

Falling for Asia



THE PAST YEAR gave me a chance to get more closely acquainted with Asia. During 2009 I visited Vietnam, Cambodia, China and Japan. I also met virtually all of my Asian colleagues face-to-face.

Asia is probably the most dynamic continent in the world. Economically it presents endless opportunities. Politically it poses many challenges, such as the unstable situations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and North Korea.

Asia seems to be emerging from the financial crises faster than the European Union and the United States. The Chinese economy is projected to grow by eight per cent this year, while the growth of the European Union's economy will decrease by four per cent, and the economy of the US by three per cent.

The EU is still the world's biggest economy, with more than 30 per cent of the global GDP (gross domestic product), while the US is at a bit less than 30 per cent. Japan's share of the world economy is slightly more than ten per cent, while China's is at just under ten per cent. Economists estimate that the Chinese economy will outgrow its US counterpart by 2030.

The centre of gravity is moving towards the East. While the G-8 of industrial countries included only one Asian country – Japan – the new G-20 format boasts China, South Korea, India and Indonesia.

Asia has also discovered the virtues of regional integration. The new Prime Minister of Japan has suggested the establishment of a new East Asian Community which would be composed of 16 states, including China, South Korea, Japan, India, Australia and New Zealand. The Community

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would not be a copy of the EU, but probably feature many similarities.

The Cold War is not over in Asia. North Korea is unstable, to put it mildly. There are also big differences in the political regimes of Asian countries. China, Vietnam and Laos are still states based on communist ideology, while Japan and India are liberal democracies based on market economies.

China is a fascinating place and the people are friendly. Its capital, Beijing, is a modern, clean city with skyscrapers sprouting like mushrooms. The country is mostly focused on domestic

policies, and that's no wonder given its 1.3 trillion population.

China seems rather reluctant to take a stronger role in world politics. All talk of a G-2 between the US and China makes the Chinese blush: they stress that they're still a developing country with a modest 3,000-euro per capita annual income. Modest or not, the Chinese are known for their patience. For them, a century is a short time.

Japan is also a great country, and one that has many similarities with Finland. Our mutual appreciation of design, nature, cleanliness, education and electronic gadgets bonds us.

The Japanese love Marimekko and the Moomins, both Finnish creations. So do we. Our personalities also seem to be rather similar – a certain shyness prevails.

Japan is probably the East Asian country with the most similarities to European post-modernism, including its democratic institutions and market economy. It's also a close ally to the United States.

Why am I telling you all of this?

Because I think Asia is definitely worth a visit or two. And when you decide to fly there remember that the fastest route to Asia goes via Helsinki.