

Japan as a Tourist Destination
-New Tourism Agency Targets 20 Million Foreign Visitors to Japan-

Briefer: Mr. Yoshiaki Hompo, Commissioner of the Japan Tourism Agency

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[Inauguration of Japan Tourism Agency]

In a policy speech last October, when I became Commissioner of the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA), I mentioned two things to be achieved, while presenting JTA's primary target of turning Japan into a tourism powerhouse. For one thing, JTA should become an organization which can be trusted by various other parties so that they want to work closely with us. Therefore, I called on JTA officials not to be complacent with our current budget (6.3 billion yen) and authority, but to "create new awareness and culture" under the slogan "Open JTA."

The other thing I emphasized in the speech is "speed." If JTA fails to achieve results in a short time, then we will lose the trust of other parties. We therefore made intensive efforts in the first three months as a quick-dash period after the inauguration and compiled a JTA Vision, which was made public on October 31, 2008. The Vision states that JTA will facilitate communication across the agency and emphasize speed and results, in an effort to fulfill its mission of realizing a tourism-based nation.

We have also drawn up a JTA Action Plan, which shows specific policies with a schedule, pursuing thoroughness in internal management and aiming to boost the predictability of the tourism administration. The progress of the plan is to be reviewed every three months by the JTA Advisory Board to make sure that we steadily implement PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, and Action).

[Foreign Tourists in Japan]

The situation pertaining to foreign visitors to Japan is quite severe at the moment, but they used to show a very strong growth in number in the past. During the four years after the Visit Japan Campaign was launched in 2003, the number of foreign tourists increased by 3.14 million, while it had previously taken 17 years to achieve an increase of the same magnitude. Behind this growth was a change in the government's attitude toward tourism as it started to pay much more attention to incoming foreign tourists and to make a full-fledged investment in the industry. Before 2003, the budget earmarked for tourism promotion was about 500 million yen on a project basis, but the government currently budgets 3.3 billion yen for the promotion. Another factor that attracted many foreign tourists was that the "Japan Brand" had taken root overseas thanks to the presence of global companies, such as Toyota Motor Corp. and Sony Corp., and the popularity of Japanese fashion, enhancing the effectiveness of the government's investment.

In fiscal 2008, 8.35 million foreign tourists visited Japan. Three-quarters of those visitors came from Asia, and Korean tourists were the largest in number. We are concerned about the constant decline in travel between Japan and the United States, which used to be the most dynamic. Overall, however, we believe that we have conducted a very effective campaign since the start of the Visit Japan Campaign.

Yet the current levels of Japan's visibility in the world and of its international exchange are far from satisfactory. Japan's inbound and outbound tourist ratio, namely, the number of foreign visitors to Japan per 100 population compared with the number of Japanese travelers abroad per 100 population, is the lowest in the G8 countries. Japan still needs to be developed in terms of international exchange.

[Realizing a Society that Attracts 20 Million Overseas Visitors a Year]

The JTA has set a target of attracting 20 million foreign visitors a year by 2020, based on the recognition that Japan has gained a high reputation in all of the 12 priority markets (Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States). For instance, Japan is the first destination in South Korea and Taiwan and is getting more popular in Singapore and Thailand. Among Western countries, a Japan boom has taken place in France.

In addition, the result of a VISA World Wide survey conducted in 11 countries was announced in April 2009 and showed that Japan was the second most popular tourist destination following Australia. Japanese cuisine has gained strong interest and popularity overseas as well. In the 2008 edition of the Michelin Guide, Tokyo overtook Paris and was ranked first, with the largest number of restaurants with Michelin stars. Japan has also gained a high level of satisfaction from foreign tourists, as 90 percent of those surveyed responded they would like to visit Japan again.

As a concrete image of a society that accepts 20 million overseas visitors a year, we envision an economic benefit of 4.3 trillion yen in market size (10.4 trillion yen in ripple effect), creation of 390,000 jobs (850, 000 jobs in ripple effect), and an increase in percentage of tourism expenditures by overseas visitors to 16.3 percent. By country, the number of Chinese tourists is expected to rise six-fold reaching six million.

Our measures to realize such a society have three pillars. One of them is overseas promotion, or more specifically, establishment of the “Japan Brand.” We are trying to establish Japan’s brand image by promoting the country as a premium destination and highlighting its diversity.

In other words, we would like foreign people to recognize Japan as a high-quality tourist destination and to realize that Japan's diverse attractions set it apart from other countries.

The second pillar is enhancement of Japan's hospitality and accommodation systems. With a view to giving more satisfaction to foreign tourists, we are working together with other parties involved, clarifying their respective roles. For example, the government's chief role is to improve the convenience of transportation by addressing issues related to visa regulations, immigration control, and guide signs. Recently, Prime Minister Taro Aso said he would incorporate into his forthcoming economic package measures to shorten the waiting time at immigration control at Narita airport from 28 minutes to 15 minutes. We are putting strong pressure on local tourism industries to make Japan more hospitable, as the country is falling well behind other countries when it comes to hospitality.

Third, we are trying to attract more international conferences. In the number of international conferences held, Japan was ranked fifth in 2007, while it was ranked 18th in 2006. We will make further efforts in this field, widening the definition of "international conference" to what is called MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Convention/Congress, and Event/ Exhibition).

<Q & A>

Q. If Tokyo succeeds in inviting the Olympic Games in 2016, what kind of impact will they have on JTA's efforts to realize a tourism-based nation?

A. We expect that there will be a very large impact. At present, even the attractiveness of Tokyo, one of the most well-known cities in the world, is not very well understood overseas. The Olympic Games provide an opportunity for the press to highlight various aspects of the host cities, not only sports played there. In this sense, we can call the Olympics "Festivals

for the Press” as well. It is therefore expected that the increase in Tokyo’s exposure to the world thanks to the Olympic Games will have a great impact on Japan’s tourism promotion.

Q. What kinds of measures are prepared by the Japanese government to achieve the target of attracting six million Chinese tourists by 2020?

A. As China is the most strategically important market, relaxation of visa regulations for Chinese tourists is very important to attract them to Japan. Currently, the Japanese government accepts only group tours with a guide from China, but if it can issue visas for individual tourists, the number of Chinese visitors will probably rise. The Japanese government, however, intends to ease the visa regulations in stages, and as a first step it has decided to issue visas for individual Chinese tourists categorized as wealthy. The government plans to gradually expand eligibility for receiving visas, if the current measures work well.

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