

# Film Tourism: Something for Everyone

By Barry Natusch



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People travel to escape from daily life, for the excitement of the journey and the surprises it brings. They may go to discover food, entertainment, friends, and culture. Part of cultural sightseeing is film tourism.

As a film enthusiast, I often drop by a film attraction when travelling. After I saw the recent film *Your Name* (*Kimi no Na Wa*), I heard there were several of the film's locations around Shinjuku, Yotsuya and Roppongi so I decided to become a *Your Name* fan for a day. When I visited one of the locations, the steps leading up to Suga Shrine, a Japanese mother came by with her son and took pictures of him. I chatted with them about the film. Then a German couple came up the steps and we talked about the film too (*Photo 1*). I took their picture on the steps as they re-enacted the poses of the main characters in the film, Taki and Mitsuha, passing by each other in their parallel universes. I had joined a community of travelling film tourists.

Let's examine this film tourism or "media-induced tourism" in Japan describing its specific types and examples, and look at the different kinds of people and businesses that are involved.

## Numbers of Tourists & Popular Films

Popular Japanese films, ones that earn a lot of money, might be expected to draw fans as tourists. For example, *Godzilla* earned \$528 million, *Your Name* earned \$281 million, and *Lost in Translation*, an

American film shot in Japan, earned \$119 million. In terms of profitability, these were popular films. So some tourists might include a film destination in their day or overnight trips.

Japan is a popular tourist destination both for Japanese and foreigners. The total number of Japanese domestic travelers in 2017 was 640 million (day trips and overnight trips are split roughly 50-50). Overseas visitors to Japan numbered 31 million tourists in 2018, with most staying between one to two weeks. Some of these tourists might be somewhat familiar with films made in Japan, and be interested in them enough to visit film locations as fans. Even films which didn't make a lot of money such as *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (\$2 million) also help in publicizing Japan and attracting tourists.

## Tourists Come in Many Flavors

A film tourist is a person who travels to seek out something to do with films or TV programs in their own country, or when visiting a foreign country. From the perspective of the tourist industry, film tourism can be a strategy to draw dedicated film fans or casual tourists to a place because of attractions such as Hollywood's Universal Studios or Disneyland to have a photo taken with Mickey Mouse.

For the individual traveler, film tourism is like a combination of a fantastic journey of surprises, but with a pleasurable familiarity. You are out of your everyday routine, you give control to someone else to tell their story, around every corner there is a sight to open your eyes.

Film tourists range between two extremes. The serious film fan is one who might visit multiple locations of historical dramas, fiction or animation movies to understand more deeply about those films. The casual film tourist, on the other hand, could be typified as a sightseer who might visit something like a movie theme park as an entertainment stop on their tour.

Among the more dedicated film tourists, some are on pilgrimages to sites where films were shot, others want to visit film museums or film-related theme parks, and yet others might come to attend a film festival or to shoot amateur or professional films. The *Table* lists some main types of film tourism in Japan.

## Pilgrimages to Film Locations

Among visitors travelling in Japan, some people recall Tokyo



Photo 1: Author

Suga Shrine steps

TABLE

## Types & examples of film tourism

Type of Film Tourism	Categories and Examples
Locations of films or TV shows made by Japanese companies	(1) Actual location of story: (Himeji Castle: <i>Kagemusha</i> , 1980) (2) Actual location of documentary: (Tokyo Gymnastic Stadium: <i>Tokyo Olympiad</i> , 1965) (3) Inspiration for location (Yotsuya: <i>Your Name</i> , 2014) (4) Replica of location (Satsuki and Mei's house: <i>My Neighbor Totoro</i> , 1986)
Locations of films or TV shows made by non-Japanese companies	(1) Actual location of story (Tokyo Park Hyatt: <i>Lost in Translation</i> , 2003) (2) Actual location of documentary (Wakayama: <i>The Cove</i> , 2009)
Film Festivals	(1) International: Tokyo International Film Festival (October-November annually) (2) Local: Tokyo: Short Shorts (May-June annually), Hokkaido, Yubari (March annually)
Film Studio Theme Parks	(1) Tokyo: Disneyland (2) Kansai: Universal Studios (3) Nikko: Edo Wonderland Edomura
Film Museums or Archives	(1) National: Tokyo: National Film Archive of Japan (2) Specialized: Mitaka: Ghibli Museum
Filmmaking	(1) Japanese film locations: Throughout Japan: most Japanese films, Asadora, Taiga (2) Foreign film locations often in less expensive locations: Hokkaido, Kyushu
Tours	(1) Big companies: JTB, railway companies (2) Small companies: private guides and interpreters
Shopping	(1) Films: Tsutaya: DVDs (2) Film-related memorabilia: museum and theme park shops
Studying film	(1) Public: Tokyo National University of the Arts (2) Private: Nihon Daigaku Film School (3) Animation Schools: Kyoto Seika University, Yoyogi Animation School (4) Private film schools offered by Japanese and expatriate filmmakers

Source: Compiled by the author

Tower being destroyed by *Godzilla*, some visit Shibamata to see the statue of Tora-san of *Otoko wa Tsurai yo*, and visitors to Himeji Castle can visualize it as the backdrop to Kurosawa's 1980 film *Kagemusha*.

*If You Are The One* (2008), a Chinese romantic comedy, was filmed partly in the eastern part of Hokkaido. A popular film in China, now Chinese tourists flock to eastern Hokkaido. A destination popular among Thai visitors is Saga's Yutoku Inari Shrine because a Thai film *Timeline* and a television drama series *Koi Kimono* were filmed there. Shrine staff welcome visitors and there are signs in several languages. Furthermore, the Saga government is supportive of film companies shooting films at Saga locations.

### Selection of My Favorite Japanese Film Experiences

- The Ghibli Museum at Mitaka is an endearing destination and you feel close to the artists who contributed to the astoundingly successful run of director Hayao Miyazaki (*Photo 2*).
- I am a film festival enthusiast not just because of the chance to see unique films from other countries but to attend Q&A sessions with directors, cast and staff who made those films. The Tokyo International Film Festival is an annual fixture on my calendar. Film festivals are about films as an art form and you get

to see films not shown at big cinemas.

- The National Film Archives of Japan has a useful library and curates impressive exhibitions.
- Being a fan of great architecture I have visited the Olympic

Photo 2: Author



At the Ghibli Museum

Gymnasium at Yoyogi many times and each time I recall scenes from Kon Ichikawa's 1964 film *Tokyo Olympiad*.

- I am also interested in movie theater architecture. So visiting big ones and small ones, I check them off against a list of criteria such as facilities, vision, sound, seating, access, and atmosphere.

An actual film location becomes a point of view for looking at the film, and the film scenes become the point of view of looking at the locations. In this way, real life and film become intertwined in my mind.

## Conclusion

So film tourism is like filmmaking; there are companies, superstars, bit players, technical people, and there is a big audience of avid followers. There's something for everyone.

**If I were** a film tourist already in Japan, I would plan to visit museums, and locations of favorite films, if possible timing the visit to coincide with a festival, like the Tokyo International Film Festival. Perhaps also shopping for Japanese films to add to my personal film archive, and throwing in visits to a couple of studios and theme parks. I'd try to visit a selection of the 3,525 cinemas in Japan. I'd seek out the biggest cinemas like the EX Theater in Roppongi, and the smallest intimate and unique theater architecture like Asagaya's Laputa Theater (*Photo 3*).

**If I were** in a film-related Japanese business, I would investigate potential numbers and groups of film tourists and then highlight services or goods that appealed to them by crafting a website offering a combination of free information and tailor-made guidance, tours or special product deals.

**If I were** in business in a local area in Japan, perhaps in a

community facing an increasingly aging population, but with local attractions such as scenery, nature, or hot springs, I could encourage filmmakers to come and use the area for film locations. Financial inducements such as discounts for movie crews at local inns and restaurants, offers of volunteers, and assistance with visa applications could be attractive. Film scouts could be informed of these advantages. Since the present Japanese government favors short-term foreign visitors, film crews could be ideal. The Saga shrine linked to the Thai movie *Timeline* is an example of local entrepreneurial initiative. Local sites connected to NHK's programs such as Taiga dramas (notable figures in Japanese history dramas) and Asadora (morning serialized novel dramas) benefit through NHK's promotion of cultural identity.

**If I were** a local politician seeking to attract tourists to revitalize the local community, I would encourage initiatives to promote the culture and stimulate the economy. I would also take a look at the Japan Film Commission's useful manual *Guide to Filming in Japan*. This may even foster local film and video enterprises.

**If I were** a national policymaker, I would encourage sub-genres of tourism such as film tourism. Yet it is also important not to go too far in publicizing and overmarketing. This could result in stretching local resources to cope with an influx of tourists. Two-thirds of Japanese have reservations about the tourist boom, so winning the support of local communities is key to tourism being a sustainable industry.

**If I were** a filmmaker, I would research local areas which offered attractions and scenery which could be worked into a film. Also, I would look into sources of funding in Japan. The Japan Foundation has in the past funded foreign films set in Japan. I would also study the rules governing filming in local areas because the regulations, labor laws and immigration criteria might cause obstacles.

**If I were** interested in studying animation, Japanese film or Japanese filmmaking, I would visit some of the universities and private film study programs before making a commitment to entering a program.

**If I were** going to visit Japan as a visitor I would watch some Japanese films pre-departure to get a sense of the culture – old films such as those directed by Yasujiro Ozu or Akira Kurosawa, and more contemporary ones by Hirokazu Koreeda or Juzo Itami. If attending the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, and even if I couldn't get a seat for some events, I might look around the sports venues, and places where visitors go, to try to capture on film a collection of impressions about this momentous event.

Film tourism offers an escape for the individual as well as a new direction for revitalizing local communities.

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Photo 3: Author



The Laputa Theater

After a career in academia, Barry Natusch now specializes in writing and film production as a media consultant.