

Beauty, Security and Accessibility: Making Japan More Appealing to International Tourists

By Kimura Shozaburo

SINCE the Meiji period (1868-1912), the Japanese economy has been based mainly on industry, but the government recently declared its intention to broaden this base by making Japan a “country built on tourism,” doubling the annual number of international visitors to 10 million by 2010. I have been urging such a move for the last decade, and had used the same words – a country built on tourism – in my Jan. 8, 1993 letter to the Nihon Keizai Shimbun suggesting a modification in government policy. You can imagine how happy I was at the government’s announcement.

But how can this policy be translated into reality?

Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro organized meetings of the Japan Tourism Advisory Council at his official residence on a number of occasions between January and April 2003. The Prime Minister himself attended all meetings from beginning to end, and participated fully in the discussions.

Many Japanese assume that international tourists tend to avoid Japan because of its high commodity prices. “Travel can be expensive in other countries, too,” the Prime Minister said, and there was no discussion on this issue in the meeting. When I spent time on the Mediterranean in June last year, I found that a hotel stay at the Cote d’Azur costs about twice as much as in central Tokyo.

So why do international tourists hesitate to visit Japan? At the Advisory Council’s meetings the main reason put forward was that there is not enough in Japan to attract people. Discussion focused on what “attractive features” are lacking, and how we can make our country more appealing. I proposed that Japan, its regions and cities, be promoted as good places to live and visit, and the subtitle of the Council’s report, *Nation-building that Provides a Good Living Habitat and a Good Place to*

Visit, shows that this was indeed the conclusion of our discussions.

Out of the total world population of 6 billion plus, almost 700 million people (i.e., more than 10%) travel outside their own country each year. People used to travel just for sightseeing. Today they are more likely to enjoy the value of spending time in other countries – which generally comes down to learning and appreciating how other parts of the world celebrate the preciousness of life and livelihood. This is the secret driving force behind today’s unprecedented boom in international travel. Incidentally, the World Tourism Organization (the WTO, not to be confused with the World Trade Organization) has called for the 21st century to be recognized as the century of tourism.

Technological civilization has reached a peak of sorts, and modern conveniences such as cars, airplanes, *Shinkansen* (bullet train), televisions, refrigerators and antibiotics are so much a part of everyday life that they no longer provoke excitement or wonder. Today’s information technology stimulates the brain, but it does not provide much cause for excitement, surprise or the kind of happiness that can be felt with all the senses.

As they reach maturity, people lose confidence in the future, and seem to be caught between hope and insecurity. Before, we were willing to put off pleasure for the future, but now such an attitude is being replaced by a desire to expand one’s living space to the world and to communicate with different cultures – we are keen to see how things are done in other parts of the world, and how other people live and enjoy life.

This situation is somewhat reminiscent of the stage of arrested development in Japan in the 18th and early 19th centuries, when it was thought there was no more land to be opened up for rice cultivation and only enough rice to feed a

population of 30 million (which was below the actual population at the time). As a result, there were frequent uprisings by farmers, cases of infanticide and several attacks on the rice merchants in cities; but at the same time, pilgrimages, a form of tourism where people enjoyed both physical pleasures and spiritual relief, to the Grand Shrine of Ise, and the 88 temples of Shikoku were very popular among ordinary people.

What worthwhile enjoyments, what charms, can Japan offer to international tourists today? The people best capable of knowing those charms are Japanese women, the elderly and foreign visitors. These three groups were almost ignored during Japan’s high-growth era driven mainly by young men. In those days, we valued progress, whereas now we value communication. So it is natural that the new values should be defined which was not by men but by women, not by the young but by the old, not by locals but by people from other places.

The special charm of a region, city or country is generally sensitive appeal (beauty, delectable cuisine and comfort) for women; security for the elderly; and accessibility, by which I mean ease of comprehension, for foreign travelers. In fact, all people, including young men, tend to value these three characteristics.

First, Japanese cities have a male dynamism, but they lost much of their beauty – a feminine characteristic – through modernization after World War II. One prime example is the highway over Nihombashi-Bridge which was one of the most beautiful structures in ancient Tokyo. It would probably take 100 to 300 years to refurbish Japan’s major cities to be as charmingly beautiful, though in a different way of course, as they were in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

International travelers can enjoy the beauty of ancient Japan and appreciate its old lifestyles in countryside that has escaped modernization – places like his-

toric cities, mountain hamlets, terraced rice fields, ancient routes such as Nakasendo and Tokaido, therapeutic hot springs and the temples, shrines and urban areas that UNESCO has listed as World Heritage Sites. For instance, tourists can see deer browsing Japan's ancient capital, Nara, something probably never seen in any other developed country.

Kanazawa, Onomichi, Kamakura and other ancient and historic cities have narrow, winding lanes for tourists to explore and enjoy the city without worrying about traffic. If such places were improved a little and given better signage to make them more accessible and easier to appreciate, all three elements – sensitive appeal, security and accessibility – would be present.

Now would be a good time to list some charming spots:

- Traditional roofs, whether tiled or thatched.



- Colors: the white and black patterns on *namako* walls; and the vermilion of *torii* shrine gates, which gives a sense of security as opposed to reds expressing anger, passion or revolution.



- Terraced rice fields, which exhibit a beautiful harmony between mountains and people, between nature and farming.

Photo: ©Niigata Professional Photographers Society



- Traditional linear design, as seen in *shoji* and *fusuma* doors and *tatami* mats.



- Landscape gardens of the 18th and 19th centuries, which were designed for strolling to different vantage points to enjoy continual changes of scenery (excellent examples include Korakuen in Okayama and another garden by the same name in Tokyo, Ritsurin Park in Takamatsu and Kenrokuen in Kanazawa)
- *Karakuri* (mechanized puppets), especially those in Aichi.



- The revolving stage, which first appeared in the 18th century at the Kadoza Theater in Osaka, then spread to Edo and other parts of the country, and then to Europe and from there to other parts of the world. This uniquely Japanese “revolving culture” – featured in everything from revolving stages and walk-around landscape gardens to revolving tabletops in Chinese restaurants and conveyor-belt sushi outlets – is now spreading around the world.
- *Origami*, the art of folding paper, a culture that helped Miura Koryo invent deployable folded solar panels for orbiting spacecraft.
- *Bonsai*, the miniature trees tended in homes by one generation after another for centuries.
- Colorful *yukata* (a simplified version of the kimono) often worn by young Japanese during firework displays, together with traditional obi waist sashes and footwear yukata are an excellent way to cope with global warming.

Photo: Japan National Tourist Organization



- The Japanese genius for playing up special characteristics of nature, which is so different from the Western desire to control nature. This is seen even in cuisine – a French chef will make a sauce that defines the flavor of other ingredients, according to his or her taste, whereas soy sauce brings out the best essence of vegetables and fish.
- Rice and *sushi* eating culture, which is said to be a secret of Japanese longevity.
- The unique replica food in front of restaurants, which is beautifully made to look real.

- Japanese cuisine that people in other countries find delectable, such as sushi, *yakitori* and a Japanese version of potato salad.



- The culture of wood, best expressed in the old wooden structures that have been cared for and protected from fire for more than 1,000 years, such as the Shosoin Treasure House and Horyuji Temple in Nara.
- “Japanned” lacquer ware, which has a beautiful sheen in indirect light.



- Japan’s ancient feminine culture, which produced *The Tale of Genji* almost 1,000 years before a literary work of similar stature appeared anywhere else in the world.

These are just some of the attributes that international visitors can admire in their search for an appreciation of the preciousness of life and livelihood in the 21st century.

The biggest hurdle facing the government’s Visit Japan Campaign is that even Japanese people are not fully aware of the appeal of their culture. Take, for example, Murasaki Shikibu, well known abroad as the author of *The Tale of Genji*. And some visitors from foreign

countries may ask, soon after arriving in Japan, where she was buried. Most Japanese people would be dumbfounded to know how to reply. They do not even know she is famous in other countries.

Another example: I heard of a French academic shocked the cluster of more than 60 stone Buddhas in Usuki, Oita, saying to a Japanese academic, “The fact they are in one place together flies in the face of Buddhist philosophy.” His guide was at a loss for words. He, like most of the people in Japan, do not really understand the difference between Japanese and original Buddhism. In Japan, it is believed that people attain Buddhahood after they die, so the bereaved make Buddhas to pray for the repose of the loved one’s soul, which is quite different from the original form of Buddhism which is all about personal salvation.

And another example: some Americans on their first trip to Kyoto admired the stylized chains used by temples to conduct raindrops from eaves to the ground, and asked at the front desk where they could buy some. They were met with blank stares.

Descriptions and labels in art galleries and museums in Japan are written only with the Japanese visitor in mind. This is because we are rarely able to look at things from the perspective of the outsider. After reading “this design was influenced by the Sassanian Persia,” or “this painting style draws from the artistic sensibilities of China’s Sung dynasty,” should a foreign tourist ask what artistic style is uniquely Japanese, most of us would be hard pressed to give a suitable explanation.

Inns constructed in the traditional style at hot springs and scenic spots tend to be designed from the inside – the view from the rooms is magnificent, but the exterior design often spoils the natural beauty of the place. Here, too, the design neglects how something is viewed from the outside.

One of our goals, then, is to make Japan beautiful to help foreign visitors easily understand and appreciate the country.

This can first be achieved by constructing the most aesthetically pleasing hotels and first-class restaurants in our ancient cities and beautiful mountain resorts, using

public funds if necessary. Such as the *Paradores* of Spain could serve as a model. In addition, public transportation systems, roads in major cities, art galleries, museums and other tourist attractions could be given a distinctive Japanese flavor while being made easier to understand and appreciate. Hotels should permit their guests to wear yukata – which, after all, need not be considered as a form of night wear – to add to the “local color” foreign visitors have come for. This could also reduce the hotels’ air-conditioning bills. Indeed, the next G8 Summit in Japan could have all the leaders wearing yukata during their informal gathering with the press!

On international flights to and from Japan, passengers could be given the option of buying distinctively Japanese souvenirs, such as: copies of Noh masks; neckties, scarves and T-shirts decorated with pictures from *ukiyo*e prints or old family crests; and yes, yukata. Airport shops could sell the fruit for which Japan is famous, including large apples, white peaches, and muscat grapes. After all, they are the most delicious and most visually appealing fruits in the world.

Japan has one of the lowest crime rates in the world, something that can be played up to attract security-conscious travelers.

To attract more visitors, especially from other Asian countries, visas should be made easier to obtain or should be waived. This should be done quickly, to promote major upcoming events, such as EXPO 2005 Aichi Japan.

We Japanese need to become more aware of our own country’s charms. We need to make Japan more beautiful and easier to appreciate, and show greater pride and confidence in our way of life. This would help achieve the goal, “A Good Living Habitate and a Good Place to Visit,” and would offer a warm welcome to international travelers coming to experience the land of security and long life. **JS**

Kimura Shozaburo is the President of Shizuoka University of Art and Culture, and a Honorary Professor of the University of Tokyo. He is also a chairperson of the Japan Tourism Advisory Council.