

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



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. YOSHIAKI MIURA

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 Kamakura.

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

