

Croatia-Japan, a beautiful friendship

Dr. Drago Stambuk
AMBASSADOR OF CROATIA

This year a wonderful example of friendship building has been set in motion between our two countries, Japan and Croatia. The accumulated efforts of Japanese and Croatian people have resulted in the project of the Japan-Croatia Friendship House in Tokamachi, Niigata Prefecture, a shining feat of how noble efforts can lead us along a creative path and express our humanity meaningfully, if we move forward with dedication and passion.

It all started with the soccer game at the World Cup in 2002 when the Croatian national team chose Tokamachi as its base to prepare for the coming championship. The friendship between the Croatian players and Tokamachi citizens was "love at first sight" and is still flourishing and going on strongly.

I have visited Tokamachi 10 times in the last four years and when I went there for their traditional Snow Festival in February 2006, soon after being appointed ambassador to Japan, I realized that something remarkable had happened there, which I later named the "Tokamachi factor." The tune registered on most of the Tokamachi citizens' mobile phones was the Croatian national anthem; the Belnatio Hotel, where I stayed, had a corner with Croatian posters and souvenirs signed by the players, many photographs of

them taken with children, World Cup-related fliers and souvenirs of all kinds, checkered shawls and Croatian soccer shirts, and posters of Zagreb, Dubrovnik, Split and the Plitvice Lakes.

I was taken to the "Croatian pitch," where my country's

'Tokamachi is the true capital of friendship between Japan and Croatia. I have never met people more in love with my country than the citizens of this idyllic Japanese town in the kami-loaded hills and forests of Niigata.'

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players had trained, and where the "Croatian Cup" tournament had taken place each September since 2003. The cups, Samobor crystal ball-shaped trophies, are handed by the ambassador to the winners in the different categories and photographs are taken at a granite block on which the names of all the Croatian team members present in Tokamachi at 2002 are carved. When I first did this, it dawned upon me that here was my new home in Japan. On top of this, in local restaurants one could see our players' photographs, the checkered Croatian pattern and citizens telling stories of their visits to my country.

In 2006 for the World Cup match between Japan and Croatia in Germany, Tokamachi soccer officials invited Croatians and Japanese to watch the game together on a big screen and to cheer and support the Croatian team. This embodies what I call the "Tokamachi factor." The love and attachment to each other, pure and simple, which is difficult to understand, let alone to explain.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the suggestion I made then to build beside the same pitch the House of Japan-Croatia Friendship received a delightfully enthusiastic response from the Tokamachi Football Association, the past mayor and the present one,

Yoshifumi Sekiguchi — who asked me to call him "Josip-san" in Croatian style — as well as city assembly members, officials and citizens. The project has been designed by two prominent Croatian architects, Vinko Penezic and Kresimir Rogina, who placed this house next to the pitch. It is on three levels; like the Freudian triad: id, ego and super-ego; where id is the playful, lowest-level self — close to the pitch, its mud and grass, which is going to be used by sportsmen; then the ego, the level of social and cultural encounters — the space for meetings, concerts, exhibitions; while the super-ego is the last level — the tangible symbol of this remarkable friendship in which a lantern of Japan and a lighthouse of Croatia face and embrace each other at the top with its eternal light. The construction is planned to start this summer and its official, solemn opening — with dignitaries and ordinary people from both countries, sportsmen and artists from both places — is expected in November 2011.

People-to-people relations start from grassroots interactions, as they did here in 2002, and flow like the Shinano River from Tokamachi to Niigata city and into the Sea of Japan, spreading through Niigata Prefecture — while celebrating the Croatia-Japan bond. Naming Tokamachi the "capital of friendship for Japan and Croatia," the

term that I cherish and treasure highly, makes me proud of all Japanese and Croatians who are engaged in this beautiful, emotional enterprise — it makes economics and trade appear of secondary importance. Our connection has a deep significance for

our humanity, bringing the childlike quality of openness into our eternal need for togetherness.

Therefore, long live our beautiful friendship! Today when we celebrate the Croatian National Day we should remember that it would be empty without this human touch.

Secondary to our emotional ties is our business relationship, though we should remember that Croatia's strategic position, due to its long Adriatic coast where the sea "fingers" into the European continent, providing a gateway through Rijeka, the deepest port in the Adriatic, which has an excellent new infrastructure linking the central and southeastern European investment points so important for Japan. These make Croatia geopolitically the pivotal entry country for the Far Eastern states that use the Suez Canal for its shortest connection to Europe. Using Rijeka to the investment sites cuts traveling time compared to the northern European ports by seven to nine days.

Japan is comfortable dealing with small, peace-loving countries like Croatia, culturally and traditionally at ease with her while sharing a love for nature, the four seasons and UNESCO World Heritage sites. This is evident in the recent steep rise of Japanese tourists visiting Croatia; last year about

165,000 came, 14 percent more than the previous year in spite of the recession and the flu pandemic.

Japan's highly organized and harmonious attitude toward work and enterprise matches well with the Croatian individualistic and creative approach — making our two countries comfortable working together. Among Croatia's great historical figures, Nikola Tesla, called the Leonardo da Vinci of our age, left nearly 800 patents, mostly unused, even now far ahead of their time; Rudolf Steiner, the spiritual giant and the father of anthroposophy; who traversed Eurasia. In truth, the Silk Road runs not just from Venice to Nara but from Korcula to Hiraizumi, where Marco Polo's Golden Temple dream from his book "Il Milione" found its real home.

The Croatian nation of 4.5 million people today has given the world such a number and variety of discoveries and contributions, from the cravat (necktie), fountain pen, torpedo to fingerprinting; from Tesla's principles in bringing cosmic energy to Earth to Tesla's successor Marin Soljagic working at the



Close ties: From left, Tokamachi Mayor Yoshifumi Sekiguchi, Croatian Ambassador Drago Stambuk and Croatian architects Kresimir Rogina and Vinko Penezic attend the public presentation of the House of Japan-Croatia Friendship in 2010. EMBASSY OF CROATIA

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) who recently gave us the new concept of witricity, or the flow of energy through space. The latest sensation at the motor show in Geneva is a Croatian electric mini-car with vertical-opening doors that uses energy in a smart way so that it deserves to be singled out by investors searching for bright opportunities.

Croatia is a politically stable, secure country that has become a member of NATO and is soon to join the European Union as its 28th member.



Sensation: The Croatian electric car



Jewel of a city: Dubrovnik is often called "The Pearl of Adriatic."

**Congratulations
on the
Occasion of
the Statehood Day of
the Republic of Croatia**

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