



In Fukuoka, Yanagawa is popular with tourists because of its canals that span a total length of 470 km

# Zen city

Fukuoka might not be half as funky as Tokyo, but the harbour city, where the first Zen temple was built, has a quiet charm all its own. **By Arun Katiyar**

▶ WHAT IS IT ABOUT JAPAN that makes it a natural home for samurai and robots alike? Where the most widely practised cultural activity is karaoke. Where you make obnoxious slurping noises while sucking up your soba noodles to compliment the chef. Where it is considered an insult when you tip for a service. Where a 90-member all-girl band (go ahead, look for AKB48), some of whom are computer generated, is a USD 200 million business. Japan is hauntingly cryptic. And, it wears disconcerting Hello Kitty contact lenses that make it difficult to look it in the eye. But, there you are. There is something irresistible about Japan. It is trying to say something important to us: about honour, nobility, focus, discipline and life. But, every time

ALAMY



A street stall along the riverbank in Fukuoka

we listen, all we see are inscrutable faces on Tokyo subways and, if we are fortunate, a few awesome tattoos.

A couple of months ago, I found myself at the lunch table with Yutaka Aso, the chairperson of the Kyushu Economic Federation and the elder brother of Japan's former prime minister Taro Aso. Yutaka Aso had just finished telling us, while demonstrating how to gently extricate a sea snail from its shell using a toothpick, how the southern Kyushu region, where Fukuoka is located, was working towards improving its relations with other Asian countries. Kyushu wants to make sure it doesn't miss out on the tourist action that the Tokyo Olympics, in 2020, will generate. When Fukuoka lost the bid to host the 2020 Olympics, the lapse was considered so serious that the mayor of Fukuoka was voted out. Which is a pity — not the mayor being voted out, which I can't comment on, but the region of Kyushu not being exposed to the world as a travel destination. The region is spectacularly beautiful. The people smile a lot. There are no amusement park-style tourist traps.

Fukuoka may not be half as funky as Tokyo, but Asians will love its friendly, warm

atmosphere. It is the home of shochu, a local brew that is popular among youngsters. It is home to the magnificent, all-weather Fukuoka Dome, home ground of the Fukuoka Softbank Hawks, a professional league baseball team. And, it is where the first Zen temple, the Shofukuji Temple, was built some 800 years ago. I head to the temple on a drizzly, overcast morning. The wooden floors and walls of the temple glow warmly in the silence. The Zen garden in the courtyard sits in still perfection.

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We have matcha, a Japanese green tea, in the traditional style, in handcrafted chawan or matcha bowls. It is an opportunity to experience omotenashi, the spirit of selfless Japanese hospitality.

We have the overwhelming privilege of Yoritomo Minamoto, the 133rd descendant from an unbroken chain of Zen monks, prepare the tea for us. The tea is shade-grown and powdered to a fine dust, which

has been whipped in a bowl of warm water. The resulting frothy brew, the consistency and colour of warm pea soup, is served with freshly prepared traditional Japanese sweets that are in harmony with the colours of the season. Drinking the tea is an elaborate, choreographed ritual. When the tea ceremony is over, we put on our shoes and thank Minamoto-san with a low bow of the head before turning to leave. It is a 50-metre walk through the cold drizzle to the gate of the temple. For us, the tea ceremony is 'done', an event to be remembered, savoured and recounted several times over. For Minamoto-san, the tea ceremony is not over. He waits at the temple threshold, patiently watching us until we leave the outer gate of the temple, before he turns back. It is only then, for him, that the ceremony is over.

It dawns on me that nothing in Japan is

truly over until it is correctly done. And, there is only one way to make it happen: by being patient. That's why I am reasonably certain the Kyushu region will beckon us just as strongly as Tokyo has done. The elders of Kyushu have a large stock of patience they plan to use.

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### WHAT TO EAT

#### Basashi

Basashi, essentially horsemeat sashimi, is a speciality of the Kyushu region. The meat is creamy and tasted a bit like venison.

#### Ichiran

This is a Tonkotsu Ramen chain and the undisputed global king of ramen. Ichiran specialises in just one dish: pork with noodles. You get to customise the flavour of the dish using an

order sheet. I ticked the 'medium' boxes on the order sheet and even skipped the garlic, but my head was almost blown off by the heat in the noodles. Ichiran has several outlets in Fukuoka.

#### Yatai

These famed food carts are usually stationed on the banks of the Naka river, or at subway stations. Nothing like them exists in any other part of Japan. And, they are not

cheap. But, Fukuoka's fish is supposed to be among the best in Japan. Be prepared for a loud and boisterous evening — with sake and shochu — if you are visiting a yatai.

#### Sasaya Iori

The Sasaya Iori is a chain of stores that does traditional Japanese confectionery. It has been in business since the 1700s. Try the Satsuma Imo, a sweet made of flour and sweet potato. Sweet

potato is popular in the Kyushu region for two reasons — it is cheaper than sugar, and Kyushu produces some of the most flavoursome varieties of sweet potatoes. Sasaya Iori's Satsuma Imo offers a glimpse of the Japan that combines tradition with mind-bending technology. Each of the plump, finger-shaped pieces of Satsuma Imo comes individually packaged in dark purple packets. When torn open — surprise! — carbon-

based technology embedded within the package self-activates to generate heat. Within a few seconds, the Satsuma Imo is warm and ready to eat.

#### Sushi-making

You've eaten sushi, now take the next step: make it. Learn from the sushi experts. The 90-minute class is run by the Sushi Kappo Gintyou. Call them on 092-5410193. You get to eat the sushi you make.