

Opening Doors

On October 1, 2008, as part of its stated intention to make Japan a tourism powerhouse, the government inaugurated the Japan Tourism Agency, giving it a mandate to prepare a national environment more friendly to tourist travel. We asked Agency Commissioner **Yoshiaki Honpo** about the work ahead.

The Japan Journal: What is the significance of founding the Tourism Agency and what are the goals for the Agency?

Yoshiaki Honpo, Commissioner of the Tourism Agency: The greatest significance in establishing the Tourism Agency is that the Japanese government cited “creating a tourism nation” as its policy and indicated its determination to work seriously on encouraging tourism. In terms of international tourism, the government has taken serious action since 2003 when then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi declared that the government would double the number of foreign visitors to Japan. The Tourism Agency has now set to work, inheriting this policy. Tourism has a very broad administrative range, with people from a diverse range of diverse fields involved. It requires many people to work in the same direction, and this is where we start from in aiming to promote tourism and become a major tourist destination. My understanding is that the Tourism Agency was founded as a commander to set out a policy vision that would act as the core.

The new organization claims to be an open organization. Tell us about some of the characteristics of the system.

The Tourism Agency employs approximately 120 people, and we invited twenty-one people from the private sector and six from local governments to start creating new notions and a new culture in a lively workplace.

We have two important roles as the first generation team in the new organization. One is to create “a good DNA,” as our approach to work will

be inherited by the future organization. We aim to make the agency “open to you,” and to establish the spirit of starting a new culture that we can pass on to future workers. That is one of our major responsibilities.

The second task is to work quickly and produce accomplishments on the notion that the first year determines everything, since any organization will be evaluated after one year. The first three months, therefore, are particularly vital, and we are releasing diverse information and working to enforce the policy as best we can.

Can you describe some of the new work the Agency is doing?

For example, the Agency is running a project called the “Lone Walker Inspections by Foreign People” in which foreign members of our staff use and analyze facilities at train stations and airports and incorporate their findings in our policies. On a relevant note, an increasing number of foreign visitors to museums and art museums have left comments to the effect that the explanations were incomprehensible or that the facility was still prejudiced, and we are currently working to resolve these issues.

Last December, we welcomed four exchange students as interns for three months. They are here to study, and we are aiming to learn from them as well. One of their specific missions is to conduct surveys on ways to improve services at the museums as I just mentioned. The students currently experience the Tokyo National Museum’s foreign visitor services and are compiling proposals about how to improve them. We then pass on that knowledge to the museum. Once we

build this knowledge base up to a certain extent, we plan to incorporate it in drafting guidelines and policies on how airports, stations and museums/art museums can enhance their services.

The Agency announced its vision of 10 million visitors by 2010 and 20 million by 2020. What are your specific strategies?

This vision comes with a subtitle: “Open-doors for the second time in history.” It is the message that, if we welcome 20 million foreigners, society would and must change dramatically. When there are 20 million visitors, there will be more people making repeat visits, which would give them more opportunities to travel from the three major metropolitan areas surrounding Narita, Kansai and Chubu Airports, to the rural areas of Japan, which still lag in internationalization yet are filled with the true goodness of Japan. We are focusing on policies so that when direct exchange takes place and extends at these levels, the country will achieve true internationalization, forging the “second door-opening” of its history. Of course, we will be providing a range of support to people in rural areas, such as human resource training.

The international exchange you mention makes citizens the ultimate players. What is your view on citizen awareness of international tourism exchange in such terms?

Awareness of the importance of international exchange or tourism exchange has spread widely among leaders in industry and the private sector in general. On an international scale, the level of Japanese interest in foreign countries is high, yet there are few opportunities to come in direct contact with foreign people. The ratio of people traveling abroad is extremely low for Japan, compared with that for other advanced nations, while Japan clearly lags in the number of foreign visitors it receives. On the whole, the country is at a very low level in terms of exchange with foreign people.

But circumstances are changing.

One is that foreign visitor numbers have actually increased approximately 60% during the period from 2003 to 2008, and the Cabinet Office poll last December showed that 80% of the nation feels that the country has more foreigners. Considering Japan's future growth in the global society, international human resources exchange and tourism exchange are very important and are matters of increasing focus, so I think citizen awareness will change significantly as well.

How is the tourism industry responding to the changes of the past five years?

A variety of changes are occurring in corporate trends associated with tourism. With the government establishing the Tourism Agency and emphasizing its focus on international tourism, companies are reevaluating the way they work, how they position their business, and what their business model should look like.

Japan's tourism industry in the

past was supported by abundant domestic demand, and resource investments were directed toward that. On the other hand, a view from a larger perspective shows that this age of population decline requires foreign demand to pump the engine for future social vitality and corporate growth. Tourism industries and companies in rural areas are also starting to shift their strategies to meet this trend and target foreign demand.

With more opportunities to receive foreign tourists, there will be more opportunities for discovery, and we can expect services to improve and management to be reformed. I even believe that we can also expect services toward Japanese customers to improve or better management systems to arise.

What do you think is the core of Japan's tourism industry?

It would be "hospitality" in English and "*Omotenashi*" in Japanese. This,

I believe, is the greatest appeal of Japan, which has always supported its tourism. "*Omotenashi*" is the mixed spirit of typically Japanese perfectionism and their desire to welcome customers with sincerity and a sense of desperation. This spirit is woven into Japanese manners and lifestyles to create the foundation of daily culture.

In surveys of visitors to Japan conducted when they leave the country, "Kindness of the Japanese people" is rated as what was best. This is the *omotenashi* spirit.

The survey also contains the question, "What expectations did you have upon coming to Japan?" Answers reveal high expectations among many people for traditional culture and architecture. But, to no surprise, repeat visitors have different motives for coming to Japan. "*Onsen*" (hot springs) and "relaxation" occur as objectives for visitors on their second or more arrival, irrespective of their nationality. Foreign travelers who had

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taken a dip in an onsen, received omotenashi and experienced relaxation, have felt satisfaction beyond their expectations, which strongly motivates them to visit again. In other words, staying at an onsen *ryokan* (inn) is not a mere bathing experience but a chance to enjoy a cultural performance consisting of various elements, such as the garden, architecture, food, the hot spring and the bath

torical value that do not exist even in China or Korea. On the other hand, the recent trend of “Cool Japan” culture has been driven by Japanese artists in the fields of *manga* (comic books), music and painting. The formation of this culture is based on various means.

China has a much longer history, and Europe is unbeatable in the beauty of its orderly urban planning. But I

will move forward with its advertisement efforts that the nation had lacked, and strive to improve awareness.

Would tourism impact the tertiary industry, in that it involves a broad range of fields and people?

Foreign investments are increasing in the tourism field. Ski resorts in Niseko of Hokkaido and Hakuba of Nagano, for example, have been developed with investments from Australian and Taiwanese companies. There has been speculation that investment on luxury hotels will increase, primarily in urban areas, but if Japan’s tourism industry becomes more globalized, we can expect a rise in investments to rural tourist sites. This is not merely about receiving funds from overseas sources. The important point here is that change will come to a market that was only for domestic businesses, and that innovative management will make its way in. We expect much on this point.

Any messages to our readers overseas?

Some people overseas have the image that Japan is expensive. While there are obvious concerns about the recent strength of the yen posing some effects, I feel that few other places offer products and services with the high quality and various services and prices that Japan provides. When you eat in Tokyo, a mere thousand yen will buy you a reasonable and delicious meal. Not too many major cities in the world can give you that. Let alone the taste, the restaurant will be clean inside with a stylish interior design and will be filled with hospitality. I hope that people overseas would come to savor the diverse goodness of Japan from its cities to its mountain villages. The Tourism Agency continues to work with other ministries and agencies and the private sector in promoting policies that enable people overseas to enjoy Japan and understand its essential goodness. □

Note: This interview was conducted on December 17, 2008.

Interview by Hitoshi Chiba, The Japan Journal

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itself, and the natural scenery visible from the bath, and visitors look forward to another visit to Japan based on that understanding.

Are there any keywords other than “omotenashi” that represent the appeal of Japan?

“Diversity.” Japan has a very long history, and the country has been flexible enough to skillfully incorporate ancient Chinese and Korean—or modern Western—culture, tradition and arts and make them Japanese, as the phrase “*wakon-yosai*” (Japanese mind, Western knowledge) expresses. The country may have suffered no major nationwide war devastation other than the provincial wars in the fifteenth century and the Second World War, which has helped preserve many examples of architecture of a high his-

torical value that do not exist even in China or Korea. On the other hand, the recent trend of “Cool Japan” culture has been driven by Japanese artists in the fields of *manga* (comic books), music and painting. The formation of this culture is based on various means.

I must also mention that there is one important element that supports this appeal. That is safety and assurance. I believe no other place offers the safe and assuring enjoyment that Japan offers nationally, from its historical landmarks to vendor wagons in cities. The keywords in describing the attractiveness of touring Japan are Safety, Assurance, Hospitality and Diversity.

We hope that the private sector will share this awareness and take the lead in establishing a foundation of Japanese attractiveness. The Tourism Agency