

JAPAN-W.VA. BUSINESS LINK TOASTED STATE DELEGATION TOURS CENTURIES-OLD RELIGIOUS TEMPLES AND SHRINES JAPAN TRADE MISSION

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OSAKA, Japan - There's no escaping John Denver's famous song about West Virginia - even on another continent. Diamond Electric CEO Shigeji Ikenaga sang the title's two words - "Country Roads" - to the delegation of West Virginians visiting Japan during a dinner Sunday. The state has been "almost heaven" for Diamond Electric, whose employees make ignition coils used in engines. Ikenaga decided to build a factory in Putnam County's Eleanor Industrial Park in 1996 because Toyota was one of Diamond's largest customers. The Putnam County facility supplies the Toyota factory in Buffalo and the Toyota factory in Georgetown, Ky.

The company's business with the Putnam County Toyota plant has tripled since the two started doing business in 1997, said Gene Bialy, vice president of human resources, in a pre-trip interview. About 30 percent of Diamond Electric's U.S. volume comes from Toyota. Diamond also does business with Ford and General Motors, Ikenaga said. "West Virginia is so appreciative of the investment and commitment you have made in our state," Gov. Joe Manchin said. He also said the state intended to work hard to make sure the work force the company needs to grow is available.

"So you will see us continually being very much involved in every way we possibly can for the success of Diamond and the commitment you've made to our state to give us the opportunity to help the good people of West Virginia," Manchin said. Earlier in the day, the delegation visited temples and shrines in Kyoto that are centuries older than the United States. Kyoto was Japan's capital city for more than 1,000 years, until 1869. The governor and first lady Gayle Manchin spotted several similarities and differences between Japan and West Virginia during the sightseeing trip. "Being Catholic, I can relate to the statues," Joe Manchin said.

Statues abounded at the Buddhist Kiyomizu Temple, the delegation's first stop. The group also toured the Golden Pavilion, Buddhist shrines and a Japanese handicraft store like Tamarack. Statues of deities that protect pregnant women and watch over dead children greeted visitors at the Kiyomizu Temple. Other statues sat in small pools of water waiting for people to pour water over their heads for good luck. A priest built the temple around 780. The present structures - a two-story gate, three-story pagoda and bell tower - were rebuilt in 1633.

Kiyomizu means pure water, and visitors can find waterfalls near the temple. The water has fallen for thousands of years, and visitors can drink from one of three thin trickles. Each trickle brings either health, wealth or smartness. It is greedy to drink from all three, explained tour guide Yumi Masaki. Manchin's chief of staff, Larry Puccio, joked that he would drink from one stream and the governor could drink from another and they could split their good fortune.

The group then headed to the Golden Pavilion. Built in 1397 by the third Shogun, a military leader, the structure had survived the test of time until a young monk set it on fire in 1950, Masaki said. The pavilion was rebuilt five years later and then updated in 1987. About 1.4 million people live in Kyoto, which makes it Japan's seventh-largest city. Kyoto and Nara, on the west side of Osaka, were the only major Japanese cities not bombed in World War II, Masaki said.

Kyoto is surrounded by mountains and is Japan's center of religion. About 1,600 Buddhist temples and 300 Shinto shrines call the city home, Masaki said.

The group also saw a 600-year-old pine tree that started out as the shogun's bonsai tree. Now, the tree is shaped like a sailboat pointed toward the pavilion to symbolize a trip to paradise. Gayle Manchin also learned traditional Japanese toilets don't have seats. "Well, that was a lesson," she said after seeing the seatless toilet and opting for a Western-style commode.

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