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 eating ramen. And, it wears disconcerting Hello Kitty contact lenses that make it irresistible about Japan. It is trying to say something important to us: about honour, nobility, focus, discipline and life. But, every time we listen, all we see are ineradicable 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 extract 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 inscrutable faces on my plate.

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WHAT TO EAT

Shirasu
Beppu is a tiny seaside town known for its hot springs. It is especially famous for its kusuri no somen — 100 mg of ramek in the Misakazato temple’s order sheet — which is said to make the noodles especially tasty. Each dish of somen is served with a side of pickled vegetables, which you can pick and choose from.

Ichiran
Located in Fukuoka, this is a famous ramen chain that specialises in tonkotsu ramen. It is the perfect place to try out some of the local specialities of the region. The ramen is creamy and thick, and the noodles are soft and chewy.

Shokoku Temple
This is the oldest Zen temple in Japan, and it is located in the city of Fukuoka. It is known for its beautiful gardens and its collection of traditional Japanese art. The temple is open to the public, and visitors are welcome to explore its grounds and learn more about its history.

At the temple, the tea ceremony is ‘done’, and the ceremony is ‘over’. The monk hands us a set of chawanmushi bowls, which are traditional Japanese tea bowls. He then pours us some hot tea from an unbroken chain of Zen monks, and we are asked to sit in silence and reflect on the beauty of the moment. The tea is shade-grown and powdery, which gives it a unique and delicate flavour.

We have matcha, a Japanese green tea, in the traditional style,../...

Fukuoka is a specialty of the Kyushu region. It is known for its fresh, seasonal ingredients and traditional cooking techniques. The area is home to many delicious restaurants and food markets, offering a wide variety of local dishes and delicacies.

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