



Text and photos by Dr Jimmy Teo



Say Okinawa and most people would be hard-pressed to find it on the map. Many will also tend to associate Okinawa with Japan. I learnt more about this island during my recent visit for a conference. Okinawa is the largest island of Okinawa Prefecture and it lies closer to Taiwan than to the mainland parts of Japan (Honshu and Kyushu islands). Intermittent direct flights are available from Singapore but most visitors from Singapore fly via Hong Kong or Taiwan.

The Kingdom of Ryukyu

History is fluid and often a story written by the victors; the history of Okinawa holds lessons for small island nations like Singapore. The old

name of Okinawa was the Kingdom of Ryukyu, and it maintained its independence through exercising a delicate balance of power between Imperial China and Japan. However, at the decline of the Qing dynasty, Okinawa was entirely annexed by Imperial Japan in 1879. With the defeat of Japan in the Second World War, Okinawa came under the "trusteeship" of the US. In fact, I was surprised that it was only in 1972 that Okinawa was "returned" to Japanese administration, despite an Okinawan independence movement. That said, the US maintains a large military presence in Okinawa even till today.

Naha city is the political and economic centre of the Okinawa



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Prefecture. Having my meal at a ramen bar was quite an experience. I had to fill out an order form upon being seated at the bar. Not able to read or speak Japanese, I had no clue what I was going to get. Thankfully, many technical Japanese terms are in Chinese characters; so I circled everything labelled “standard” and one “less”, presumably for salt. I was pleasantly surprised when my dinner was served – “*Oishiii!*” In any case, there are many restaurants with picture menus, and you may well enjoy the ambience of some uniquely designed restaurants in Naha city. Off the main shopping street (Kokusaidori), one can walk into the market street (Makishi Kosetsu-ichiba). Here there are many shops selling unique Okinawan products such as cane sugar and sea grapes. There is also the popular Makishi Public Market where there are many stalls selling Okinawan produce, including pork, fresh fish and the unique Okinawan bitter melon.

Out of Naha

The Okinawa Convention Center is located in Ginowan, right next to the

sea and just a short distance from Naha. The public beach is within walking distance of the convention centre. At low tide, you can walk and admire the rock pools teeming with marine life. The fresh air, clear water and moderate temperature allow for a nice long walk, which soon helps us whip up an appetite for the sunset dinner gathering. Our Japanese friends became quite the party animals once they took off their coats and ties! Their friendliness helped to make all conference attendees feel welcome, and the gorgeous sunset performances completed the evening.

The conference was well organised and offered many opportunities to network with other clinicians and scientists from all over the world. The opening ceremony even had a performance by a traditional Okinawan music and dance troupe. The conference dinner was held at Shuri Castle, which was rebuilt after being totally destroyed in the Second World War. I also managed to squeeze in a visit to Okinawa World to view traditional Okinawan arts and crafts. In it, there is also the Gyokusendo Cave, which is 890 metres long

and filled with many interesting stalagmite and stalactite formations.

Even though the conference trip was short and busy, I was intrigued by my visit and I resolved to return to drive around the island like many other tourists. It would also be interesting to go sea fishing, snorkelling and island hopping. I am getting excited just writing about it. See you there! ♦

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Legend

1. Sushi, anyone?
2. Okinawan performance at the conference's opening ceremony
3. Success! It looks edible