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THE INSIDE STORY FOR BUSINESS TRAVELLERS

BUSINESS CITY GUIDE

OSAKA GLOBAL SCENE

Known as the nation's kitchen, Japan's second city is also well established as a thriving tech hub, says **Rob Goss**

The birthplace of major Japanese companies such as Panasonic, Sharp, Capcom and Roland, Osaka has long been a thriving hub of trade and innovation. And now the city looks set to further raise its world profile. Osaka will host the 2019 G20 Summit and will also be one of Japan's 12 Rugby World Cup venues later this year, while it was recently announced that the city had beaten Baku in Azerbaijan and Yekaterinburg in Russia to be awarded EXPO 2025.

With going global in mind, maybe Osaka is also about to step out of Tokyo's shadows and become an internationally minded startup hub, too.

According to the Osaka Business and Investment Centre, the wider Osaka prefecture is home to 410,000 places of business, which generate a total close to 40 trillion yen (£276bn) and, with a well-educated population of almost nine million, it has a deep talent pool. Among all of that – small yet growing – there are an estimated 1,000 early stage startups and a pronounced openness to non-Japanese entrepreneurs.

One organisation promoting Osaka startups is Osaka Innovation Hub (OIH). Established in 2013 by Osaka City's Economic Strategy Bureau, OIH arranges mentorships, provides work spaces for entrepreneurs and runs about 200 events annually – many in English only – bringing together a membership of roughly 700 entrepreneurs and

With a well-educated population of almost nine million, Osaka has a deep talent pool

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DID YOU KNOW...

- Osaka, then called Naniwa, was briefly the capital of Japan on a couple of occasions in the seventh century, before Nara, Kyoto (for almost 1,000 years) and then Tokyo took their turns as the nation's cultural and political centres.
- **Osaka-ben, the distinctive local dialect, is littered with words not used in standard Japanese. One Osakan classic is *ookini* instead of the standard *arigato* (thank you).**
- Local baseball team the Hanshin Tigers was supposedly cursed by KFC's Colonel Sanders. After winning the Japan Series in 1985, exuberant Tigers fans tossed a statue of the colonel into the Dōtonbori Canal. They didn't even make a play-off for the next 18 years and the legend of the curse grew.
- **The landmark Osaka Castle was originally built between 1583 to 1585, but the current version is a modern rebuild.**
- Osaka is often called 'Japan's kitchen', which many attribute to Osakan cuisine and the locals' appetite for it. Yes and no. The term originally comes from Osaka's role at the heart of the rice trade when nearby Kyoto was the capital, where its warehouses functioned like a kitchen pantry.

INSIDE

Elon Musk's Chicago airport shuttle service

Meet Marriott's Andrew Watson

News and offers from British Airways

Light show
Downtown skyline reflected on the Yodo River at dawn

300 corporate partners with the aim of developing Osaka as a global startup city.

Closeness and collaboration are two reasons Osaka can succeed in that goal, according to Hiroyuki Tahara, staff officer for innovation at the Economic Strategy Bureau.

"Compared to Tokyo, startups, large companies, SMEs and government agencies are closer to each other here. They can easily contact and communicate with each other through events or in exchange spaces," he says. "The Kansai region also has a lot of large corporate headquarters, universities and research institutes gathered in the narrow area of Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe, all of which are within 30 minutes by rail, and we are seeing Kansai businesses supporting startups by launching funds, acceleration programs and co-working spaces."

Global is another key word, especially when it comes to one of OIH's signature annual events, Hack Osaka, a pitch contest held in English that features renowned entrepreneurs and business accelerators from around the world as judges.

MARUI-Plugin is one startup that went through Hack Osaka, receiving a bronze award in 2017. The company has created a plug-in for Autodesk Maya that allows users to do modelling and animation work in VR with an Oculus Rift, HTC Vive or Windows MR headset. The founder, Max Krichenbauer, a PhD student at nearby Nara Institute of Science and Technology (NAIST) when he started MARUI-Plugin, met one of his investors

through the event and made new connections in the startup ecosystem.

"There are two main advantages [of Osaka] that have helped us tremendously," he says.

"One is that, because the startup community is still very small, the support is very personal and enthusiastic. Officials and support staff will actually take personal interest in your case and try to help you succeed. The second is that Osaka is much cheaper than Tokyo in terms of rent and cost of living. For a startup, money is often tight, so being able to live cheaply and not pay too much rent helps us keep the burn-rate low and the runway long.

You could say: 'A yen saved is a yen raised in seed capital.'"

Philip Nguyen is another entrepreneur now based in Osaka. He is the CEO of Gochiso, an online platform that helps users discover local restaurants and support social and environmental projects when dining out, allowing them to reserve a table and then donate ten to 20 per cent of their bill to credible social and environmental initiatives.

The 85 restaurants currently signed up to Gochiso can use the platform to promote

Closeness and collaboration are two reasons Osaka can succeed in its goal of being a global startup city



their businesses and increase traffic in a way that also benefits society. Nguyen agrees with Krichenbauer about Osaka's relatively lower living costs leading to a lower burn rate. He also cites other reasons for choosing Osaka.

"For product and customer development, I think new services are generally harder to sell in Osaka since the people here really consider the value for their money and they are straightforward with providing feedback, so that could lead to developing a stronger product and sales pitch," Nguyen says. "We definitely will move to bigger markets like Tokyo in the next stages, but Osaka is ideal for starting out."

As a major travel destination – in a country that continues to increase its inbound numbers – there are opportunities for entrepreneurs in the travel sphere, too: such as Chris King, who is developing two projects, Train Hacker and Food Tours Japan,

to make travel and food in Japan more accessible to travellers. "The whole tours and activities space is seeing massive growth, especially with tech startups who aggregate all the options and produce easy-to-use platforms," he says. "But it's an area still with lots of untapped potential compared to fields such as hotels and flights. I was blown away by the food when I first moved to Japan but soon realised how difficult it must be for travellers to find authentic food experiences. So Food Tours Japan is set up to help visitors connect with the best tours and activities. And Osaka is the perfect place to be based for that – everything and anything here, business or family, revolves around food."



Global ambitions
Philip Nguyen co-founder of Gochiso. Above: Max Krichenbauer, CEO of MARUI-Plugin



LOCAL VIEWS

"I really love the old downtown area called Shinsekai, which actually means 'New World'. You can get a sense of what Osaka was like in the 1980s."

Philip Nguyen, CEO of Gochiso

"For the full Osaka experience, there is a restaurant called Tako-no-Tetsu in Umeda where you can try your hand at making takoyaki and okonomiyaki (two classic Osaka dishes) at your table. Not far from Hankyu Umeda Station is a café called Yuu-Koubou. It has an incredibly friendly atmosphere and the cutest coffee cups I've ever seen. On the second floor, they organise classes for pottery."

Max Kruchenbauer, founder of MARUI-Plugin

"The Dōtonbori area is an absolute must: great food and an electric atmosphere like no other. Be sure to take a photo with the Glico running man, Osaka's most famous billboard!"

JaDon, YouTuber

"Try a tachinomiya (standing bar) in Namba. There are lots in the narrow streets between Namba and Nippombashi stations. They serve up small plates of tasty food with beer and sake, and tend to be intimate, so lend themselves to interacting with locals – Osakans have a reputation for being more outgoing and talkative than anyone else in Japan. For an escape from the city, Minoo Park (30 minutes by train from Umeda) has walking trails, waterfalls and great autumnal foliage."

Chris King, founder of Train, Market and Food Tours Japan



Points of view
Takoyaki take away counter, Dōtonbori; Osaka Castle



Japan's ever-growing love affair with craft beer is also on display in Osaka. Unusual for Japan in that it is run by three sisters, Osaka's Minoh Beer is one of the best-regarded craft breweries in the country. Craft Beer Works Kamikaze near Nishi-Ohashi Station often has Minoh's hop-heavy W-IPA or heady imperial stout on one of its 23 taps, plus a changeable lineup of craft imports and other domestic brews. For cocktails instead, Space Station in Shin-saihashi serves game-inspired concoctions such as Gin & Sonik, which you can sip while playing classic console and PC games.

FOOD & DRINK

Osaka has almost every Japanese and international cuisine covered, and follows all the food and drink trends that hit Tokyo, whether that's the third wave of artisanal cafés or the craft beer boom. But Osaka also has its own flavour. For the city's signature street food, *sokoyaki*, *Manadako* near Namba Station does things a little differently to the Osaka norm. The golf-ball-like battered chunks of octopus here come topped with a mountain of green onions, as well as the usual mayonnaise and sweetish brown sauce.

In any guidebook, you'll find plenty of listings for *okonomiyaki* – a kind of savoury package you cook at your table – but a less heralded Osakan favourite is *kushikatsu*, deep-fried skewers of breaded meat, seafood and vegetables. Perfect with beer. The lively *Kushikatsu Daruma* in Shinsekai claims to be the first place to have served this in the 1920s, and it's still there.

Itoimura enclaves' collection of small galleries, Maeda Craft for contemporary woodcraft and furniture, or grab some organic granola and a smoothie at Granda Familio.

Don't skip Osaka's art scene. The vast exhibition space at Sakuranomiya's ARTCOURT Gallery represents Osakan contemporary art at its most dynamic and genre-bending, with shows that range from conceptual installations from major artists to exhibitions of emerging local talent. On a smaller scale, the minimalist Third Gallery Aya near Higobashi and Yodoyabashi station hosts exhibitions by up-and-coming and established Japanese fine art photographers who frequently delve deep into the fabric of Japanese society.

WHERE TO STAY

THE HOTELS BELOW CAN BE BOOKED AT BA.COM

HILTON OSAKA

A great location in the heart of the busy Umeda commercial and shopping district, with a wide range of business and leisure facilities (pool) included plus 527 rooms and suites that incorporate local touches such as fusuma sliding panels.

HYATT REGENCY OSAKA

Away from the hustle of the city centre, the bayside Hyatt is close to Universal Studios Japan, has good business facilities and is a short walk from the INTEX Osaka exhibition centre.

SWISSÔTEL NANKAI OSAKA

A smart property with top-end meeting facilities. Situated above Nankai Namba Station – a major hub and lively entertainment district – it has a direct rail link to the airport.

OUT AND ABOUT

Take a short stroll from busy Umeda to the calmer, hipper Nakazakicho. Its little alleys and rickety old tenements have a very different vibe to Osaka's bustling image and are crammed with small boutiques and hipster hangouts. Check out places like Resuch as Green Pepp for retro clothing, the



HOW TO GET THERE

BA flies direct from Heathrow to Kansai International Airport four times a week. From here, it's 25 miles to central Osaka. A taxi will take about 50 minutes and cost ¥20,000, while limousine buses have routes to many city-centre locations, taking about an hour and costing ¥1,500. The Rapid Rail link does the trip to Nankai Namba Station in 34 minutes for ¥1,130. Visit ba.com/osaka