

Mundialization Trip to Itabashi, Japan – October 2020

Official Delegation / City Business Trip Itinerary and Mayor's Recap

Tuesday October 15th:

Depart Toronto for Itabashi (overnight flight + 13-hour time difference ahead)

Wednesday October 16th:

Arrive in Tokyo in afternoon

Dinner with Mayor of Itabashi and colleagues

Thursday October 17th:

Embassy tour at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo

JETRO meeting (Japan External Trade Organization)

Tour of Tokyo

Friday October 18th:

Welcome ceremony in Itabashi at Itabashi City Hall (public event)

Courtesy Call group meeting at Itabashi City Hall with Itabashi Mayor and staff

Traditional lunch

Sharing of ideas

Tour City Hall

Itabashi Art Museum Visit

Visit local school

Visit to their Emergency Management Operations Centre

Welcome dinner, gift exchange, Key to the City presented

Saturday October 19th:

Soba noodle-making experience

Kimono dressing

Formal tea ceremony

Japanese drumming lesson

Annual Itabashi Citizen's Festival

Traditional Folk Entertainment Show

Sayonara Dinner

Sunday October 20th:

Bullet train to Sendai

Visit Yuriage Minato Market Cooperative in Natori & meet with CEO of the market

(learn about the 2011 Tsunami and Canada's support for rebuilding the market and presented them with a Canadian flag)

Guided Tour of Sendai Castle ruins, Gokoku Shrine, Zuihoden Temple

Overview:

As part of the dual exchanges that take part in our twinning relationship with Itabashi, Japan, both of our cities send reciprocal official delegations to each other every five years. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the City of Burlington's twinning agreement with the City of Itabashi.

Earlier this year, the Official Itabashi Delegation and Mayor Takeshi Sakamoto visited us during our Canada Day celebrations. As Burlington's Mayor, I was part of the Official Burlington Delegation that was in Itabashi from Oct. 15-18.

DAY 1

After a full day of official meetings and ceremonies, some of the highlights from our first day in Itabashi included a visit to the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo (about a 20-minute car ride from Itabashi) and a meeting with JETRO — Japan's External Trade Organization — to talk economic exchange.

We then toured Tokyo starting with a visit to the Sensoji Temple where you can read your fortune and incense is burned outside for people to wave good fortune. We next headed to Ueno urban park that features many stones and historic markers, a shrine, and a giant lake with massive water lilies.

We also toured famous commercial streets in Tokyo, including the largest intersection in the world — Shibuya Crossing — where approximately 2,500 people cross at a time.

DAY 2

To start off Day 2 of our official visit, we headed to Itabashi City Hall where our hosts literally rolled out the red carpet to welcome us. There is a subway stop right in City Hall — the rail lines are privately owned, earning revenue from development around stations.

Itabashi City Hall was filled with displays commemorating the 30-year anniversary of our twinning relationship. There was even a paper "maple tree" where people could write messages to Burlington and our citizens. Their appreciation for our city and what makes it so special and unique made me think about how we could celebrate it back home each year with the creation of an event, perhaps called "Burlington Day". One million people are served at Itabashi City Hall each year and the city has a population of about 550,000 citizens.

I was honoured to bring greetings from Burlington and on behalf our Official Delegation that included Ward 3 Councillor Rory Nisan, who is Council's representative on the Mundialization Committee (the committee that maintains our twin city relationships).

Children at the on-site day care made us paper frogs. The frog is considered a Japanese lucky animal, seen as good fortune in things returning. We also had a tour of the Assembly Hall where I had an opportunity to sit Mayor Sakamoto's chair and the large elevated chair reserved for the Chairman, who presides over the meetings. There are 46 Assembly Members, seated by parties or affiliations, similar to a parliament.

We then had a spectacular traditional lunch of sushi, soup, rice and sweets, served in a traditional-style Bento Box. These lunch boxes were used by Samurais when they would visit the Sakura trees in the spring.

After lunch, we toured City Hall and got a glimpse into the City's disaster operations room. They have two high-altitude cameras in Itabashi that are used to detect fires or floods. They also have 7 rivers through the city with rain gauges. In one rainfall, more than 3 metres fell in 30 minutes. Itabashi aims to be very environmentally sustainable. The tiny tiles on a street they named "wine block" are made with recycled wine glass bottles. Silver seats for seniors and the disabled are also made with recycled wine bottle glass. Itabashi aims to be "green" with planted medians on their streets.

We next visited the newly-renovated Itabashi Art Museum where the work of their extremely talented local artists are put on display. We got to meet the artists and learn about their craft techniques and brushes. I met an artist who was seven years old in Hiroshima when the atomic bomb was dropped during the Second World War and saw her painting that depicts her sister and other citizens who ran to the water to escape the bomb, only to be swept out to sea.

There was also a photography exhibit at the Museum with incredible talent on display. The visit prompted a goal for me as Mayor to develop a formal art/artists exchange between our Art Gallery of Burlington and local guilds with the Itabashi Art Museum and its artists.

The afternoon ended with a visit to a local school where Mayor Sakamoto's wife works. The children gathered around us and practiced their English.

Day 2 ended with an official Welcome Dinner. It was an honour to present Mayor Sakamoto and the City of Itabashi with two special gifts: an original artwork with bark and blossoms from a Sakura tree in Burlington's Spencer Smith Park, and the new Key to the City.

DAY 3

This was a day to learn about and immerse ourselves in Japanese culture. We were given traditional Kimono to wear to take part in their local festival's official opening ceremonies. They were such beautiful works of art. The Kimono are complicated, and one of the ladies with us said she couldn't put it on by herself and needed help. She also showed us pictures of herself and her grandkids all wearing Kimono for special occasions, such as graduations and weddings.

Once in our Kimono (the men in our Burlington Delegation also donned them), we were taken to a traditional tea room for a formal tea ceremony. We were told you wash your hands before entering the tea room by drawing water from a nearby pot. Similar pots were also seen outside of shrines. Inside the tea room were people playing traditional instruments. We noticed the door height of the tea room was very low and that is to force everyone who enters the tea room to bow down and lower their head — we were told it is meant as a symbol that when you are in the tea room, everyone is equal, and no one is better than the other.

In the afternoon, I joined Mayor Sakamoto, Chairman Yoshiyuki Motoyama and the Burlington delegation to lead the dancing at the close of the day-long parade for the annual Itabashi Citizen's Festival.

We had time to explore the festival, where I tried fried fish on a stick (think a large sardine — and yes, you eat everything but the head). It was sweet and salty at the same time. I also tried a bit of fish sake (fish floating in a homemade brew pan) that was locally crafted by those operating the Canadian beer tent at the festival.

We also tried candy-covered bananas (some with candy faces on them) that were a big hit at the festival, and some roasted tea that was very smooth and has no caffeine.

Earlier in the day, we saw how Soba noodles were made from scratch. Our teachers were retired people who do this as a hobby at the local community centre. It takes 3 years to master mixing, rolling and cutting Soba properly. The Soba teacher taught all the chefs at the community centre the fine art of Soba noodle-making.

We ended the afternoon with a lesson in traditional Japanese drumming where several of us in the Official Burlington Delegation were called onto the stage to teach us how to do it. The performance was at a community centre in Itabashi where Robert Bateman prints hang — they were a part of a previous gift exchange.

Day 3 ended at one of Japan's best restaurants (according to Mayor Sakamoto) for the Sayonara (good-bye) dinner. In addition to everything tasting fantastic, great care was taken to make sure the food and area looked good.

Before saying farewell for now to the Mayor of Itabashi at the dinner, I presented him with several gifts from our community, including a Cherry Blossom Vase that was intricately designed by two Burlington woodcarvers: Hugh Widdup and John Mills. The wood for the vase came from one of the original Cherry trees given to the City of Burlington by Itabashi during a twin-city presentation. The design was carved using chisels. All the branches, leaves and flowers were wood-burned for shading before they were painted and sealed. The inside of the vase is gilded in gold leaf and glazed with magenta pearl paint and then shaded with the same colour of pink as the cherry blossoms on the outside of the vase.

DAY 4

This day was one to learn more of the history of Japan and visit sites of historical significance. Our first stop was a bullet train ride to Sendai (about a two-hour train ride from Itabashi) to visit the Yuriage Port Market Cooperative in nearby city Natori.

The market there was hit by a devastating tsunami in 2011 that was caused by an earthquake under the sea. It was the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in Japan, and the fourth most powerful earthquake in the world since modern record-keeping began in 1900. The earthquake triggered powerful tsunami waves that may have reached heights of up to 40.5 metres (133 foot) and that travelled, in the Sendai area, at 700 km/h for up to 10 km inland. Residents of Sendai had only eight to ten minutes warning, and more than 19,000 were killed, many at the evacuation sites — more than 100 of which were washed away.

The tsunami was still travelling at about 60 km/h when it hit the coast — too fast to outrun or out-drive. Many people who tried to get away in their cars drowned. We were told a story of five adult children who came back to Sendai from a neighbouring city to rescue their parents, who had already been evacuated. The children ended up drowning.

There is a memorial at the Natori market to the residents who died as a result of the natural disaster. A concrete statue of a bean shows the height of the waves when they hit.

A Canadian doing business in Japan offered to help rebuild the market, and secured lumber and funding from Canada to build the new welcome centre and museum. We had an opportunity to meet the CEO, Mr. Satori, and present him with a Canadian flag to fly at the museum. He told us more than 7,000 people visit there for the market and to see the Canadian flag. It was certainly a proud moment for me, and for our country.

Our next stop was Zuihoden, the mausoleum of Date Masamune, one of the most powerful feudal lords of the Edo period and founder of the modern-day city of Sendai. Masamune was the first in a long line of Date lords to rule over Sendai from Aoba Castle. His son and grandson, Date Tadamune and Date

Tsunamune, are entombed in nearby mausoleums. Zuihoden was designed in the ornate style of the Momoyama Period. It features intricate woodwork and a rich variety of vivid colors.

Massive cedar trees surround the paths in the area and are meant to symbolize the long history of the Date clan. A museum beside the Zuihoden main building shows some of the personal artifacts of the Date family, and even some specimens of their bones and hair.

Our last stop was a visit to the Aoba Castle, built in 1600 by Masamune. He built the castle on Mount Aoba, 100 metres above the town below. Now all that is left of the castle are remnants of the outer stone walls and a guard tower. It provides a lookout onto the city. A statue of Masamune, samurai armor-clad and horseback, recalls the site's origins.

We ended the day with another amazing dinner where the restaurant's specialty was beef tongue. And yes, I ate it. And yes, it was delicious — very tender and flavourful.

Day 5 and onward were personal travel that I paid for myself while enjoying some time with my eldest daughter. Among our adventures, we visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and Park to learn, pay our respects and commit to peace among nations and peoples.

The entire journey to Japan was life-changing and we all learned so much. I'm grateful for the experience and the new ideas and relationships that resulted.

For more details on my personal trip along with photos from the entire trip, please visit my blog at <https://mariannemeedward.ca/twin-city-itabashi/overview-official-burlington-delegation-visits-itabashi-japan/>.