

## HERITAGE MATTERS



# ASUKA: JAPANESE SENSIBILITY IN HERITAGE TOURISM

Over 900 participants, including over 45 Ministers and Vice Ministers of Tourism and Culture, international experts, speakers and guests from 100 countries, gathered at the World Conference on Tourism and Culture in Siem Reap, Cambodia, February 4-6, 2015. The main goal was to explore and advance the new partnership models between tourism and culture. The UN Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals provided the context. Japanese experts actively participated. They played an important role in the rebuilding of Cambodia following the devastation of the Pol Pot regime.

Angkor Wat, and its service area of Siem Reap, is one of the most visited tourism sites in the world. The UNESCO and UNWTO partnership is critical for understanding the contributions to the local GDP and in return the investment in refinement of tourism elements through strategic policy development, local job creation and conservation of tangible sites and collections and the safeguarding of local intangible heritage. Interventions are driven through deep research and international advice and long-term planning.

A year later in February 2016, UNWTO and Japanese partners organized the International Conference on Heritage Tourism. Japan excels in developing and promoting heritage tourism. Non-renewable heritage and environmental resources are safeguarded with utmost care. They showcased their best in the first ever such meeting of UNWTO working closely with UNESCO. For the host, they deliberately chose Asuka, the ancient capital of Japan. It is close to the well-known subsequent capital establishment of Nara. Asuka takes us away from the monumental to the quintessentially Japanese lived heritage – built environment to contemporary forms of intangible heritage and historical cultural landscapes. The conference drew its inspiration in many ways from the 2011 UNESCO Recommendation on Historical Cultural Landscapes. This soft law instrument of the UN body provides guidance for the holistic development of heritage places taking broader and integrated landscape approaches.

The historical significance of Asuka is well researched in Japanese history and art. Its foundation years are from 552 to 645 CE. It begins with the introduction of Buddhism. There is prior evidence of large stone mounds and reverence for the departed, akin to the so-called Megalithic cultures. Initially, local clans were not welcoming Buddhism. It was dominant Soga family that provided the first patronage in the 6th century. Buddhist art found expression in the temples of the Asuka period. Soga probably sponsored the first significant one, the Asuka-dera. Prince Shōtoku from the Soga family was responsible for the Hōryū-ji Temple outside the city of Nara. It is the only surviving edifice of the Asuka period. The temple complex was the first Japanese site to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Its wooden structures and those of Shinto shrines in Japan provided the undertow for the discussion and

debate that led to the famous Nara Recommendation on Authenticity in 1994, providing the initial steps for opening up the World Heritage discourse. It was until then very much under the tyranny of site and fabric centeredness.

One of the important learnings from the 2016 UNWTO summit is valuing educational visitation. Education travel in Japan demonstrated the best practice of ideal balance between tourism and culture. It is important in most countries that demonstrate a sense of understanding and awareness about the value of 'heritage' in heritage tourism. In Kyoto and Nara region of tourism 47.5% of destination education visitation is by junior high school students and 17.8% by high school students. Access to the sites and museums for pupils is free. Not everything, especially one's sense of place and heritage is for making money in tourism or the market place. Studies of valuing heritage and culture show that you cannot put a price on one's heritage values.

Ishibutai Burial Mound, believed to be the tomb of Soga no Umako (end of 6th century to early 7th century) is the largest square shaped burial mound in Japan. It is made up of more than 30 stones that weigh a total of 2,300 tons. The ceiling stone weighs about 77 tons and demonstrated the high level of engineering and transport technology at the time. Tourism infrastructure includes - mini-shop, picnic area, and rest area landscaped to maximise the heritage significance of the sites; observatory provides views of the old Capital Asuka with 3 Yamato mountains and beautiful terraced fields.

Asuka-mura village provides unique homestay programs that are organized by the local commerce and industry association. Visitors can stay in traditional houses and experience Japanese lifestyle through these programs. Schools organise homestay programs as part of their educational activities. Participants exchange ideas on how to promote local resources and educational programs based on unique cultural elements. One of the most important study activities is the visit to the Asukadera Temple and its oldest Buddhist statue in Japan. The main focus is on learning about the preservation and effective use of the cultural properties.

One could go on the many aspects of Asuka's sustainable heritage development. In summary, what Japan does best is present the best possible heritage tourism with exemplary conservation and economic valuing of its invaluable heritage resources. Tourism policies assessed through demonstration projects guide the industry. Heritage education is given prominence for schoolchildren. Well researched interpretation planning ensures quality experiences for all visitors.

Accessibility and comfort for all are provided. In fact, the more you travel in Japan, the more you realise how little you have travelled in Japan. The emphasis on retaining the integrity of local and regional heritage values means that there is so much to see in the country per square mile compared to any other part of the world.



**PROF. DR. AMARESWAR GALLA**

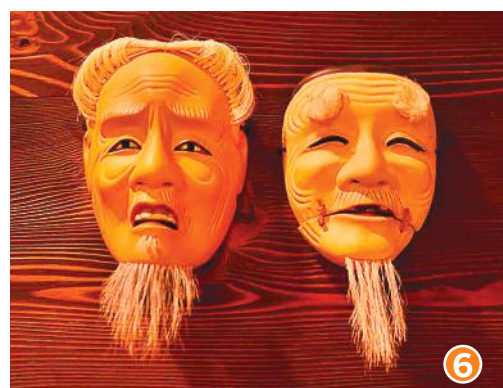
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(Professor Dr. Amareswar Galla, an Indo Australian, was the youngest expert at the Nara Conference on Authenticity of the World Heritage Convention in 1994 and an invited plenary speaker at the 2016 UNWTO Conference on Heritage Tourism in Asuka)

**NEXT WEEK**

Heritage Matters will bring you reflections from the International Conference in New Delhi on Re-imaging Museums in a Global Context

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- 1 Heritage walk built by locals with sensitivity and respecting local landscape values
- 2 Dishti Bommalu, not scarecrows, to ward off evil eyes in Asuka and Amaravathi
- 3 Bicycle rides popular with visitors providing access to Asuka and its hinterland
- 4 Megaliths, once abundant in the hinterland of Amaravathi, are valued as major heritage resources in Asuka
- 5 Ancient Royal Cuisine of Asuka served on Hobo - Magnolia Leaf and with locally made ceramics. Plastic is not allowed
- 6 Local arts and crafts are promoted. Dumping from outside cheap commercial fakes are frowned upon