

## **Love in Tokyo**

by Sanjay Trehan

Folks, 16 years after my marriage I have fallen in love again. Did I not think of my devoted wife and adorable daughter? Yes, but only for a moment. And after that I promptly lost my heart to Tokyo – a city where past, present and the future all come together to create magic.

I am lucky that my first visit to the Land of the Rising Sun happened in such august company. The 15 member international delegation invited by Japan's Institute for International Studies and Training (IIST) comprised 'opinion leaders' from Germany, France, US, Austria, Switzerland, Russia, Canada, Thailand, Kenya and of course, India. As part of its efforts to promote better understanding of Japan and groom global business leaders, IIST organises an annual leadership programme with the support of Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI).

If Japan today enjoys a worldwide reputation for efficiency and clockwork precision, it is richly deserved. While the Narita International Airport may not have Kuala Lumpur's avant-garde, neo-modern architecture, it is well organised and hassle free. Thanks to Kumi, a petite Japanese girl who received me at the airport, I soon found myself aboard a limousine bus to the Hotel Capitol Tokyu. At the bus stop I met fellow participant Georg Karabaczek from Austria. He was Deputy Trade Commissioner at New Delhi for three years and we clicked instantly.

### **Drive from Narita**

Narita Airport, formally known as New Tokyo International Airport, shares its name with the city in which it is located in the Chiba Prefecture. The drive from Narita to downtown Tokyo, a distance of some 60 km, can be quite exhilarating for the first-time visitor. Greenery is abundant along the way and noise reduction barriers help preserve a semblance of tranquillity amidst high-speed traffic.

Every available inch of Tokyo appears to be bristling with occupants. Skyrises stand dangerously close to the expressways. Although I am sure it must be eerie to look out of the 40<sup>th</sup> floor window and stare into the eye of an expressway, that's just the way Tokyo is. In a country that has the 9<sup>th</sup> largest population in the world (127 million with per capita GDP of US\$ 24, 900) and only 7000 islands to fit them in, optimisation is the key. And still the Japanese manage to make everything look beautiful – man-made water bodies divide the streets and Tokyo Bay is simply stunning.

Capitol Tokyu, our hotel for the stay, is built in the middle of a garden and is classy, to say the least. However, it does lack the grandeur of five star hotels back home. The fact that there's no Internet in the rooms is particularly galling. Connectivity is otherwise a problem too. Don't believe what the Airtel lady here in India tells you – Japan has its own CDMA mobile service and international roaming facility doesn't work there. Either Airtel executives have never ventured far in the Orient, or else ignorance is a virtue that the company cultivates with a vengeance.

In the afternoon, I met my friend Dr. Pooja Sardeshmukh, who is a software whiz kid with Geometric Software in Tokyo. We walked for about two hours in the *Akasaka* area and took a look at the National Theater, Ginza Shrine and the jogging tracks around the Imperial Palace. It was a Sunday and everything was quiet. I was to later discover the creative and the restless energy of Tokyo which could easily be dubbed as a 'miracle' of post World War II Japan.

## **Checking out Roppongi Hills**

Since the Leadership Programme was to begin only the next day, Georg and I decided to make good use of our first evening in Tokyo by checking out sights and sounds of the city at night. We took the metro to *Roppongi Hills* and walked the streets - plush and a little bit intimidating! Roppongi is perhaps Tokyo's most fashionable area – clean walkways, underground lighting for trees, imposing offices, a whole lot of cycles, stylish women with dual-shaded nails-clean skins-cropped hair are some of the images that come to mind. Tokyo Tower, Japan's answer to the imposing landmark built by Gustaf Eiffel in Paris, was the other highlight of our nocturnal trek. At nearly 30 feet higher than its European cousin, the world's tallest freestanding iron structure inspires awe even in the dark.

Just as Roppongi's sights had filled our senses, a local bar filled our stomachs. My Austrian companion and I downed our chicken pepper steak with Highland draught. Only later did I realise how lucky I was to get fowl for dinner. While the Japanese eat all kinds of sushi, pork, beef, octopus, snails, tortoise and lobsters, chicken definitely doesn't score high on their menu!

## **Leadership Programme begins**

Day two was when the real action began. The IIST team led by managing director Takato Ojimi met us warmly and after exchanging pleasantries, we plunged straight into the Leadership Programme. Sr. Managing Director of the Fujitsu Research Institute, Risaburo Nezu, gave an outstanding presentation on the Japanese economy. Nezu's talk tried to answer the question – where does Japan go after a decade-long recession? I observed two curious paradoxes: a) Despite very high fiscal deposit (140% of the GDP), Japan is seized with deflation and b) While businesses are trying to reduce the three excesses of over employment, over capacity and over debt, unemployment is growing at 4.5%, even with the shock of 1.29 (that's the fertility rate of Japan). Throughout the seminar, conversation kept turning to China's mushrooming economy and its growing clout in international business.

Politics was the next item on the agenda. Member of the House of Representatives, Nobuhiko Suto, gave a refreshing insight into Japanese politics and it was a relief to learn that there are at least some things in which our two countries are not much different!

With the lunchtime veggies a bit too bland for my taste, I languorously devoured some rice and then it was back to business with globetrotting executive Glen S. Fukushima. The co-president of NCR Japan spoke of changes in the domestic market from 1979 to 2004 and talked about the two faces of his country – one, global (automobiles, electronics, etc with great manufacturing competencies) and the other local (agriculture, distribution, financial, constructions, services, etc). Would they ever be united, he asked.

After a day spent doing so much mental callisthenics, the evening was a time to unwind at the welcome reception held for us. Here I met Dr Shankar of the Indian Embassy and managers from Sony, a company that I greatly admire.

## **Shibuya, here we come**

With the party over well before our bedtime, the five of us (Matthew, senior manager with a law firm affiliated to PWC in Vancouver; Alexander, Member, European Parliament; Georg, Member of The Board of Austrian Trade; Herb, Attorney at Law in Zurich, and I) thought it was a good opportunity for a close encounter with Tokyo's famed nightlife. We took the subway to *Shibuya*

where the young hang out and everybody above twenty-five is considered old. Interesting place! Overawing, in a way, as the youth have a life of its own. The place was dotted with eateries and pubs and looked straight out of a Hollywood set.

Pulsating, animated, faddish, crowded, cramped, and busy like hell, Shibuya is much more than a shopping and entertainment district situated in Tokyo's west. It's newer than its rival Shinjuku and is known for the "Love Hotel Hill". Shibuya's youth counterculture has raised the heckles of the traditional Japanese society and has been the subject of many sociological studies.

### **With the METI Officials**

Day three began with the visit to the METI office. The metro is connected to the METI office, and lo and behold, through a maze of subways, we found ourselves at the entrance of an imposing building. (Can you imagine such a thing in India!) At METI, the vice-minister for international affairs, Kazumasa Kusaka, gave us an overview of his department's workings and Japan's policies on myriad issues - energy, trade, Industry, FDI and domestic consumption. Kusaka was no doubt sharp, but I found it rather strange that he had not honed up on his English skills during his post-graduate days at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School.

At the repast with senior ministry officials in a continental restaurant, there was an unexpected bonus. METI employees Nishiyama and Takagi appeared very well informed about India and there was much that we could talk about.

### **Typhoon at Imperial Palace**

Sightseeing followed the sumptuous lunch. Although our guide, Ms Okada, reminded me of the headmistress at school with her stentorian approach, she was absolutely brilliant in managing the logistics of the tour. But even she could not have foreseen the typhoon that hit us at the Imperial Palace, our first halt for the day. A pitched battle with umbrellas proved futile and all of us got soaked. Incidentally, the Imperial Palace is one of Tokyo's most important landmarks. Protected by walls and moats, it has been the official residence of the Japanese Emperor and Empress since Tokyo became the country's political nerve centre in 1868.

From the bus, we also got to look at Ginza - the most expensive piece of real estate in all of Japan where a square meter of land costs upwards of US \$150,000!

Our next stop was at the *Sensoji Temple* located in Asakusa, a central part of Shitamachi, the old town of Tokyo. Its red-lanterned gate was amazing. It is remarkable how Japan has been able to blend tradition with modernity so effortlessly, seamlessly and without any visible conflict.

Naomi Okiyama, one of IIST's youngest members accompanied us on the tour. Naomi is a postgraduate in community development and this sensitive young lady did her best to make our sojourn as comfortable as possible.

### **Neon-lit Fairyland**

In the evening, we went for dinner at a Japanese restaurant at *Shinjuku*, which turned out to be something of a neon-lit fairyland. Shinjuku is a crazy world! If you have ever been caught in the middle of a sea of young people, you will know what I am talking about. The place is a hotbed of neo-Japan and is swarming with those who want to live life on the edge. Having failed to locate a sushi bar that would also serve chicken, we had to make-do with what was available. While I

stubbornly stuck to the poultry (done Japanese style), the more adventurous in our group sampled a variety of sushi. Food in our belly, we were all set to explore the kaleidoscopic collage of screaming neon, buzzing sounds, wall-sized electronic hoardings and of humanity in perpetual motion. Can you imagine over two million people successfully pass through Shinjuku Station each day!

Shinjuku West is the plush business district, replete with clouds-kissing skyscrapers that include the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building. Inspired by Notre Dame in Paris, it is the fourth tallest building in Japan and supposed to be fully earthquake-proof, thanks to special shock absorbing pillars and posts. The towers also serve as an observatory for viewing Tokyo's skyline. From our vantage position on the 45<sup>th</sup> floor, the sprawling city of 12 million people appeared simply breathtaking.

Shinjuku Eastmouth is the high street shopping area interspersed with strip clubs, hostess bars and pachinko parlours.

After the excitement of Shinjuku, Dr. Kumagai's talk the next day seemed a trifle off-colour. For someone who is a professor of sociology at Tokyo's Kyorin University and has published seventeen books on the subject, she spoke rather simplistically about the makings of Japanese society. She also took a pessimistic view of the country's youth and there appeared to be a huge gap between her thinking and that of Generation Now.

The infusion of some chicken sandwich and some French charm livened up proceedings. Ms. Morechand, a "social observer" married to a Japanese, gave a fascinating account of Japan's culture. Even though she sometimes bordered on the theatrical, the Frenchwoman certainly managed to hold everyone's attention during her talk.

## **Hello, Qrio**

After that it was time to visit Sony Media World's facilities. We were treated to a demonstration of high definition cameras and talked to Qrio, the latest robot from the Sony stable. Next on the itinerary was a visit to animation company GDH, where we experienced creativity in chaos. GDH's pony-tailed CEO spoke at length about the present and future of the animation industry in Japan.

Since we were already in the area, we decided to do Shinjuku again. While the others wanted dinner at a sushi bar, I found Naomi willing to give me company at KFC, the good old American chain. Ms. Okiyama is a sweet, sensitive, unassuming girl with the right set of values and I hope her hunt for a Knight in Shining Armour turns fruitful soon.

On the way back, we stopped for a nightcap at a swank beer bar in Akasaka. It was almost midnight by the time we broke up and headed for our rooms. The next day would see us begin the second leg of our journey to Nagoya and we needed to be up by 6 to catch our train.

## **Bullet Train to Nagoya**

Despite the late hour at which we had gone to sleep, thankfully nothing went amiss in the morning. By 7 the luggage had been kept out, breakfast was over at 8 and we left for the subway some 30 minutes later. But time appeared to stand still as I boarded the world-famous bullet train at precisely 9.03 am. Called *Shinkansen* in Japanese, this high-speed ride is a marvel of modern

technology and travels at an incredible 300 km per hour! Spotlessly clean and more comfortable than an airplane, it took just an hour and forty minutes to bring us to Nagoya.

On the train I shared a seat with Pierre Sauve and we got talking. What an impressive background he has! Consultant with the World Bank Institute at Paris, he was educated at Cambridge and Harvard. Pierre spoke nostalgically about an Indian friend who was the best man at his wedding, and suddenly we found ourselves discussing Indian food, Indian women and what not. I am sure Nagoya arrived much sooner than either of us had wanted it to.

### **The Toyota Experience**

Nagoya, the capital of Aichi-ken, is Japan's fourth-largest city and was rebuilt from scratch after the devastation of World War II. Today, it is primarily an industrial centre and doesn't figure prominently on the tourist map.

To us, Nagoya seemed like a more relaxed version of Tokyo. From the station we headed straight for Toyota City. And what a city it turned out to be! We had the opportunity to see for ourselves the Japanese carmaker's man-and-machine technology at work in a production facility that spans an area equal to 35 baseball stadiums. Everything that you may have seen on countless TV shows is true. Industrial robots do most of the assembly jobs and manual intervention is limited to quality checks and some basic chores. No wonder, Toyota is able to maintain a 97% uptime in its line movement! The future has certainly arrived as far as the automobile giant is concerned. On show at the Toyota plant are hybrid cars that run on fuel cell technology. A delicious Japanese lunch served to us in a double-decker bus shaped box proved to be the icing on the proverbial cake. Truly, the Toyota experience is something that I am going to cherish for a long time to come.

After the factory visit, we were driven to the site where Aichi 2005 will take place in March next year. This is a global exhibition that highlights Nature's Wisdom and suitably scenic environs are being developed at a cost of over 200 billion Yens. You will be surprised to know that nearly 90% of the tickets for the exposition have already been sold out.

Late afternoon I checked into my plush executive club-class room at The Westin Nagoya Castle. The window afforded a majestic view of the Nagoya Castle and its riverside setting was quite enthralling.

However, the reverie would have to wait since we had a packed schedule for rest of the evening. Just before the reception dinner, we were given a presentation about the Greater Nagoya Initiative (GNI) aimed at garnering foreign investments for the region. A number of the city's business leaders were present at the banquet that followed. The gathering was quite eclectic - I ended up meeting the boss man for a lumber company, the head of an iron works business and a sweet Japanese girl who had studied at an American university and was now working with Aichi 2005. After dinner, Ojimi-san took us all out for beer and sake at a typical Japanese pub. We sat on the floor and literally let our hair down. Ojimi-san also loosened up and kept the drinks flowing as if there were no tomorrow. He talked about his days in Paris, Italian women and the wine stock in his office. It was lovely to see him like this, free from the rigours of formality, deep down a warm and affable person. Certainly it was the most fun we could have with our clothes on!

## **To Kyoto with Love**

Next morning we said our goodbyes in Nagoya and took the bullet train to Kyoto. Kyoto is a beautiful town hemmed in by mountains on three sides. It was the imperial capital between 794 and 1868, and even today remains the cultural centre of Japan. With its myriad shrines and gardens, sensuously contoured temple roofs and modern-day geishas, Kyoto is a magic blend of the old and the new and is one of the most striking cities in Japan.

In Kyoto, we were staying at the Rihga Royal Hotel. We began our day with a visit to the \$3 billion semiconductor manufacturing company, Rohm. The first thing that struck me was the sanitised environment. Since it's involved in the miniaturisation of technology (Nanotechnology), Rohm has virtually eliminated dust particles from its work environment. Imagine just 0.1 microns of dust in a cubic meter of space! The production facility is fully automated and the only thing workers do is move batches from one process to another. Like in the sci-fi movies, everyone wears surgical masks and full body coverings. This was modern Japan at its best!

### **A seven-course lunch**

A seven-course lunch at Kyoto Park Hotel followed. Although the food was lip-smacking good, even the gastronomes among us were forced to abandon at least half of the super-sized chicken steaks.

Later in the day we made our way to *Kiyomizudera*, which literally translated means "Temple of Pure Water". Young Japanese flock to the Shinto shrine located inside the temple complex to pray for suitable life partners. Set against the backdrop of mountains, *Kiyomizudera* boasts of a wooden observation platform from where visitors can catch a good view of Kyoto city. Determined to play the first-time tourist to the hilt, I picked up Japanese paintings and ceramic works from the small market that leads up to the temple.

The religious circuit next took us to the *Heian* Shrine. It's set amidst a Japanese garden and appeared perfect for an extended photo shoot. The building itself is a partial replica of the Imperial Palace as it stood during the Heian Period.

Dinner was at a Japanese restaurant in downtown Kyoto's busy intersection. While the others went for sushi as usual, I played safe with chicken yakitori and Asahi beer. A stroll down the streets of old Kyoto was quite another experience. Kyoto Gion is a world of geisha bars and cabaret joints, beautifully paved roads with the stream of water dividing the two parts and trees lined on both sides. A truly spectacular setting by night!

### **Kyoto Tour**

We were drawing close to the end of our visit and yet there was so much that still remained to be seen. Day seven in Japan began with a sightseeing tour of Kyoto city. None of us could stop admiring the grandeur of the two famous temples, Ryoanji and Kinkakuji. Ryoanji is a Zen temple and is known for its rock garden. Reflecting the stark simplicity of the Zen philosophy, the garden consists of nothing more than rocks, moss and neatly laid out gravel. Every visitor is free to interpret the arrangement according to his or her own sensibilities and tastes. At Ryoanji, we were offered green tea in the ceremonial Japanese manner.

Kinkakuji was no less interesting. The temple was burnt to the ground by an obsessive monk in 1950, and later rebuilt complete with gold-foil covering. It has a magnificent garden that is perhaps the most photographed in all of Japan.

The green tea ice cream was easily the crowning glory of lunch at the plush Kyoto Okura Hotel. Once we descended from the 18<sup>th</sup> floor restaurant, it was off to our last official engagement – a visit to the handicrafts factory. At Watabun Co., we saw Japan's national dresses – the Kimono and the Noh – being manufactured. On the way back to the bus, we ran into two local belles who graciously agreed to let us click them in their traditional attire.

Before returning to the hotel, we stopped at the Kyoto Handicrafts Centre to buy the usual knickknacks – my purchases included the seven gods of Buddhism, a decorative personal mirror, wall hangings, paintings and few sundry items.

### **Grand Finale**

The grand finale of our trip was a farewell dinner organised at *Umemura's* rooftop restaurant overlooking the river in central Kyoto. *Umemura* opened a window into Japan's old-world glory. The floors were all wooden and the wall hangings intricate. Classical music played softly in the background and there was real-life geisha to complete the picture of days gone by. At the restaurant, Ojimi-san handed us our completion certificates. Although the impeccably served dinner didn't hold much delight for a vegetarian, the trainee geisha more than made up for it with a spellbinding performance. She was a 16-year-old girl who was being groomed to take up the profession.

Such warm hospitality deserved an equally worthy vote of thanks and the group called upon me to speak on its behalf. I noticed tears in Naomi's eyes as we parted and this poignant moment was the quintessence of our Japan experience.

The good times however did not end with the dinner in *Umemura*. Ojimi-san surprised us with an invitation to a wine, cheese and nuts party at a fabulous pub in Kyoto Gion. The club had lots of Indian influence and I noticed its wall hangings and upholstery were all from Gujarat. At this post dinner do, Ojimi was at his sparkling best. He ordered the most expensive red wines (much to the delight of our French friend, *Christian Bechon*, a Magistrate Senior Auditor at French Court of Accounts) and we literally set the night on fire with our spirited goodbyes.

### **Home, sweet home**

Next day, it was the long haul home. I took an express train from Kyoto to Kansai airport from where I was to board my flight. Osaka's Kansai international airport is a state-of-the-art virtual city built on an entirely man-made island, the first of its kind anywhere in the world. It was an uncanny feeling to travel over sea to reach the airport.

The JAL ground staff was pleasant to a fault and made me comfortable by supplying an airport map and every other detail that I needed to know. After flying five and a half hours from Kansai, I landed in Bangkok at about 11 pm local time.

During the flight I thought of Japan and how it simultaneously inhabited two worlds. I thought of the country's post World War II resurgence and the Japanese penchant for order and structure. (Incidentally they tend to get agitated when things don't go exactly as planned!) My thoughts also went out to Ojimi-san, a professional to the core and a wonderful host who loves to treat people.

(One has to learn the art of hospitality from him.) I thought of Reiko, Cambridge educated, loves Kyoto's religiosity and even eats ice cream with chopsticks, and Naomi, a sensitive person, who, in a strange way, is very Indian. (Naomi and Reiko are keen to visit India and I have extended them an invitation to stay with us in Delhi.) I thought of my Thai friend, Techa Boonyachai, Director of The Thai National Shippers' Council and a very large-hearted person. He branded me a vegetarian who eats chicken and said that 'I am his first Indian friend'. I thought of the generally reserved Swiss, Martin Herb, who had let slip his guard at the farewell and grown sentimental. I thought of our entire group that had met as strangers and parted as friends.

Bangkok airport was as chaotic and as tempting as ever. I let myself go in this shoppers' paradise and came back loaded with the usual duty-free goodies: perfumes, chocolates and scotch. My Air India flight touched down in Delhi at 5 the next morning and finally I was home after a journey that had lasted 18 hours.

Although oceans once again separate me from the enchanted isles, I know my love affair with Japan will continue for a lifetime.

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