

SIGHTSEEING

What tourists want when visiting Japan and how the country can give it to them

Since the Visit Japan Campaign was launched in 2003 by the Japan Tourism Agency, the number of tourists to Japan has increased from 5.2 million (2003) to 8.3 million (2008). To explore the challenges for the tourism industry in Japan, The Japan Times recently held a round-table discussion with three experts:

Yasuhiro Hasegawa director of marketing and promotion department, Japan National Tourism Organization

Masashi Negishi managing director and secretary general of Japan Guide Association after 40 years of working in the travel industry; licensed guide

Atsuko Takamiya English-speaking tour guide, licensed in 2002

Japan Times (JT): What is the recent situation of the Visit Japan Campaign?
Yasuhiro Hasegawa (YH): Although tourist numbers declined significantly in 2009 due to the worldwide economic crisis and the impact of the H1N1 flu strain, the number of tourists to Japan is steadily increasing this year — 5 million at the end of July and predicted to reach more than 9 million by the end of 2010.

JT: What is the reason for the increase of inbound travel to Japan?
YH: A major factor is the increasing number of visitors from China. While 70 to 80 percent of tourists from Taiwan and Hong Kong are repeat visitors for sightseeing, 75 percent of tourists from China visited Japan for the first time.

Masashi Negishi (MN): Most Chinese tourists are members of guided tour groups. I've heard the feedback on their Japan tour, saying that they wanted to eat more Japanese foods; to do more sightseeing rather than shopping; and to meet more Japanese people.

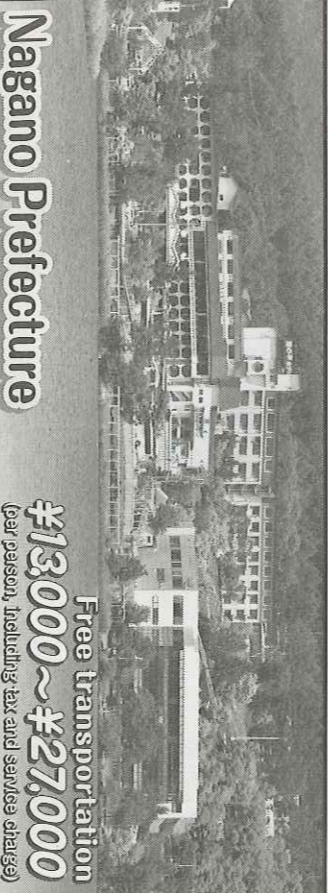
YH: Most of the guided tour groups follow the so-called golden route, starting from Osaka, experiencing the *shinkansen* high-speed train to Kyoto, then traveling along to the Tokaido area by bus and going shopping. Their first

impression on Japan is very important, which then rapidly spreads by word of mouth, which might have an influence on potential tourists. Also, it's the key to whether they will visit Japan again. So our challenge is to let them return home with as good a memory as possible.
MN: The Japan National Tourism Organization's new catchphrase — "Japan. Endless Discovery." — demonstrates the endless attraction of Japan, aiming to secure repeat visitors.

YH: In this respect, we are stepping up our campaign abroad to show Japan's tourist attractions through local media, as well as with advertisements in public spaces. Another approach is to provide educational programs to learn more about Japan for planning and sales staff at Chinese travel agencies.

JT: What is the major tourist attraction of Japan?
YH: Japanese food. Western tourists have recently replaced historical interests with Japanese food as their first priority, while most Asian tourists go for hot springs or shopping first.

MN: Japanese food has become popular with fitness fads.
Atsuko Takamiya (AT): Of course, tourists appreciate the freshness of sushi and raw fish, but for those who request "something



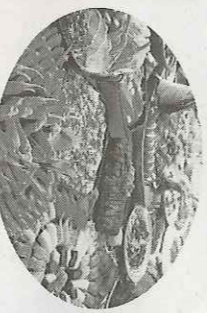
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(per person, including tax and service charge)

Nagano Prefecture Shirakaba Resort Ikenotaira Hotel

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Approximately 3 hours 30 minutes from Shinjuku on the Shinshu Shirakaba Kohan-bound bus.

Duration: Oct. 1, 2010-March 31, 2011
(excludes Dec. 30, 2010-Jan. 2, 2011)



- Details**
- ① Free bus ride from Shinjuku to the hotel
 - ② Free tickets to use the indoor, warm-water pools
 - ③ Three free bowling tickets are offered instead between Nov. 4 and Dec. 17) (two meals per night (dinners are buffet-style featuring around 50 dishes from around the world, including Japanese, Western, Chinese, and other ethnic foods)
 - ④ Free access to the hotel's hot springs



Room rate (per person, including tax and service charge)	One room, two people	One room, three people	One room, four to six people
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Weekends, Jan. 4, 5, 9	17,000yen	16,000yen	15,000yen
Dec. 25-28	22,000yen	20,000yen	19,000yen
Dec. 29, Jan. 3	27,000yen	25,000yen	23,000yen

It may be difficult to make arrangements when rooms are at full capacity or when the hot springs are at full capacity. Children in elementary school may stay for 70% of the adult charge; toddlers from 1 to 3 years old may stay for 50% of the adult charge. Children 2 years of age or younger who do not require bus seats are free. The outdoor baths and cafe/bars are free. Outdoor bathing, sports, and other activities are available. Check-in times are 2:30 p.m. and the check-out time is 11:00 a.m. Reservations are accepted up to 30 days in advance. Bus times are estimates. We do not accept reservations for the hot springs. We appreciate your understanding.

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From left, Masashi Negishi, Atsuko Takamiya and Yasuhiro Hasegawa discuss inbound tourism to Japan at the Japan National Tourism Organization's office in Tokyo on Sept. 14.

cooked," a recommendation is *yakisoba* (stir-fried noodles) at casual eateries. They enjoy the non-touristy atmosphere, blending in with locals.

JT: How about a favorite destination?
MN: Generally speaking, 50 percent of tourists to Japan on their first visit will go to see Mount Fuji and Hakone; 30 percent to Nikko and 10 to 15 percent to Kanakura.

JT: How do they get information?
YH: The Visit Japan Information Network consists of 300 offices nationwide, which are used mainly by tourists from the West. Information about Japan available in the Western countries is not as detailed as in Asia.

MN: And Western people tend to conduct personal travel.
AT: Today, the Internet is so convenient. Many tourists check websites. (Potential tourists' detailed knowledge about Japan elevates their desire for a more personalized trip. For example, a tourist requested to visit a Japanese capsule hotel and another wanted to view sunset from the Sunshine 60 Building in Ikebukuro. One of the major missions of a private tour guide is to fulfill such wishes. Tourists can get information, but it is difficult for them to

arrange and negotiate in Japan.

MN: It's difficult for an individual guide to respond to increasing and diversifying needs. More guides should be cultivated both in quantity and quality if Japan seriously wants to promote tourism.

JT: What do you think would be useful to further enhance tourism in Japan?
MN: I think that to provide more benefit systems such as coupons and discounts for visitors would be useful as a promotion.

YH: We arrange occasional press tours, inviting writers for local papers in Asia, which are helpful in attracting their readers to visit Japan.
AT: I think it would be important to provide tourists with a more enjoyable stay in Japan through more information about seasonal festivals and local events. The other day, when I took five American tourists to Asakusa, we met a group of elementary school students. I talked to the children and they spent a pleasant time talking in simple English with the tourists and taking pictures together. It should be a precious memory for both the visitors from abroad and the Japanese children.

Lake Shirakaba-ko Blending man-made with nature

At the western foot of Mount Taeshina, in a quasi-national park managed by Nagano Prefecture, is Shirakaba-ko, an artificial lake 1,416 meters above sea level. Completed in 1947, the lake was enhanced in the 1950s by the addition of recreational facilities, such as a rental boat station and ice skating rink, and has developed into one of the big resorts in the prefecture today.

Easily accessible from Tokyo, the area provides visitors with family-friendly resort life all-year-round. People go there to walk, cycle and camp in the natural setting. The lake is surrounded by a forest of white birches (*shirakaba*). Hiking and skiing are also available in the nearby hills. On the eastern side of the lake is Shirakaba-ko Family Land, which has leisure facilities such as an amusement park, an indoor swimming pool, hot springs and a forest railway.

Autumn is the best season to take a walk in the woods to enjoy the fall foliage.



Golden-colored acacia forest (above) Lake Shirakaba-ko in autumn
 SHIRAKABA RESORT
 IKENOTAIRA HOTEL

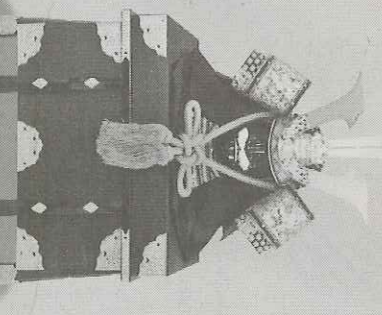
Among the highlights is the golden-colored forest of some 1,300 acacia trees planted on a hill at the Ikenotaira Hotel. The hotel also offers a panoramic view of the Kurumayama Highlands from its large, outdoor hot springs.

Access: 2 hours from Shinjuku (Tokyo) to Chino Station by JR Chuo Line (limited express) and 50 min. from Chino Station to Minami-Shirakaba-ko by bus. By car, the journey takes about 3½ hours from Tokyo.

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