

## Points of View

The Japanese love lists! Whether it's the 20 most beautiful waterfalls, the 10 loveliest gardens or 5 things you must do on a rainy afternoon in Saitama, the superior judgments of the list makers are hugely popular and avidly followed.

Take the 3 best views in Japan. I've ticked off two off these so far; I'm leaving Amanohashidate for now as I'm a bit put off by that undignified maneuver you are expected to carry out there which I don't even want to witness, never mind perform. But judging by the crowds that congregate at all of these locations it's clear their top 3 status has done wonders for the tourist industry.

If the Japanese approach to these rankings is top down and serious, in Britain it is more bottom up and light-hearted. There are no official lists but opinion polls are regularly conducted to decide the loveliest this or the greatest that. One of these saw Wastwater in the Lake District voted the nation's favourites while in another Salisbury cathedral took the top prize. Polls like this provoke lively debate and fill column inches on slow news days but are not taken that seriously.

So why the difference? On the whole the British distrust and prefer to avoid definitive statements about the best or the most beautiful or anything really. One reason may be linguistic. The word *opinion* originally had a negative connotation and still today the British take a roundabout route to giving one. We favour tentative or vague language to suggest, rather than insist; to qualify rather than clarify. For example:

*The view from parliament hill is one of the most beautiful in London.*

*Loch Lomond is among the loveliest fresh water lakes in Scotland.*

Often we will add a rider like 'Is regarded as....' or 'Many people think that....', which we like to claim are polite but are in fact cowardly, cop out phrases whose real meaning is –'Don't blame me if you're disappointed or I turn out to be wrong.'

And after all, what constitutes a great view anyway? As I see it, the best views of all are the ones that we didn't expect. The most eye-popping sight I ever witnessed appeared to me one dark evening when I was wandering around West London, hopelessly lost, in search of a friend's house. I turned a random corner, looked up and was mesmerized by the sudden immensity of the old twin-towered Wembley Stadium, looming gigantically in front of me, lit up and shimmering like an alien mothership. It was impressive because I hadn't realized I was anywhere near it and had thus had no preparation for it. I had a similarly jawdropping experience in Tokyo once when I saw the extraordinary sight of an old man walking along the street, naked expect for a huge mawashi type loin cloth, with a tiny dog perched on each shoulder. What could prepare you for that?

But despite my reservations about lists I do have my own personal British sankei, places so rich in dazzling vistas that you may have an experience similar to that described above just by wandering around and keeping your eyes open:

- Perth – Scotland's Kyoto, often overlooked but less obvious than a trip to Edinburgh and potentially just as rewarding. A gem.
- Portmeirion Wales – Italianate elegance in North Wales. It shouldn't work but it does. Unlike anywhere else in Britain.
- Parliament Hill London – the only view in Britain protected by law. I'll say nothing more about it – see for yourselves.

And my general advice would be to travel light to these destinations. Don't bring any preconceptions. Don't expect too much. Avoid looking at pictures beforehand. And once you get there, just meander and see what presents itself. Don't look for the view; let the view find you.