

Interview with Dr. Aw Wan Ping, Co-Founder, TokudAw Inc.

Recommended Wellness Tours to Japan

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By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Introduction

JS: First, could you briefly introduce yourself and tell us about the circumstances that led you to start the company?

AW: My name is Aw Wan Ping. I am from Singapore and came to Japan 18 years ago as a Japanese Government Scholarship student under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Initially, I pursued research on Omics and Food Science in the Master's and Doctoral programs at Tokyo Medical and Dental University, now known as the Institute of Science Tokyo. Subsequently, I joined the Institute for Advanced Biosciences at Keio University, where I am conducting research in Nutrigenomics.

Over the past decade or so, Japan has seen a boom in entrepreneurship, with many of my colleagues at Keio University launching their own startups. Around seven or eight ventures have also emerged from the Institute for Advanced Biosciences. Influenced by this trend, I too began considering starting a business in a field that interests me, aiming to contribute to society. While I enjoy research, living in Japan as a foreigner has given me many insights. For instance, insufficient mutual understanding between Japanese and foreigners hinders effective collaboration and integration within companies and daily life. I believe this stems primarily from language and cultural barriers. To address this issue, I founded TokudAw Inc., a travel agency where we can provide a platform for people of different nationalities to interact and communicate with each other through having fun and creating happy memories..

Our company has two main target audiences. One is foreign travelers from abroad who come to Japan for private travel. The other target is overseas companies. We address the needs of overseas companies seeking to collaborate with Japanese firms or conduct training programs about Japan. In other words, our targets are both individuals and corporations. At TokudAw, we consider ourselves navigators, because we have cross-cultural expertise that we can share and help people of the world discover the treasures of Japan whilst keeping them safe and comfortable during their



Dr. Aw Wan Ping

journey. We established a travel agency to create enjoyable, engaging spaces that foster mutual understanding. Naturally, with so many travel agencies existing, differentiation is crucial. Therefore, we plan educational tours and wellness tours, offering these as compelling products to our customers.

JS: I see. You majored in food science, and Japanese cuisine is popular overseas. Many foreign visitors come to Japan specifically for the food, right? So I think there might be areas where your research field aligns with the travel agency's planning.

AW: That's right. That's how it all started. So as a food researcher, I introduce things to visiting foreign guests with a little scientific spice, saying things like, "Matcha is good for your health" or "The water from Mount Fuji is rich in a mineral called vanadium, so it's expected to have anti-obesity and anti-diabetes effects." But they didn't make reservations to hear that kind of talk. Most travelers aren't interested in such things; they come to Japan wanting to visit places like Mount Fuji, the Oshino Hakkai ponds, or Arashiyama in Kyoto. So I guide them to the places they want to see first, weaving in just a little bit of this kind of story to help them better understand about nutrition in Japanese food.

JS: I believe you launched your company in 2020 in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Wasn't that a particularly challenging time to start a travel business?

AW: It's true, the early days of the business were quite challenging. Before the pandemic, Japan's inbound tourism industry was in a very strong position. In that environment, I scrambled to prepare by obtaining my Travel Agency Manager qualification and securing permanent residency to start a business in Japan. Then the pandemic hit during that period. However, my co-founder Kazuhisa Tokuda used that time to advance various qualification registrations for the business. We steadily prepared for a startup and finally launched in 2020.

At the time, many foreigners left Japan due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I imagine many travel agencies went out of business as a result. Actually, amidst all that, a major job came our way for the Tokyo Olympics. We secured a contract from Omega, one of the top-tier Olympic sponsors. Since they dispatch marketing staff to every event, we handled the transportation management for that – specifically, vehicle operations and driver arrangements. So it was a good thing we had already established the company.

Potential for Wellness Tours in Japan

JS: I'd like to ask about wellness tours. I believe Japan has great potential for wellness tours, with its hot springs and healthy cuisine. What are your thoughts?

AW: I agree. Recently, people in Europe and America have been showing particular interest in wellness. Japan offers not only hot springs but also the pleasures of forest bathing and hiking. For hiking destinations, the Shikoku pilgrimage route and the Kumano Kodo ancient pilgrimage routes are extremely popular. Additionally, we've seen increasing requests from visitors coming to Japan for the Meetings, Incentive Travel, Conventions, Exhibitions/Events (MICE), expressing a desire to participate in activities like yoga or zazen meditation, or to experience healthy traditional Japanese cuisine. Therefore, our company is proposing special programs related to my research to hotels.

The trend toward wellness is also evident in the JW Marriott Hotel's emphasis on wellness and well-being. The JW Marriott Hotel Tokyo, newly opened in Minato Ward on Oct. 23, 2025, features nine special rooms called "Mindful Rooms" which are themed around mindfulness and reportedly offer special services using music and light to help guests relax. With numerous such developments, wellness is a field I believe will continue to grow significantly.

JS: Earlier, you mentioned that travelers aren't particularly interested in complex topics like nutrition science. Have you considered developing tour programs that connect your research with Japanese cuisine?

AW: Tourists visiting from overseas are not only interested in Japanese cuisine, but also deeply fascinated by Japanese culture, the

Japanese people, and Japanese lifestyles. Therefore, we are developing tour programs to meet these interests. One popular example is an experiential tour at a farm in Nagano Prefecture where participants make *gohei mochi* rice cakes using organic rice alongside the farmer. The tour involves visiting the farm, making rice cakes with her, preparing a local walnut-infused miso paste to spread on the cakes, grilling them, and then enjoying them. It's a very popular way to spend such an afternoon. You may view the video of our special experience [here](#).

Recently, I discovered a *mochi* maker in Saitama Prefecture that has been practicing organic farming for over 100 years. On tours to visit there, the farmer explains why organic farming is beneficial, and participants harvest vegetables together, make miso soup, and pound *mochi*. We have a video of our guests in this experience [here](#).

JS: What other Japanese ingredients are attracting attention from foreigners?

AW: *Amazake* is also popular, and barley tea is a great summer drink because it contains minerals. Also, wasabi has been gaining attention lately. There's a wasabi farm in Nagano that's hugely popular with foreigners.

Potential & Challenges of Medical Tourism

JS: I can picture the wellness tours you're planning. I'd also like to ask about medical tourism. In Singapore, attracting medical tourists from abroad is actively promoted as a national policy. Do you feel Japan also has the potential to become a thriving destination for medical tourism?

AW: I think language will likely be the biggest issue. Currently, there are problems with the capacity of medical interpreters and whether Japanese hospitals have adequate capacity and reception systems in place. Given that Japanese hospitals are already operating at near full capacity, I suspect few have the resources to accept new patients.

JS: Indeed, there is the issue of language. Singapore is a multi-ethnic nation where people speak English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil, so you could say it has a foundation for accepting foreigners. However, these days we have automatic translation tools, and I feel

the quality of translations has improved. What do you think?

AW: I think it would be great if a translation machine specialized for medical use could be developed, but given the accuracy of current automatic translation machines, I don't think doctors would want to use them yet.

JS: When listening to doctors, there are voices expressing a desire for nurses to learn languages as well. In Japan, which languages would be best to acquire?

AW: Well, considering languages of neighboring countries, I think it would be good to increase the number of people who can speak Chinese, Russian, and English. Some interpreters also hold qualifications in fields like medicine or social work. Increasing the number of people with language skills plus specialized qualifications in medical fields would contribute to the expansion of Japan's medical tourism.

Another concern is that Japan's healthcare system requires a referral letter to receive medical treatment. While international patients can research hospitals and doctors online, they often find themselves unable to obtain a referral letter.

JS: In that sense, it might be nice to have a one-stop service that handles everything – from arranging referral letters to booking flights, accommodation, and hospital appointments.

AW: That's right. A while back, medical checkup tours were popular in Japan, so we thought about offering them at our company too. When we inquired at Keio University Hospital, we were told they already had a contracted company and weren't accepting new ones. I imagine they have concerns about communicating with patients who don't speak Japanese, and there's also the possibility of sudden appointment cancellations. With so many potential scenarios, I could understand the hospital's desire to have a reliable intermediary handle things.

JS: That's certainly true. I think it would be ideal if standard models for wellness tours and medical tourism could be established among Asian countries,

allowing travelers to receive checkups or treatments alongside their trips. What do you think?

AW: I think the best scenario would be for countries to collaborate, but the market isn't large enough, so the government might not take action.

JS: Based on the interviews I conducted for the previous issue (November/December 2025), I got the impression that the market targeting affluent individuals is fairly substantial. What are your thoughts?

AW: While it may be a market of considerable size within the travel industry, when considering other sectors – such as defense – it becomes relatively small. Therefore, I doubt bureaucrats in different countries would be willing to invest significant time in standardization efforts.

JS: Unfortunately, Japan's economy is shrinking. When considering what areas remain competitive, I felt that combining our high medical standards with tourism resources like hot springs – where people can recuperate in nature – could create opportunities to earn foreign currency through medical tourism.

AW: Since Singapore lacks tourism resources, considering the overall package, Japan seems like a better choice. I work at a Japanese research institute, and the research level in Japan is truly high. They have a wide array of cutting-edge equipment, and everyone is doing excellent research. In that sense, I think it ultimately comes down to how you approach marketing.

JS: Japan is often said to be bad at marketing, isn't it?

AW: I don't think it's bad, but it might need to be a bit clearer. For example, if we emphasized something like "The language barrier isn't a barrier. You can come to Japan safely and securely to receive world-class treatment" – wouldn't that attract more people? One of our affluent clients had a husband who developed oral cancer. We recommended that he receive radiation therapy in Japan, explaining it would be a better treatment option without the need to remove muscle tissue. However, she declined it, stating she wanted him to

be treated by doctors she trusted in her home country.

JS: I've heard that Japan's radiation therapy technology is at a very high level. What's your take on that?

AW: I agree. A friend of mine in Singapore once had the same type of oral cancer. Since they didn't have the money, they raised funds through crowdfunding and received treatment in Japan. They're cured now and living a healthy life.

Many people have the impression that medical costs in Japan are high, but in reality it's simply because they can't use their insurance abroad that makes it seem expensive. If they could use the insurance they have in their home country while in Japan, I think more people would come to Japan for treatment. Tour participants sometimes hesitate to go to a hospital when they get injured, catch a cold, or come down with the flu during their trip. They worry about things like not being able to communicate at the hospital or running out of money.

JS: So it would be good to have insurance that covers that.

AW: Yes. There's no need to reduce treatment costs; I think it would be good if insurance coverage could be applied to treatment in Japan as well. If that were possible, they could receive treatment, and the hospitals would be happy too, wouldn't they? If countries were to collaborate, I think insurance collaboration would be ideal.

Young People's Interest in International Exchanges

JS: Let me ask a slightly different question. It's said that more young people in Japan these days aren't interested in international exchanges. Do you get that impression?

AW: I haven't given it much thought, but there's definitely a barrier between Japanese people and foreigners. For example, I think if exchange programs existed starting in school, people would gradually get used to it and be more accepting of foreigners as adults. I want to provide such enjoyable activities through the company.

JS: You mentioned that many foreigners living in Japan face difficulties. Do you feel that more Japanese people are becoming less tolerant of different cultures?

AW: I think both Japanese people and foreigners have issues. Japanese people don't know much about foreigners, so they don't know how to interact with them. Foreigners also don't understand the real Japan. Because there's a gap between the Japan they imagine and the actual Japan, they end up disappointed and leave feeling let down when they come here. To address this issue, our company offers a program called "Cultural Boot Camp". This program is designed for individuals planning to study or work in Japan, teaching them the authentic Japan over a two-week period.

JS: Finally, could you tell us about any future goals for the company or your personal goals as a researcher?

AW: During the first five years after starting the company, we took on various jobs just to survive. From here on, I want to build the company's identity and become a travel agency specializing in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics) fields. As a nutrition researcher, I naturally want to make wellness tours as popular as our current Mount Fuji tours. In 10 or 20 years, I want customers in Japan looking to join wellness tours or those interested in science-focused tours to immediately think of our company. **JS**

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