

Attractions: Tourism in Japan

In October 2008, the Japanese government set up the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA), a new body tasked with establishing Japan as a “tourism nation.” The Visit Japan Campaign and other policies promoted by the government in the past have increased the number of foreign citizens visiting Japan each year, with the total reaching 8.35 million in 2008. The JTA has set itself the target of increasing this total to 10 million by 2010 and 20 million by the year 2020. **The Japan Journal** takes a closer look at recent developments in tourism and public-private initiatives promoting tourism.

In recent years, the Tsukiji Fish Market in central Tokyo has started to bring in crowds of between 200 and 500 foreign tourists early each morning to witness the popular spectacle of its tuna auctions. Tsukiji Market is one of the largest of its kind in Japan, handling up to 2,400 tons of over 400 different types of fresh and processed fish and seafood from more than 3,000 suppliers nationwide every day. Produce is auctioned off by more than 300 wholesalers each morning and sold on to over 800 buyers. Auctions of tuna, which is best known for its use in high quality sushi, make for an impressive sight in particular, not least the calling of transactions involving hundreds of fish lined up in rows. Helped along by the established popularity of sushi these days, the process has captured the imagination of foreign tourists, creating such a buzz that they even get in the way of auctions on some occasions. Although this, coupled with the busy end of year period, resulted in the market being closed to visitors for a while, it was reopened on January 19 and is already starting to draw in the crowds once again.

The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) runs the Tourism Information Center (TIC) in order to

provide information to foreign tourists visiting Japan. According to a survey published by the TIC in November 2008, the experiences that foreign tourists find the most interesting whilst visiting Japan include Japanese food, traditional buildings and gardens, modern architecture, hot springs, shopping, staying in traditional Japanese inns and popular culture. Other attractions that have become increasingly popular recently include the aforementioned fish market, the electronics stores of pop culture hotspot Akihabara, the ski slopes of powdery snow-covered resorts such as Niseko in Hokkaido and Hakuba in Nagano, the many worldwide designer shops in Tokyo’s Ginza district, going to see sumo tournaments, experiencing life as a ninja and eating regular lunches, just like businessmen and women eat every day.

Foreign tourists responding to the survey also said that they were looking forward to experiences such as “visiting or climbing Mt. Fuji,” “communicating with Japanese people,” “getting out into nature to see the scenery and countryside,” “hiking, cycling and other outdoor pursuits,” “seeing kabuki theater, bunraku puppet theater and geisha” and “learning Japanese.” According to major travel agency JTB,

the most popular tours sold to foreign tourists during 2008 were trips to Mt. Fuji and Hakone, tours of the Ghibli Museum, walking tours of Kamakura and sample tours offering experiences such as riding the bullet train or going to watch sumo wrestling.

The Japanese government launched a full-scale international tourism promotion drive with the aim of establishing Japan as a “tourism nation” in 2003, since which time the number of foreign citizens visiting Japan has continued to increase as interest in Japan has soared.

This was all triggered by a policy speech given to the 156th session of the Diet in January 2003 by then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. It was during the speech in question that Prime Minister Koizumi set out plans to set Japan on the road to becoming a tourism nation, declaring that “the entire Government will endeavor to promote tourism. While over 16 million travelers leave Japan to go overseas every year, the number of foreign visitors to Japan is no more than about five million per year. We are aiming to double this figure by 2010.”

Annual figures show that the government’s efforts have produced results. According to the JNTO, the number of foreign tourists visiting Japan rose from 7,334,077 in 2006 to 8,346,969 in 2007 and totaled 7,838,200 for the period from January to November last year (an increase of 2.2% compared to the same period the previous year) (<http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/index.html>).

Establishment of the Japan Tourism Agency

The Japan Tourism Agency (JTA) was launched in October 2008, with five basic goals: (1) to increase the number of international visitors to Japan to 10 million by 2010 with a long-term goal

of equaling the number of Japanese overseas travelers (7.33 million in 2006); (2) to increase the number of international conferences held in Japan by over 50% by 2011, with the aim of becoming the top host nation of international conferences in Asia (168 conferences in 2005); (3) to increase the duration of Japanese domestic travel by one night per person by 2010, to four nights annually (2.77 nights in 2006); (4) to increase the number of Japanese overseas travelers to 20 million by 2010, with the aim of promoting mutual international exchange (17.53 million in 2006); and (5) to increase domestic travel spending to 30 trillion yen by 2010, through the creation of new demand brought about by an improved environment for smooth travel and diverse service offerings by increased productivity in the tourism industry (24.4 trillion yen in 2005).

There are, in short, two political motives for getting foreign citizens to come to Japan and discover everything it has to offer. The first reason revolves around international exchange and diplomacy whilst the second is economic.

When it comes to international exchange and friendship and diplomatic relations with other countries, political exchange and grassroots level exchange and understanding between individuals are two sides of the same coin in terms of complementing relationships between Japan and other countries. The government is positioning tourism as a key tool to get people from other countries to come to Japan so that they can get to know and experience all the best things about the country for themselves and improve mutual understanding, as well as meeting and interacting with people from all over Japan rather than just the big cities.

From an economic standpoint, the fact that Japan's population is on the verge of going into decline raises the possibility of a reduction in the scale of the country's economy and the availability of business opportunities, which could potentially pose serious issues for outlying areas of Japan in particular. The aim is therefore to showcase the resources that such areas have to offer tourists the world over in order to lend a hand by bringing in more foreign visitors, thereby helping

to revitalize local economies.

According to the JTA, overall spending on tourism during fiscal 2007 came to 23.5 trillion yen. Of this total, foreign tourists visiting Japan spent approximately 1.5 trillion yen, 6.3% of the overall total. The key point behind these figures is that whilst domestic spending was down 0.2% year on year, the total amount spent by tourists visiting Japan increased by 8.7% on the previous year, marking it out as a promising area for the future. The JTA predicts that, if the total number of foreign tourists visiting Japan were to be increased to 20 million, the current level of 1.4 trillion yen would rise to 4.3 billion yen, directly creating jobs for 390,000 people.

One issue that needs to be addressed in order to achieve this is to broaden the scope of destinations that foreign tourists coming to Japan visit. As it stands, 70% of all tourists traveling to Japan follow the so-called Golden Route, whereby they spend four to six days touring round areas such as Fuji and Hakone, Kyoto and Nara and then Osaka, with just 30% making alternate arrangements. It is thought that, if this percentage could



Tsukiji Fish Market, the electronics stores of pop culture hotspot Akihabara, the ski slopes of resorts such as Niseko in Hokkaido, sumo tournaments, experiencing life as a ninja... These are among the increasingly popular attractions of Japan for foreign tourists.

be maintained at a roughly 60/40 split with other regions around Japan, it would have a knock-on effect on local economies. A spend of 1.6 trillion yen for instance would bring in added value totalling 2 trillion yen and create employment for 311,000 workers.

At the most basic level, it is absolutely crucial to take care of details such as providing sufficient information to motivate foreign citizens to want to visit Japan and then ensuring that they can travel around smoothly from arrival to departure and receive a warm welcome once they have decided to come to Japan.

Pioneering Foreign Visitors to Japan

Historically, people from China, Korea and other neighboring countries were the first to visit Japan and engage in exchange with the Japanese people. From the sixteenth century onwards however, western visitors started to come to Japan as missionaries and engage in various types of exchange as well. The majority also traveled within Japan during their stay. Examples include the Portuguese missionary Luis Frois (1532–1597), who wrote *Historia de Iapan*, and the first British consul general in Japan, Sir Rutherford Alcock (1809–1897), author of *The Capital of the Tycoon: A Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in Japan*. Although not as showy as some cities around the world, they were all impressed by the same things about Japan, namely its shrines, temples and gardens, the beauty of Edo Castle (now the Imperial Palace) and the cleanliness of the streets of Edo (now Tokyo).

Even today, Japan still leaves a tremendous impression on the majority of the foreign citizens who come to visit, many of whom are struck by experiences such as “the friendliness and politeness of Japanese people and getting to know Japanese people,” “sightseeing destinations all over the country,” hot springs, scenery, kabuki theater, shrines, temples and gardens, “Japan’s many tourist attractions apart from sightseeing destinations,” “Japanese food,” “public transport” and “cleanliness” (TIC survey).

Resolving Issues

Aspects of Japan that leave visitors feeling most disappointed during their stay on the other hand include “the language barrier—lack of signs and explanations in other languages, difficulties reading maps and getting lost,” “transport issues,” “accommodation,” “prices,” “overcrowding,” “shopping and service,” “using cash machines and credit cards” and “views.”

In its quest to become a tourism nation, Japan needs to bring the private and public sectors together to resolve issues such as these.

The JTA’s first priority is to ascertain the current situation with regard to tourists’ movements and their time in Japan and to compile data and information to make it easier for tourism related industries to formulate strategies. Its second focus is to improve and standardize information and signs at locations such as airports and stations. Its third priority is to collect foreign tourists’ practical opinions on the navigability and usability of facilities. The most important point with regard to this last priority is to organize projects in locations such as airports and stations and carry out monitor surveys at museums and art galleries, which are attracting more and more foreign visitors, in conjunction with organizations such as the Agency for Cultural Affairs (see p. 8–10).

The Japan Association of Travel Agents (JATA) has long been working on international exchange for the mutual expansion of tourism, most recently with Taiwan. JATA, the coordinating body for the travel industry, has for example set up the Japan-Taiwan Tourism Association in conjunction with counterparts in Taiwan, which accounts for 16.6% of all foreign visitors to Japan (Korea, at 31.2%, is top, Taiwan is second, and China, at 11.3%, is third [FY 2007]), and is discussing how best to divide roles in relation to tourism and exchange between the two countries.

“Take natural disasters for example; they occur in both Japan and

Taiwan,” explains JATA President Kosuke Shibata. “We can therefore learn from one another about how the travel industry in each country should deal with tourists from the other country and how to put together a network of contacts in the event that



“The friendliness and politeness of Japanese people and getting to know Japanese people” is cited by many foreign visitors to Japan as one of the chief attractions of the country.

tourists from either country should find themselves caught up in such a disaster. Enabling tourists from both countries to travel with confidence is a major advantage to both countries’ tourist industries.”

In the private sector meanwhile, there is a growing trend towards companies working in step with the JTA. A prime example of just such a private sector initiative can be seen on the Odakyu Romance Car, a train service linking Shinjuku in the center of Tokyo with the popular destination of Fuji and Hakone, one of the major stops on the aforementioned Golden Route. Faced with a conspicuously high number of empty seats on weekdays, operator Odakyu set up a dedicated information desk at Shinjuku station, where the service starts, and began to offer discount passes for foreign citizens in an effort to tempt foreign travelers. The company has even put together special overnight packages in conjunction with traditional Japanese inns in the Hakone area at the other end of the line. All this has yielded results, with sales up 30% on the previous year. According to a

source close to the company, Odakyu is planning to launch a number of other packages targeting the foreign tourist market, which is expected to continue to grow in the future.

On October 3, two days after the JTA was established, JTB unveiled a new range of Sunrise Tours for 2009, including a number of domestic package tours for foreign citizens visiting Japan. First launched in 1964 to coincide with the Tokyo Olympics and the opening of the Tokaido bullet train line, Sunrise Tours have been used by a total of approximately 6 million people to date, making it the leading range of inbound package tours in Japan. Overnight trips to Fuji and Hakone are particularly popular, as are Ghibli Museum tours based on the works and concepts of Hayao Miyazaki. Hands-On JAPAN! tours designed to give participants a taste of Japanese culture or subculture have also become increasingly popular recently, including sumo stable tours and walking tours of Akihabara. From Hokkaido to Okinawa, JTB sells a total of 213 tours covering the length and breadth of the country and hopes to generate demand from a new market in Asia, which accounts for 73.4% (FY 2007) of all visitors to Japan, in an effort to boost sales of regionally based tours rather than

relying so heavily on the Golden Route. Needless to say, the most important thing about tours such as these is to have well-trained guides who are polite, friendly and hospitable.

Human Resource Development

Having gone through a period of promoting inbound tourism in a bid to bring in foreign currency during the postwar recovery years, the Japanese travel industry then became very much focused on outbound tourism. Despite not always focusing enough attention on inbound tourism in the past however, the travel industry is now starting to draw on the experience built up by travel coordinators and agents to cater to inbound travelers such as those referred to above.

According to JATA President Kosuke Shibata, “Japanese tour operators have plenty of experience providing high quality vacations and trips designed to get people closely acquainted with Japan’s culture, history and natural surroundings, as well as high level tour guides and escorts, so they are more than capable of catering to inbound tourists. There are many ways in which the Japanese travel industry could help people to really get


to know Japan. I believe that the industry will have a major role to play in the future.”

From the point of view of travel companies, it is absolutely crucial above all else to have staff that are qualified, knowledgeable and skilled in diplomacy.

Shibata points out that, as there are a great many people within the travel and tourism industry who feel great joy at making their customers happy, it is important for management to create rewarding and enjoyable working environments for such people, focusing particularly on human resource development in outlying regions.

As part of its technical qualification scheme for travel counselors, the JATA for example aims to develop human resources capable of making a professional contribution in each area, including training “destination specialists” equipped with expertise on specific countries or regions.

The JTA meanwhile is stepping up collaboration with the private sector and other related parties, picking up the baton from the policy of establishing Japan as a tourism nation first launched by the government in 2003, whilst also working to open up more business opportunities and broadening the channels available to potentially revitalize regions around Japan. The public and private sectors will have to work together to send out a common message to the rest of the world and put in place the environment needed to enable foreign tourists to travel seamlessly around Japan during their visit. The most important point to remember is that members of the tourism industry aren’t the only ones who need to be hospitable to visitors from other countries. It is important that each individual Japanese person plays a leading role in welcoming people who visit Japan and helping them to enjoy their country.

“Japan’s biggest selling point as a tourist destination is *omotenashi*, or hospitality,” explains JTA Commissioner Yoshiaki Honpo. “Our hope is that *omotenashi* will start to be recognized as an international language” (see p. 8–9). 



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