

EXPO 2005 Foreign Pavilions



By Tashiro Kiyohisa

THE most popular pavilions at EXPO 2005, truth be told, are not the foreign pavilions. The biggest show-stealer is actually a local affair: a band of music-playing robots at the Toyota Group Pavilion, created by engineers of the Aichi-based automaker. The long line of Japanese visitors waiting patiently outside the pavilion for free robot show tickets provides an interesting contrast to the only other world exhibition ever held in Japan: the 1970 World Expo in Osaka where visitors had to line up for maybe three hours or more in order to see two star attractions: the Soviet Pavilion and the US Pavilion which showcased a lunar rock.

At EXPO 2005, the long lines are usually found at corporate pavilions where the titans of Japanese industry parade their latest high-tech marvels. The lopsided crowd interest has prompted wry observations that the World Exposition is a misnomer. To the relief of the EXPO 2005 organizers, however, visitors to foreign government pavilions have been on the rise gradually. When the attendance exceeds 100,000, most foreign pavilions are packed with visitors.

With 121 countries represented at EXPO 2005, the foreign pavilions are clustered in the six so-called Global Common zones. Some countries have chosen to showcase their wares in co-habitation fashion, grouping themselves into the Caucasus Pavilion, the Nordic Pavilion, the Africa Pavilion, the Pacific Islands Pavilion, the Central Asia Pavilion, the Andean Amazonian Pavilion and the Central America Pavilion.

Global Common 1 is adjacent to Corporate Pavilion Zone B, which houses the Toyota Group Pavilion and some other Japanese industry groups. Access is through the North Gate, the main visitor entrance, beyond the corporate pavilion zone. At the center of Global Common 1 stands the Central Asia Pavilion. Here, four Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – pool their resources to tell the story of cultural exchanges between the East and the West. The main exhibit is a replica of Buddha in Nirvana, unearthed in Ajina-Tepa, Tajikistan, in 1966. Created in the sixth century, this Buddha must be one of the most treasured exhibits at EXPO 2005. The priceless value of this artifact somehow presents a sharp contrast to the simplicity of the display itself: a huge Buddha is lying there with no explanatory note. Occasionally, some elderly Japanese visitors fold their hands in prayer before the Buddha, but most visitors simply walk past it leisurely.

In the Global Common 3 area, the Jordan Pavilion has emerged as a popular destination, even though the country is not familiar in Japan. The popularity of this pavilion matches some of the other favorite pavilions in this zone, such as the German and Italian ones, making the exhibition at the Hashemite Kingdom one of the most successful by a developing country.

The key to its success is found at the so-called Black Box, a miniaturized replica of the Dead Sea. Water and sand have been transferred from the Dead Sea to a module 18 x 18m long and 9m high, and the visitor can borrow a swim suit to experience the buoyancy of a Dead Sea swim. One chubby Japanese comedian took a dip in front of the TV cameras, and instantly the Jordan Pavilion became the Pavilion of Fun. True, not many visitors come solely for the Dead Sea experience, but the visitors lining up at the Pavilion obviously have a Dead Sea



African performers entertain some visitors



float in mind.

In Global Common 6, the Thailand pavilion has caught the fancy of Japanese visitors. The Buddhist country is familiar to many Japanese, particularly among elderly Japanese, who were prominent among the visitors there. The Thai Pavilion presents video shows on the Thai way of life and its natural beauty. A great variety of herbs are on display, and *tom yam kung* soup and other traditional foods are available. The performance of traditional dances is a crowd-pleaser. The attendance was so overwhelming at times that staff members wondered whether they should hand out numbered tickets, only to be reminded that such a practice is un-Thai. The pavilion is also spacious: the exhibition space is three times larger than those of

its neighboring countries.

Beauty, as people say, is in the eye of the beholder. While Japanese visitors and the Japanese media have little to complain about, the Thai pavilion has drawn harsh reviews from their compatriots. From the Thai viewpoint, the pavilion lacks a “Thai feel.” They say the pavilion looks drab and, unlike some foreign booths, does not have “interactive” facilities for visitors. Such grievances made their way to the Thai Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, the representative of the Royal Thai government at EXPO 2005 and the minister, Youngyut Tiypairat, traveled to Japan in April for a first-hand look. He was not happy about what he found saying “It has no identity.” And the upshot was that exterior of the pavilion was remodeled.

The Pacific Islands Pavilion is located in the same zone as the Thai pavilion, and has exhibits contributed by 11 Pacific island countries. Japanese visitors should find it a most heart-warming place. A large voyaging canoe from Tonga, a traditional Samoan house and other exhibits captivate the visitors, reminding them of the islands’ dazzling sunlight and pristine nature. To stressed out Japanese visitors, this Pacific Islands Pavilion can be the antidote. The dressed down Japanese staff look relaxed. Smiling faces are also one of this pavilion’s characteristics.

As visitors meander through to the exit, the drink counter selling fresh coconut juice is another crowd-drawer. After enjoying the huge amount of dazzling exhibits and long hours of walking, a shot of fresh coconut juice is truly inviting, for everyone, regardless of nationality or creed. The price, however, is stiff. One drink sets you back as much as ¥700, whereas a soft drink sold at a vending machine costs around ¥130. Still, visitors tend to gravitate toward the coconut juice bar; it seems few people can avoid the temptation of an exquisite beverage from the southern Pacific. Since they serve more than 1,000 drinks a day, this is rather handsome revenue.

The Africa Pavilion, in Global Common 5, is also appealing. Here, 28 African countries gather under one roof, each vying to showcase their national heritage and artifacts. A wide variety of African arts and crafts is available there. The various African booths are staffed by Japanese volunteers. The displays are generally simple, and some booths are high school bazaar level.

Still, just strolling along these booths, visitors can feel as if they are crossing the African continent. The varied African culture has its great charms. While the skull of a frozen mammoth displayed at the Global House in the Central Zone has drawn large crowds, the Africa Pavilion also boasts the great discoveries of the animal kingdom. There are, for example, skeletal bones of an enormous elephant at the Senegal booth, and the skeletal frame of an elephant bird, reputedly the most ancient bird discovered so far, at the Madagascar booth. “With so many countries displaying so many different kinds of things, this pavilion symbolizes what a world exposition should be. There is also a festive atmosphere here. It is really fun,” says



visitor Takada Yoshiko, a 45-year-old housewife from Hyogo Prefecture.

In the open-air plaza surrounding the Africa Pavilion, the participating countries stage folk dances, music and other traditional performances, and the energy flowing from the artists underscores the very dynamism of the continent. While foreign visitors sway merrily to the powerful rhythm of drums and percussion, the Japanese, whether young couples or elderly folks, generally listen closely, enjoying the show without a stir.

While organizers take pride in the large number of African entries, the number of actual participants is not what is officially advertised. By June, the Chadian booth was still conspicuously empty. The booth has turned into a kind of resting place

for staffs from other African countries. The situation in Chad was taken up in local newspapers as the no-show had become apparent before the EXPO was opened; it is inconceivable in Japan that a country could have opted out in such a manner.

The EXPO organizers worried about the no-show and repeatedly made inquiries with the Chadian authorities. "We were able to get confirmation that Chad wants to take part, but we have no idea when they will get things moving," said one official. There are rumors that the Chadian official who had been entrusted with the money for the EXPO had vanished without a trace, and nobody seems to know when Chad will take up its allotted space.

The doors of the entire Andean Amazonian Pavilion

Photo: Kyodo News



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remained closed for more than a month after the EXPO opened on March 25. There was only the melancholic presence of a security guard at the main entrance. To the queries of occasional visitors interested in the Andean Amazonian exhibits, the guard could only respond, "The site is still under construction." While the empty Chadian booth is just part of a jointly operated pavilion, the Andean Amazonian Pavilion was the only stand-alone EXPO building that remained non-operational until it opened on May 13 at long last.

Japanese organizers were understandably concerned about the matter. The Andean Amazonian Pavilion is co-hosted by Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. According to EXPO officials, the concept of display has changed in Venezuela with

the change of minister in charge shortly before the EXPO opening, then the four countries reopened their debate on the pavilion display and officials could not agree in time for the grand opening. In the end, it was decided that they would present the natural diversity of the Andean mountains and the Amazonian waterway. A senior official of the EXPO association said "Maybe it is difficult for the average Japanese to understand, but this sort of thing is commonplace in the world outside."

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