Fukuoka a charming slice of Japanese culture

By Wan Xin

As I checked in for flight CA915 from Shanghai to Fukuoka, Japan, on November 26, the young clerk behind the counter said that there were so few passengers that “you can lie down across the seats.”

There was no need on the 80-minute flight, barely long enough for a rushed, cold meal.

I landed in Fukuoka for the Kyushu-Asia Media Conference. Capital of Fukuoka Prefecture, Fukuoka is on the north shore of the island of Kyushu, one of Japan’s four main islands.

With a population of 1.4 million (2010), it’s the largest city in Kyushu. This year it was voted No. 12 of the world’s most livable cities in Monocle Magazine. Fukuoka may not be a well-known destination for Chinese, but it has its share of attractions: the season’s koyo (red leaves), fresh sea air, ruins of feudal castles, Shinto mountain shrines, and matcha.

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A senior Japanese host explained to me that the interesting thing about Shinto is that people come to the shrine for very practical purposes: success in examinations, employment or marriage. It seems to lack a system of formalized scriptures or doctrines ministering to spiritual improvement.

Perhaps observance of the prescribed rituals themselves can elicit a kind of high seriousness that’s so important for any success.

Like many Japanese structures, Tenmangu is moderate in size. It afforded us here and there a view of clusters of red leaves, one of the season’s biggest attractions.

In fact, colorful leaves (koyo) are to the Japanese autumn what cherry blossoms are to spring, thus viewing of autumn leaves is a great event, whether in mountains or cities. As with all Japanese activities, viewing is governed by strict rules of etiquette.

It is so popular that the changing colors are closely monitored and included in routine weather reports. So each year, starting in mid September, the “koyo front” slowly moves southwards — at 27 km a day — from the northern island of Hokkaido to the lower elevations of central and southern Japan towards late November.

We were just in time for the last glimpse of leaves in all their glory, but too early for the plum flowers. They take center stage from early February to mid March. In Dazaifu there are 6,000 plum trees, of 197 species.

Cherry blossoms will reign in April, Iris in June, and Cosmos in October. Such has been the importance of Dazaifu, literally meaning administrative capital, that the Kyushu National Museum is next to the Tenmangu shrine. It’s the fourth national museum after those in Tokyo, Kyoto and Nara.

It was from this old capital that Japan’s first emperor set out to unify the country in the 6th century BC. It was here in the AD 4th century that Buddhist and Chinese characters were imported to Japan. And it was here that the natives of the island repelled Mongolian attempts at conquest, the most formidable in 1274 — thanks to intervention of a powerful storm.

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Fukuoka is stored, waiting to mature into glue — ready after exactly 10 years. “Just like vintage wine — vintage glue,” a visitor marveled.

One of the most memorable sights is the Shofukuji Temple, the first zen temple in Japan. Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism, which holds that enlightenment can be attained through meditation and intuition rather than faith.

Here we got an idea of how many slips there are betwixt the cup and lip.

Enjoying Matcha

The opening of matcha was preceded by a dish of dainty desserts, which were to be cut and consumed by using a toothpick-like tool called kuromoji.

The moves preliminary to the drink of tea include: taking the tea bowl on the left palm and steadying it with a toothpick-like tool called kuromoji.

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At the entrance to the museum is a futurist vaulted edifice 160 meters long and 80 meters wide, with the apogee of the roof standing at 36 meters.

In the first floor atrium, children led by their teachers were enjoying themselves in stylized Ajippa Square, where small children can experience a wide range of Asian cultural experiences.

We were privileged to be shown around the closed work area where we saw how exhibits are stored in strictly controlled conditions, and where damaged items are evaluated and repaired, using high-tech equipment. Even here high-tech goes hand in hand with tradition.

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