Where Less is More
Fukuoka, a Japanese city, is the sustainability capital of the world

BY ARUN KATIVAR

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 slipping a Pinot Grigio in a European vineyard. Of course, there 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, Kitakyushu, 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 gym 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 curated 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
The ABC 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 ajiensha and assume you will have to pay anything between 800 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 different. 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
glass of shochu, a zesty local aperitif, with a
dash of warm water, casually popping ome-
bushi or sharp, salted, preserved plums.

Soon enough, with the yatai playing
American jazz, the food began to flow and I
was offered a helping of kujira, Japanese for
whale. What do I do? 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 argu-
ment, thrust the whale sashimi at me, saying
it was caught for research purpose and could
not be wasted. Whale is not something West-
erners get easily exposed to in Japan. But the
argument for it is compellingly Western:
studies show that it is more efficient to produce
than 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 get back with a grand 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 tonkatsu, or raw horse, without remorse).

But did you notice something? The argu-
ment for kujira was to do with sustainability.
Let me move on to another issue of sustai-
nability. In Japan there is a chain of
Tonkatsu Ramen shops called Ichiran. Don’t
confuse Ichiran with the Tonkatsu, a white broth made by
boiling pork bones, with Tonkatsu, which is a
chuck fried pork cutlet. Ichiran has nothing on
its menu other than Tonkatsu 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 rec-
ommend. 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
tooth. There is no wait for a bill or for change.
With minimum fuss, you get the best bowl of
Tonkatsu Ramen you are likely to find any-
where 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-

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