures such as deploying local police, business, and sanitary authorities to inspect and deal with those who sell dogs," said the official, who like many Chinese bureaucrats would give only his surname, Liu, because he was not authorized to speak to reporters.

Opponents this year expanded their campaign to the United States, petitioning politicians in San Francisco to pressure their Chinese colleagues into calling for an end to the slaughter.

Actors and celebrities, including Matt Damon, Joaquin Phoenix, and Rooney Mara, also released a public-service announcement calling for an end to the torture and killing of dogs in China, South Korea, and other Asian nations.

The brief clip focused particularly on the

DOOMED DOGS. A woman with a load of dogs on her tricycle cart arrives at a market during a dog-meat festival in Yulin, in south China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Restaurateurs held the annual dog-meat festival despite international criticism. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

practice of killing dogs by beating, burning, and other painful methods in the belief that dying by torture makes their meat taste better.

Such efforts may be having an effect. Wendy Higgins of Humane Society International said activists on the ground reported fewer dogs killed and less visible dog meat eating than in years past.

The society "urges the Yulin authorities to take decisive steps to spare countless animals from a fate involving a brutal beating to death with metal poles," Higgins said in an e-mailed statement.

As many as 10,000 dogs are believed to be killed during the event, which falls around the summer solstice. Promoters say eating dog meat during the summer helps ward off the heat and maintain a healthy metabolism.

"It's been a tradition for years for us to celebrate the festival. We can't change it simply because they (animal lovers) love dogs," a local resident, who gave only his surname, Huang, told The Associated Press.

"They don't want us to eat dog meat. We eat dog meat to celebrate the festival, but since they've come here, they've ruined our mood completely," Huang said.

Opponents say the festival is cruel and has no redeeming cultural value.

Another animal-rights activists, Chen Chun, said the push to end the Yulin festival was part of a larger campaign to pass legislation banning animal cruelty. A draft animal cruelty law remains mired in China's legislature and prosecution of dog thieves and those violating animal transport laws remains lax, activists complain.

"Our ultimate goal is that the country can make a law to protect animals, especially dogs here," Chen said.

Activists debated and argued with local residents, with police intervening at times to prevent any physical confrontations.

Activists said rallies held around the country to oppose dog eating, as well as outrage on social media from the growing ranks of dog lovers, are already having an effect. Dog-meat restaurants have been

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