Short takes from a Japan visit

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Amidst announcements of multi-million dollar energy and infrastructure aid projects for RMI and other Pacific islands, fully-paid education exchange programs for island government workers, and climate mitigation aid, seemingly small but significant bits of information from the various personalities we come into contact with illuminated life in Japan. Not necessarily material for a big story, they offer modest insights into developments in Japan.

• During Japan's booming economy of the 1980s, foreign media interest surged, with the number of foreign journalists resident in Japan peaking at about 1,000, said Kiyotaka Akasaka, president of the Foreign Press Center Japan, which sponsored the visit of five media representatives from the Pacific, including myself. "Now the number is about 500," he said. But while there are numerous television, radio, web and print journalists covering Japan for organizations in Europe, the Americas and Asia, there is not a single Pacific island media correspondent residing in Japan.

• Tokyo is gearing to host the 2020 Olympic Games, 56 years since its last hosting of the international sporting competition. "In 1964, Tokyo was crowded and dirty," said Akasaka. Clearly, Tokyo has solved the "dirty" problem as hardly a speck of litter is seen anywhere. Despite 30 million people in Tokyo during the day — 10 million of that number commute to work in the city from surrounding suburbs — public transport options reduce traffic congestion. "Traffic is now well-managed," Akasaka observed, with "traffic jams are less serious."

• While only two Japanese universities — Tokyo and Kyoto universities — make the global top 100 ranking, Akasaka said elementary, high school and adult literacy is extremely high. Our group's interpreter, Yoko Minato, said school is compulsory for children aged 7-15, which covers elementary and junior high school grades. But most students attend high school, and it is estimated that 70 percent go on to either universities or vocational training options.

• Renewable energy is still a small player in Japan's power system, with less than 10 percent of electricity produced by solar and other non-fossil fuels. In the meantime, Japan used to rely on a network of 50 nuclear power plants, but their use has been suspended with only a couple currently in operation.

• We learned of one impact of the Great East Earthquake and Tsunami of 2011 from a visit to an elementary school in Tokyo. The school, Sanya Elementary prides itself on an integrated food education program that includes a large — for a Tokyo school — garden. In years past, the school grew shintake mushrooms, but halted their cultivation in the wake of the tsunami and earthquake, which caused a disaster at the nuclear power facility in Fukushima. Radioactive fallout from the nuclear reactor accident was carried by wind and rain the 150 miles (240 kilometers) to Tokyo. Sanya Principal Kazuyoshi Yamagishi explained that gardening activity was halted for a period of time, as the school conducted regular tests of radiation levels. Gardening resumed when radiation levels subsided, he said. But mushrooms were particularly affected by the radioactive fallout from Fukushima, and are no longer being grown by the school.

• The 2011 calamity, in which thousands died, has reshaped the thinking of the public and government. In our conversations with a range of people in Japan, they commented on people expressing greater interest in moving to rural areas and in renewable energy. It's made it easier to get funding and support for research and development of integrated energy systems to reduce use of fossil fuels, and might lead to spurring shifts in population.

• A visit to Kume Island, near Okinawa, gave us a day-long tour of an experimental OTEC energy plant and the businesses that have grown up because of access to deep sea water that is both clean and cold, producing a good growing medium for aquaculture and agriculture, as well as for cosmetic products. The two most important "take-aways" from the visit: 1) developing OTEC is still in its demonstration phase, going step-by-step to prove that the computer models work in reality. This is leading to improvements and technology fixes that are reducing the cost of future OTEC plants. At Kume, they are hoping to build a one megawatt facility, which will move the ocean thermal technology to the next level, and allow for more improvements toward making a larger plant viable; 2) to be financially viable, multiple uses of the deep sea water is essential. This is why, at Kume Island, they have developed a mini-industrial center with a prawn farm, a farm growing "sea grapes," a series of greenhouses growing lettuce, cabbage, tomatoes and other garden products, and a cosmetics business. These businesses are generating an estimated $20 million annually, and more importantly, from the OTEC point of view, are paying to use the deep sea water for their products. This helps to underwrite the very high cost of installation of OTEC equipment, which rises exponentially as they move to large plants — and at the moment, with no commercial plant in operation anywhere in the world, the high cost of investment has prevented the building of a large, commercial level plant to date.

Being bullet proof

Best advice about traveling in Japan came from Junya Sugawara, deputy director of media relations at the Foreign Press Center Japan:

"Never miss this train," he advised as we stood inside the bullet train preparing to leave Tokyo for Nagoya to the south. We had about eight minutes till departure and enough time to slip off the train to buy a coffee at one of the small stores on the platform next to the train — but there are no ifs, ands or buts about train riding. Whether you are a Cabinet minister or college student, the trains run on time, to the second.

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This group of Pacific journalists was culturally in style during a visit to Kyoto. From left, businesswoman Michi Ogawa, Floyd Takeuchi, Giff Johnson, Linny Folau, Titi Gabi, Bill Jaynes and Samisoni Pareti.

Meaningful cultural moment

In Kyoto, the team of six journalists I was part of participated in a couple of cultural events, a highlight of which was being dressed in kimono and taking a walk through the park, so to speak. As we were getting done up in native attire, Islands Business Publisher Samisoni Pareti nervously asked Hawaii-based photojournalist Floyd Takeuchi if our group was going to walk down the road to a nearby temple in kimono. "Yes!" replied Floyd enthusiastically. He got the desired response from Samisoni before adding, "just kidding." To which, Samisoni let out a breath of relief.

But five minutes later, one of our kimono ladies came into the room and announced: "Right, time to walk over to the temple!" Message: Be careful what you ask for.

What was great about our walk down a main street in Kyoto and across a traffic light to the nearby temple dolled up in kimono was the spectacle we produced: reporters from Fiji, Tonga, Papua New Guinea, Hawaii and a couple of white guys hailing from Majuro and Pohnpei in these outfits.

Equally amusing was the many Japanese at the temple and driving along the road staring at us, but trying to act natural like they weren't.