

A Compass on Japan's Foreign Tourism Ahead of the Tokyo Olympics 2020

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For many of the tourists coming to the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 it will be the first time they have set foot on Japanese soil. The country is for much of the world a less common tourist destination, if not somewhat exotic, and thus the Olympics present new opportunities for Japan: in the short term through economic benefits stemming from related investments and tourist spending, and in the long term through its soft-power development. The event will allow Japan to make itself seen on the international stage, introduce its culture to more foreigners and build international bridges that will be vital to boost its soft power in the future. *Japan SPOTLIGHT* talked to the president of the Japan Guide website, Stefan Schauwecker, to discover what Japan's cultural attractions are and where its tourism opportunities lie ahead of the 2020 Olympics.

Haraoka: How did you become interested in Japan and Japanese tourism?

Schauwecker: The first time I met Japanese people was at an English language school in Vancouver, Canada, where I, a Swiss, was enrolled. I made a lot of wonderful Japanese friends and thanks to them I developed an interest in Japan. It was like a new world waiting to be explored, as my knowledge of Japan and its culture was zero back then; my Swiss school hadn't taught me anything about it. This was in the mid 1990s when the Internet started to become popular, and in this way all the pieces fell into place. I had studied computer science, so I combined my old dream of creating a website with my interest in Japan by choosing it as the content. When I started the site in 1996 it was purely a hobby, and I only provided basic facts about Japan to foreigners. But over the years the number of site visitors increased to a degree that made it possible to have it as a full-time business. Then, in 2003, I moved from Canada to Japan, a significant step that allowed me to travel extensively in Japan, put all my energy into creating the sightseeing guide, and focus it on tourism. Travelling and introducing tourist spots was for me a dream come true.

Haraoka: You said that you made a lot of Japanese friends at the English school in Canada. What in their personality traits did you like?



Stefan Schauwecker, President of japan-guide.com Co., Ltd.

Schauwecker: I particularly liked their seriousness and friendliness. I get along really well with such people since they are a good match with my personality.

Haraoka: My image of Swiss people is that they are also serious and friendly.

Schauwecker: Yes, we are definitely serious. The friendliness you can understand once you get to know us better, but Swiss people can often be unfriendly to strangers in shops, for example, and other public places.

Highlights of Tokyo

Haraoka: What are the most popular places in Japan among foreigners?

Schauwecker: The most popular places are by far the really famous ones: Tokyo, Kyoto, and maybe Osaka. Personally, I prefer to introduce the lesser known places of Japan, like the countryside. Unfortunately, tourists travelling there don't give much feedback online. But, of course, Tokyo and Kyoto are indeed amazing places. You could easily only do a website about Tokyo and still be very busy.

Haraoka: Is that so? Kyoto is of course beautiful, but many Japanese people don't particularly think the same of Tokyo. That may be different when remembering Tokyo in the Meiji period or early

Showa period, before it was destroyed in World War II.

Schauwecker: Certainly, people who are interested in the history and culture of Japan might feel a bit disappointed about Tokyo. But the number of website visitors suggests a great interest in Tokyo. The city ranks first in popularity with twice as many visitor numbers as Kyoto, which is ranked second. People can find the modern face of Japan in Tokyo. After all, it is the capital, and in it some of the most interesting architecture and most popular entertainment and shopping areas can be found.

Haraoka: Does this mean that tourists coming to Tokyo are interested in modern Japan?

Schauwecker: For many I think that is true. However, Tokyo has a lot to offer to tourists who want to visit traditional and historical places, not just the many and good museums but also old districts.

Haraoka: Asakusa, for example?

Schauwecker: Asakusa and the downtown districts that have a very different flair compared to, say, Shibuya. In these districts Tokyo feels more like a peaceful and calm town rather than the biggest city in the world, with an atmosphere of earlier decades.

Haraoka: Unfortunately, Asakusa isn't so popular anymore among the Japanese. The small shops and traditional restaurants are losing customers despite their high standard.

Schauwecker: Indeed, Asakusa can be quite quiet, especially in the evenings.

Haraoka: What about Ginza?

Schauwecker: Ginza is a great destination for shopping but not so much for entertainment. Tourists don't feel comfortable entering the expensive establishments there, as these places can be intimidating from the outside. Ginza is therefore rarely listed as a popular entertainment district among Western tourists. The popular entertainment districts are usually Shibuya, Shinjuku and Roppongi.

Haraoka: I have seen a lot of Chinese tourists in Ginza. Do you have Chinese visitors?

Schauwecker: No, not a lot. We also have a Chinese website, but Chinese, South Korean and Taiwanese visitors are few, even though they represent the lion's share of tourists in Japan. Most of our visitors are Western and Southeast Asian who can speak English and use our English site. And we also know that the three largest tourist groups seem to like shopping, especially the Chinese.

Haraoka: These are the wealthier Chinese.

Schauwecker: Right. We don't have a lot of experience with Chinese tourists. Our website targets independent travelers who can read English and are more interested in culture than shopping.

Haraoka: Tokyo is in general a safe city, but things are changing here too.

Schauwecker: Perhaps Tokyo is becoming somewhat more dangerous. But all our visitors regard Japan as very safe compared to their home countries. Even in Kabukicho (in Shinjuku) you don't have to worry, as long as you stay out of the wrong establishments.

Unique Culture of Hot Springs

Haraoka: You mentioned that you preferred the regional areas over the cities.

Schauwecker: It's a personal interest. You can find many books and websites about Tokyo and Kyoto, but there is very little information about regional areas, even in Japanese. That's my ambition; I want to make those places more easily accessible to foreign tourists. I think they have a lot of potential.

Haraoka: Which rural areas were you thinking of in particular?

Schauwecker: Smaller hot spring towns, the so-called onsen towns. Kusatsu Onsen is already quite popular, but I think it has the potential to become even more famous. Just look at the immense popularity of Hakone. Not many people are familiar with the nice little town of Kusatsu. In the evening, you can put on a summer kimono and traditional Japanese sandals and walk to the Yubatake in the town's center — one of the biggest hot springs in the area. The town has tried very hard to enhance its charm; overly colorful and disturbing public signs were removed and buildings underlining its historic image as an *onsen* town were built.

Haraoka: Apparently, hot springs are becoming very popular among Americans.

Schauwecker: Yes, but for some people getting naked in a public bath is too awkward. Though, according to our surveys, it's only about half of the tourists. There is of course always the possibility to go to a private bath instead, but in an *onsen* not only can you relax but you can also experience a unique Japanese culture. Many foreigners enjoy it so much that they become regular customers, and their recommendations are making *onsen* more and more popular among foreigners. I also enjoy it, and I spend much time doing research to put together a guide to the best *onsen*.

Haraoka: Another reason why Western people may have a hard time with *onsen* is the prohibition of tattoos. The tattoo ban is very rigorous, even on small tattoos. Japanese people are very law-abiding

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Schauwecker: Which I think is a very good thing. Yes, a lot of people from our website forum are worried and wonder whether they can enter a bath with a tattoo, but in general they respect and accept the local customs. These rules are made for a reason: to keep the *yakuza* out and to prevent other visitors from feeling disturbed. However, it is unfortunate since those small, fashionable tattoos don't have much to do with the real reason why they are prohibited.

Haraoka: Tattoos are also expected to become an issue during the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 because so many people, even athletes, have them.

Schauwecker: That's an interesting thought. In fact, it seems that the tattoo ban is becoming stricter rather than the other way around. The new big *onsen*, like the Oedo Onsen in Odaiba (in Tokyo), are especially strict. They put up big signs in Japanese and English that forbid tattoos, and not just to keep the *yakuza* out.

Haraoka: Abiding by the law is a good characteristic of Japanese people. However, some Westerners see the Japanese as being a bit too strict, too meticulous.

Schauwecker: Yes, that's right. Some of them who are residents in Japan even see it as a reason to return to their own countries. Different people have different preferences. I think it's one of the best characteristics of Japanese people, because ultimately it translates into the crime rate being low, the streets being secure, and the public services working effectively. You can even trust the taxi drivers.

Haraoka: And even if you lose your wallet in the train...

Schauwecker: Yes, you often get it back.

Foreign Tourism Investment

Haraoka: I heard that American hotels are interested in hot springs. They want to buy Japanese inns to build their own hotels there.

Schauwecker: Yes, I have heard that too.

Haraoka: Can tourism in that sense lead to foreign direct investment in Japan?

Schauwecker: From what I know, it's especially the Chinese companies that are active. They buy inns and then cater to Chinese tourists. The economy is not my field, but I guess this is one example of foreign investment in tourism in Japan.

Haraoka: I see that you introduce ski resorts to foreign tourists. I think there was a ski resort in Hokkaido that Australians developed, which eventually led to them establishing and running operations there. That would be another successful example.

Schauwecker: Right, the Niseko resort. It's quite amazing; Niseko is almost like going abroad. Not only are there many foreign skiers, but also the shops cater to foreign tourists. You can compare the Japanese restaurants in Niseko with Japanese restaurants in Vancouver. Although you are in Japan, the food tastes like that in Japanese restaurants in other countries.

Haraoka: You lived in Canada. Is it true that there are a lot of similarities between Hokkaido and Canada?

Schauwecker: Yes, it is. Development of western Canada started in the late 1800s, and during the same period a big part of Hokkaido was developed by North American specialists. So it is no surprise that several cities, like Vancouver, in western Canada look similar to Sapporo. Basically, they were made at the same time by people with the same kind of background, especially around Asahikawa city. If you drive through the area around Asahikawa, you could be fooled into thinking it was a town in British Columbia. It's quite astonishing. The climate in these two regions is similar as well.

Tourism During the Tokyo Olympics 2020

Haraoka: The Japanese government is aiming to increase the number of foreign tourists, in particular during the Olympics. The Tokyo Olympics in 2020 is expected to attract tourists not only to Tokyo but also to regional areas.

Schauwecker: That is also my major concern.

Haraoka: However, foreign tourists will encounter a number of difficulties in the regions. And they might feel uneasy and lost when being in Japan for the first time and in an unfamiliar environment in the countryside, where they can't even read a traffic or direction sign.

Schauwecker: Yes, there has to be English information material or English-speaking people in public places, hotels and buses available.



The language barrier is the main reason for the slow process in the opening of the countryside. Right now, you have to be an adventurous traveler in order to leave the beaten track.

Haraoka: Is there any advice you can give the Japanese government on how to make local areas more accessible to tourists?

Schauwecker: Of course, we facilitate local tourism by creating the sightseeing guide on Japan Guide. I have also participated in governmental meetings aimed at improving the local tourist situation. At those times I always got the impression that the government is well aware of the areas that are the weak points. In fact, the great effort the government puts into a project, once they decide to implement it, is impressive. Wireless Internet is one example. One of the major complaints among foreigners was that there were not enough Wi-Fi access points to connect their smartphones to. But within just the last twelve months, new systems have been installed all over Japan — thanks to the support of the government. I think they do a good job.

Haraoka: The hot and humid Japanese summer might also have a negative effect on tourism during the 2020 Olympics. Unfortunately, the Olympics can only be held in July and August. Do you think the hot summer will be a problem?

Schauwecker: It is well known that the best times to visit Japan are spring and autumn, to enjoy the cherry blossoms and the changing of the leaves. Another reason why these seasons are preferred is indeed that you can avoid the humid summer, which can make sightseeing very exhausting. But I don't see any solution for this.

Japan's Tourism & Soft-Power Potential

Haraoka: I see. In terms of the OECD average, the Japanese foreign tourism industry is underdeveloped. What do you think can be done to increase tourism?

Schauwecker: It has only been about ten years since the government set out to develop tourism on a national level. On a local level, the engagement varies widely by prefecture and city, with some having no interest in foreign tourism or becoming more active, while others have been involved for more than a decade. But the first and important step is to actually accept foreign tourists. Besides that, I think the government is on the right path. There are many improvements, such as how the Japan Tourism Agency now targets more individual markets, or visa changes that make it easier for Malaysians and Thais to visit Japan. If the government continues with such reforms, I think success will come automatically.

Haraoka: Do you think the promotion of the campaign “Cool Japan” is useful in attracting more tourists to Japan?

Schauwecker: To be frank, I've never liked the name of the concept too much. It doesn't convince me, because I've always had the opinion that the labeling of oneself as “cool” can only be done by someone else. That's why I've never been excited about it, although there is certainly an abundance of “cool” things Japan has, like the technology and modern culture. But I am personally not a fan of it.

Haraoka: I agree. But changing the topic: some say that Japan may be a safe country but lacks exciting sightseeing spots such as those in European cities, and that's why Japan is ideal for tourist families wanting to enjoy leisure activities, like hang-gliding, swimming or sun-bathing. What is your opinion?

Schauwecker: Honestly, I find that unconvincing. People come here because of their interest in Japan and its unique features. I think that it is, and will be in the future, those features that attract most tourists: the old and modern culture, the architecture, nature, the tradition of *onsen* and the volcanic landscape. So, quite the opposite, my impression is that Japan attracts more independent travelers than families, because families can find travelling in busy cities and visiting sightseeing spots tiresome. On top, the spots are usually historic attractions, which I think appeal more to an older audience too. And while there is a potential to attract tourists with outdoor activities, I don't see how this would appeal to Western tourists. For them it is much cheaper to go hang-gliding in their own country. Tourism is often about doing something that you can't do in your own country. That's why Singaporeans go to Hokkaido: they don't have snow and agriculture is scarce. And that's why Swiss people go to Kyoto: they don't have pagoda architecture. The reason for visiting Japan really depends on which country you come from.

Haraoka: The cover story of this issue is soft power. Unfortunately, Japan's foreign policy is now at a difficult point. Do you think that developing tourism will help to boost a country's soft power and thereby facilitate peace?

Schauwecker: Yes, definitely. I think it is a very good tool. Traveling has a big impact on people. It broadens the mind or at least has the potential to do so. Whereas you were limited to one way of thinking before, traveling teaches you how diverse the way of thinking in different countries can be. Your image of a country can change, maybe sometimes in a negative way, but in the case of Japan I think it is mostly in a positive way. By visiting a country like Japan — with its friendly people — stereotypes can be eliminated, too. Overall, tourism contributes to a more open attitude towards foreign countries and their people, which is directly connected to an increase in tolerance — and consequently, peaceful relations can be more easily established than if everyone just stays at home and listens to the local media.

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