

Working Harder at Relaxing

By Motohide Omachi



Every year about half a million Japanese women in the 15-24 age group go overseas on vacation, a figure which is some 42% higher than that for men of the same age.

The years since World War II have radically transformed Japanese society. And not surprisingly, they have also reshaped the way Japanese think about, and enjoy, their free time.

In the immediate postwar years, leisure options were limited at best. Most people went to the movies or the beach, or took short day trips to tourist spots. The emphasis was on cheap, quick pleasures, while recreational facilities were simple and utilitarian.

The 1960s brought higher income levels and more vacations. Pursuits became more ambitious. People who used to go ice skating now went skiing. Day trips were replaced by overnight excursions. The cost, both in money and time, shot up.

Yet with the coming of the 1980s the trend toward mass recreation has begun to wane. With only a few exceptions—most notably the boom in foreign travel—leisure today is leaning toward more individualistic pursuits. No new sports have appeared with the mass appeal enjoyed by tennis and golf, which many people often took up for no other reason than that everyone else was doing it. Instead, there has been a flood of new activities indulged in by a committed few.

This is nowhere more obvious than in wind surfing, scuba diving, hang gliding and other sports loved by young people. These are not only fun, but also make a clear statement about the person's lifestyle. While the total number of participants may be limited, these sports all possess a clear identity of their own in today's crowded leisure market.

Diverse facilities

Recreational individualism has also spawned greater diversity in leisure facilities. Beaches that once might not even have had changing rooms are now full-fledged resorts, resplendent with sailboats, motorboats, jet skis, tennis courts, swimming pools and restaurants. In Hokkaido, one ski resort even has an immense indoor pool where people fresh off the slopes can go surfing on artificially generated waves. The quest for bigger and better leisure facilities has led to a boom in large resort construction.

To the Japanese, spare time used to be exactly that: time left over after some

task was finished. Leisure, for all practical purposes, meant a slightly longer break than usual to recuperate before the next stretch of labor. Japanese were suspicious of leisure activities that cut into working hours.

"In the West, working hours are considered unpleasant," says Yuzo Takasu, a professor of social welfare at Nihon University who has studied the origins of the different perceptions of leisure in Japan and Western countries. "It is during one's free time that one can escape from work to do what one really wants. The Japanese, however, from time immemorial unstintingly poured their time into growing rice, turning it into an art. They found the same fulfillment in rice cultivation that Western peoples might derive from creating a work of art."

This distinctively Japanese view of leisure was passed down unchanged until the early 1970s. During the miraculous economic growth of the 1960s, Japanese could see for themselves how the energy they put into their work translated directly into higher incomes, and ultimately a greater sense of fulfillment and prosperity with each new purchase of a car or television. No wonder people could find satisfaction in their work.

Table 1 Annual Leisure Expenditures per Household

(¥, %)

	1967		1971		1975		1979		1983		1985	
	Nominal	Percentage	Nominal	Percentage	Nominal	Percentage	Nominal	Percentage	Nominal	Percentage	Nominal	Percentage
Eating out	18,843	14.9	34,769	15.9	68,009	16.7	100,415	17.1	121,439	17.5	127,441	17.4
Consumer durables	9,627	7.6	23,306	10.7	22,881	5.6	31,816	5.4	29,992	4.3	27,047	3.7
Radio-TV sets, etc.	7,337	5.8	19,842	9.1	16,243	4.0	23,158	3.9	21,732	3.1	19,600	2.7
Culture & entertainment	29,011	23.0	45,831	21.0	87,382	21.4	128,553	21.9	148,323	21.4	155,831	21.3
Reading	12,344	9.8	17,378	8.0	32,023	7.9	40,185	6.8	44,478	6.4	43,876	6.0
Sports	2,236	1.8	4,746	2.2	7,752	1.9	14,328	2.4	22,047	3.2	24,721	3.4
Travel	14,033	11.1	23,132	10.6	47,092	11.6	66,652	11.3	82,624	11.9	96,015	13.1
Other	52,501	41.6	86,258	39.6	174,382	42.8	246,334	41.9	289,856	41.7	301,397	41.1
Total leisure spending	126,251		218,042		407,588		588,098		694,281		732,452	
Total consumption	684,855		1,049,699		1,895,786		2,576,363		3,114,247		3,277,373	
Ratio of leisure spending to total consumption	18.4		20.8		21.5		22.8		22.3		22.3	

Notes: 1. Economic Planning Agency estimates based on "Household Survey"
2. "Other" category represents primarily personal expenses.

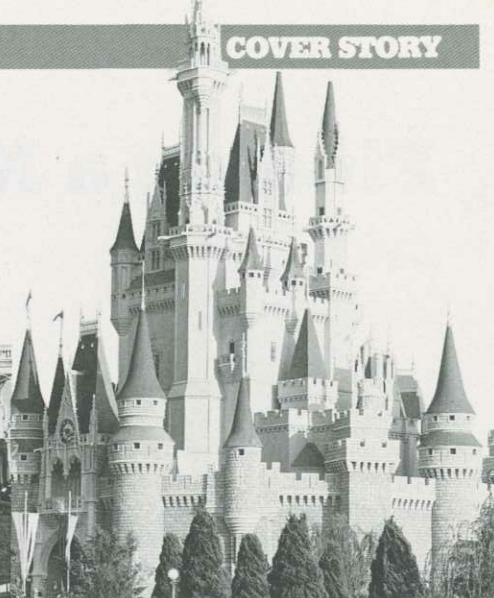
But the oil crises and the era of low growth they heralded brought about two great transformations in the Japanese view of leisure. One, clearly revealed in leisure expenditures (Table 1), was a shift toward services in recreational spending. While the share of leisure in total household expenditures stayed constant, there was a striking change in where the money went. Spending on durables fell sharply, even as the money spent on dining out, sports, travel and other services soared. There was a clear shift in values from "possession" to "experience."

The second great transformation was the end of the belief that leisure was subordinate to labor. Young people today demand that labor and leisure be given equal weight. Increasingly, they seek fulfillment, not at work, but in their leisure time activities. Naturally this leads them to seek self-expression in the way they use their free time. It is this that lies behind today's recreational individualism.

Women's travels

Another recent phenomenon is the popularity of leisure activities attracting large numbers of women. And none has earned more attention than the upsurge in foreign travel.

The number of Japanese traveling abroad has risen steadily ever since foreign travel was liberalized in 1964. Last year, the strong yen boosted the number of travelers past 6.7 million, an increase of more than 20% over the previous year. Destinations, too, have changed, shifting from Southeast Asia and Hawaii to North America, Australia and other more distant climes. But above all, foreign travel has become a woman's pursuit. By 1986,



Attractions such as Tokyo Disneyland are thriving, helped by the fact that some 30% of Japanese companies now restrict working hours to a five-day week.

35% of all Japanese traveling abroad were women. And in the 15-24 age group, some 500,000 women vacationed overseas compared with only 290,000 men. The number of women going abroad has increased 2.6 times over the past 10 years (1976-1986), far more than the 1.7-fold increase for men.

While more and more Japanese are winging overseas, the number of foreign tourists visiting Japan has stalled, with the result that Japan's international balance of tourism expenditures finished 1987 some \$8.7 billion in the red. That was well ahead of the U.S. tourism deficit, putting Japan on a par with West Germany in a two-way tie for first place (Table 2).

Recognizing this deficit's potential for trimming away at Japan's huge current account surplus, the Ministry of Transport last year formulated a plan for doubling foreign tourism known as the "10 Million Program." The goal is to double the number of Japanese vacationing abroad in just five years. According to ministry calculations, this should expand the tourism deficit to \$11 billion. The proposal has been warmly received by other countries.

Drawing no less attention in the leisure industry today is the rush to build large-scale resorts. At the last count, there were 20 such development projects under way. Helping fuel the boom are international pressure for Japan to increase its domestic demand, the aggressive courting of new projects by local governments and businesses eager to boost local economies, and the readiness of structurally depressed industries to branch out into new fields in a bid to reorient their corporate structures.

Two conditions must be met, however, if these goals are to be realized. The first is a sharp reduction in Japan's working hours, now running some 10% to 30% longer than in Europe and the United States. At present, 30% of Japanese companies have adopted the two-day weekend, and economists estimate that if this practice spread to the entire work force, it would generate ¥3 trillion annually in new demand.

The other necessary condition is resort construction targeted on middle- and higher-age groups, a segment of the population all but ignored by the leisure industry. The youth-oriented strategies of the past will never generate enough new demand to meet the coming increase in supply of leisure facilities. When and only when these conditions have been met will Japan finally be able to boast a fully mature leisure industry.

Table 2 Overseas Travel Balance of Payments

	1983	1985	1987
Receipts	825 (109)	1,137 (117)	2,066 (141)
Payments	4,428 (108)	4,814 (104)	10,732 (148)
Balance	-3,603	-3,677	-8,666

Notes: 1. Figures from the "Monthly International Balance of Payments Report," Bank of Japan
2. Figures in parentheses indicate percentage change from previous year.
3. The 1987 figures are preliminary.

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