

1 The Kansai Region

"Kansai" is the historical name given to the region of the Osaka-Kyoto-Kobe core of central Japan including the immediate neighbouring prefectures. The Kansai area, which is comprised of the seven prefectures of Osaka, Kyoto, Hyogo, Shiga, Nara, Wakayama and Mie, is about the size of the Fraser Valley in Canada.

Canadian tourists arriving in Kyoto to visit Japan's thousand-year-old temples, are probably not aware that they have entered one of the largest industrial areas of the world. The Kansai region is home to several of the world's largest banks, the third largest stock market, 30 of the largest corporations and produces 2 per cent of both the world's gross national product (GNP) and non-communist trade.

Though small geographically, the Kansai has a population of some 22 million people, concentrated in the cities of Osaka, Kobe, Kyoto and Nara. The region is Japan's second-largest industrial, financial, commercial and population centre after Tokyo. It accounts for about 20 per cent of the total Japanese economy.

In 1986, the Canadian Consulate General was established in Osaka as part of the government's national trade strategy to boost Canada's commercial interests in Japan by capitalizing on opportunities for both trade and investment offered by the region's powerful economy. The Consulate General is located on the main thoroughfare in the heart of Osaka's business district. A staff of 10 services the Kansai region.

Osaka was the original great business city of Japan, serving as the nation's distribution centre. Many of Japan's foremost trading companies started here. The city has a population of over 2.6 million while 8.7 million people live in the Osaka prefecture. Despite being the headquarters of such large companies as Sumitomo, Matsushita, Sanyo, Minolta and Sharp, the region is now better characterized as the centre of medium and small enterprises representing some 92 per cent of the work force. A wide range of consumer goods are made here. But, where textiles were once the predominant export, consumer and industrial electronics have now taken over.

There are marked differences between Osaka and Tokyo. People from Osaka are proud of their cultural and social traditions which extend back to feudal times when the region prospered as a commercial centre developed by huge monopolies and controlled by the same philanthropic industrialists whose names still adorn the many bridges across the city's canals.

The highly competitive Osaka business community is quick to point out that it is more sensitive to customers' needs, and more direct in doing business than its Tokyo counterparts. It is always willing to try new ideas, especially if it means profit. Japanese instant noodles, "karaoke" (sing-along bars), business hotels and cigarette vending machines made their debut there before being adopted in Tokyo. The qualities of individuality and pride are the reasons, we are told, that all of Japan's six Nobel Prize winners were born or educated in the Kansai. Osaka business people are more outspoken than their counterparts elsewhere in the nation and are proud of their identity as the "Merchants of Japan."

Since the Second World War, Osaka has lost some of its commercial pre-eminence to Tokyo. But there is a determination to win back some of its economic clout and city officials are working feverishly to make the city more international and more able to capture its share of the growth Japan is enjoying. Stylish new hotels and other major facilities are now playing host to important international conferences, trade shows and exhibitions which are helping to revitalize the local economy and attract foreign business people to the region for the first time.

Climate and Dress

The climate in Osaka is generally hot and humid in the summer, and cold, frequently rainy and changeable in the winter. Business people should bring a top coat for the months of December through March and a lightweight rain coat for the months of June and July. Carrying a collapsible umbrella is a good idea.

It is a common custom to remove shoes in restaurants, houses and at tourist attractions such as temples and shrines. Wearing slip-on loafers, and judiciously selecting socks and hosiery is recommended. Most Japanese men generally wear suits and ties for business and semi-social meetings. A jacket is normally worn in restaurants. For women, a dress or business suit is recommended.

Currency and Banks

Major North American credit cards (AMEX, Visa, Mastercard) are accepted by most business establishments such as restaurants, hotels and department stores. Banks and major hotels cash travellers cheques. However, visitors should be prepared to pay cash for such expenses as interpretation services. Banking hours are normally 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday to Friday.