



Where Less is More

Fukuoka, a Japanese city, is the sustainability capital of the world

BY ARUN KATYAR

FUKUOKA IS on nobody's holiday map. That's a good thing. It isn't crowded with people lining up to see ruins of forgotten civilisations, or gaping at paintings by Monet and Manet (the difference between which few can tell), clamouring for the next Disney ride or getting pictures shot sipping a Pinot Grigio in a European vineyard. Of course, these are also good things. Who doesn't want to flaunt a picture of themselves at the Niagara as seen from the Falls Drive? But Fukuoka? Err, excuse me, can you point it out on a map? Right away. The small dot on the south-west coast of Japan, near Korea, in the middle of the flight path between Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is Fukuoka. With its sister city, Kityakyushu, it is the Sustainability Capital of the World, according to UN Habitat. When you come to Fukuoka, you'll find yourself just a handshake away from the future.



Fukuoka's skyline (top); a reindeer installation made of recycled plastic water bottles

In 2010, a UN Global Compact-Accenture CEO Study called A New Era of Sustainability found that 93 per cent of CEOs believe that sustainability issues will be critical to the future success of their business. KPMG's Sustainability Yearbook 2012 says that reporting on sustainability performance by Indian companies has increased in the last five years, but only 20 of the top 100 Indian companies were reporting their efforts publicly.

This makes me suspect the obvious: that as soon as Indian CEOs have had their fill of gyan from sustainability conferences and have figured that recycling paper and using CFL bulbs will not cut it alone, they will wing it to places that are showing real results. Fukuoka will become an enlarged dot. In 2006, *Newsweek* listed Fukuoka as amongst the 10 most dynamic cities in the world. In 2012, global affairs magazine *Monocle* ranked Fukuoka number 12 in its most liveable cities index. Fukuoka is Japan's curved ball on the tourism map.

But why wait for the collapse of global tuna fishing, the melting of ice caps and for already auxiliary cultures to be reduced to Nat Geo documentaries? Turn up in Fukuoka. You won't regret it.

You first notice the bicycles. Fukuoka has 2.5 million people, and each seems to have a bicycle. The streets are lined with bicycle parking facilities and they have a massive



THINKSTOCK



The ACROS building has 120 varieties of 50,000 plants, which keep the structure cool

underground bicycle parking lot at the main Hakata train station. It's always full. Although the city has generous, wide streets and there is no crowding typical of Asian cities, it is almost impossible to take a picture at any time of the day without a bicycle in the frame. It also tells you that the best way to discover Fukuoka is on a bicycle. Rent one as soon as you can. Tell your hotel concierge that you want a *jitensha* and assume you will have to

pay anything between 600 to 1,500 yen for four hours to a day, depending on the type of bicycle. Grab a cycling map and it's easy to find your way around.

Fukuoka also has a remarkable absence of policemen on the streets. No police station has more than a single person on duty at any given time. In most cities, you'd imagine that the more police officers and police cars you see, the safer the city. But Fukuoka's thinking is dif-

ferent. Their metric for safety is based on how few policemen they can do with — not how many. The fire chief, Yutaka Miura, at the Fire Prevention Bureau, told me that growing a police force is not sustainable. Instead, a city must work towards lowering the demand for law enforcers itself.

That — lower the demand instead of increasing the supply — is the central theme of Fukuoka. In 1978, Fukuoka had a severe drought which restricted water supply for 287 days. The city decided to take action to stabilise and secure its water supply. By the time they were through with streamlining water distribution, the number of people working in the Fukuoka City Waterworks Bureau itself had reduced from 140 to 60. Today, Fukuoka consumes just 125 litres of water per person a day, the lowest in Japan. An adequate amount per person according to the Safe Drinking Water Foundation is 235 litres; as a matter of comparison, Americans use 380 litres per person. In Fukuoka, less is the preferred style.

But what's so exciting about finding people using less water or not seeing policemen, you may wonder. For me, it is Fukuoka's sustainability DNA that is exciting. Fukuoka is a port city. It produces the largest catch of sea food. Late one night, on my first visit to the city, I was taken to a *yatai* or a riverside handcart. Freezing from the cold, we pushed aside the plastic cover of the cart and sat down for a

TRAVEL

glass of shochu, a zesty local arack, with a dash of warm water, casually popping ome-boshi or sharp, salted, preserved plums.

Soon enough, with the yatal playing American jazz, the food began to flow and I was offered a helping of kujira, Japanese for whale. Whale! Hang on. Isn't that a banned substance on a dinner plate? Won't the WTO turn up, training its cross-wire on us? But my Japanese friends, by now fuelled by the shochu, drowning out the jazz playing in the background with their loud, boisterous argument, thrust the whale sashimi at me, saying it was caught for research purpose and could not be wasted. Whale is not something Westerners get easily exposed to in Japan. But the argument for it is compellingly Western: studies show that a kg of whale meat produces just 1.9 kg of greenhouse gases as opposed to 15.8 kg for beef, 6.4 kg for pork and 4.6 kg for chicken. If you pay attention to the Japanese, especially after a glass or two of shochu, you go back with a great case against livestock farming that the west does not question (as an Indian, I am somewhere in between east and west and enjoy my kujira and basashi, or raw horse, without remorse).

But did you notice something? The argument for kujira was to do with sustainability. Let me move that lens of sustainability a little across dinner bowls. Japan has a chain of Tonkotsu Ramen shops called Ichiran. Don't confuse Tonkotsu, a white broth made by boiling pork bones, with Tonkatsu, which is a crumb fried pork cutlet. Ichiran has nothing on its menu other than Tonkotsu Ramen, a speciality of the Fukuoka region. You go to Ichiran and buy a meal ticket from its vending machine. An electronic display outside shows you the seats that are empty. Pick the seat you want to be at. Some shops have eating booths with bar stool seating which I strongly recommend. The booths have a water spout, space to keep just one bowl of soup and a glass of water. You customise your order for the pork and noodle soup on a sheet of paper, press a button in front of you and within seconds, the tiny bamboo curtain in the booth opens directly into the kitchen with a person to take the order. The sheet with your order is picked up, and the bowl of soup pushed through the bamboo curtain on to your booth table. You eat. Enjoy. You leave. There are no waiters fawning over you, no one to serve water — you help yourself to water in the booth. There is no wait for a bill or for change. With minimum fuss, you get the best bowl of Tonkotsu Ramen you are likely to find anywhere in the world.

Fukuoka makes me think. Am I being exposed to alien Japanese culture or am I privileged to look through a window into the future? A couple of years ago, I was in Kitakyushu, the sister city of Fukuoka, where wash basins didn't have automated on-off sensors to reduce water wastage. Instead, they had a small lever positioned at exactly the point where your elbow falls on the wash basin while using it. I have never seen any-



Bicycles on a street (top); a Tonkotsu Ramen shop

thing like it before. You press the lever with your elbow to turn on and off the tap, without moving your hands away from the stream of water. It is a hundred times more effective than high-tech sensors that continue to provide water even when you don't need it — and you just look on helplessly.

Fascinated, I discuss the design with a local municipal official. He smiles. They do things differently here. He points to his shirt and asks me to touch it. It is finely spun cotton, better than the one I am wearing. He tells me that his shirt — and his cap and that of all the schoolchildren in Kitakyushu — is made from recycled pet bottles.

Officials from Narendra Modi's government were co-incidentally present at the same time while my eyes were dangling on their stalks as I was first discovering Fukuoka.

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ka. His government was signing an MoU for the transfer of sustainable technologies to Gujarat. Yes, Fukuoka and Kitakyushu are exporting their sustainability practices. They have more than 250 engineers all over the world teaching others how to manage the environment, water, land and civic services.

As you walk past ACROS, short for Asian Cross Road Over the Sea, an art, culture and information exchange in Tenjin, the heart of Fukuoka, you will be drawn towards it. The building has 120 varieties of 50,000 plants running up its 14 storeys. They reflect the seasonal changes you see on the mountains that surround Fukuoka. The soil and foliage have a cooling effect on the building. It prevents the massive building from becoming a heat island and contributes towards neutralising carbon emissions. ACROS is a landmark in global architecture.

I think about ACROS as I walk through a massive upmarket mall in December. It's cold and Christmas carols are playing; there is festivity in the air. The malls are full of Christmas bling and lit-up reindeer dot the walkways. I stop dead in my tracks. The reindeer are made of recycled water bottles. ■

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