



Message from the Chairman



I take this opportunity to wish all our CACCI Members a successful year ahead. Members involved in the tourism industry can anticipate good years to come by looking at the remarkable growth achieved by the industry in the year 2017.

Tourism growth in 2017 has shown the greatest increase in arrivals worldwide since 2010. International travel has continued to grow strongly consolidating as an economic driver in development worldwide.

The past years have experienced an extraordinary growth in tourism. It has been well above the sustainable and consistent trend of 4% over the years and ended up with a growth of 7% as per the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) 2017 estimates. Tourism has become the third export sector in the world, that plays a very important role in job creation and the prosperity of communities around the world, says the Secretary General of UNWTO.

As per UNWTO, many regions have performed far better than the previous years, totaling to 1.3 billion tourists' arrivals worldwide in 2017. When analyzed, Europe recorded a growth of 8% in the worldwide arrivals, extraordinary results for a large and a rather established region. In absolute figures, worldwide arrivals reached 617 million in 2017 when compared with 2016. Africa followed by an 8% growth by consolidating its 2016 results. Asia and Pacific regions continued its growth by 6%, Middle East by 5% and the Americas by 3%.

It was possible to achieve these great results due to the growth in many destinations and substantial recoveries in some of the destinations which suffered decreases in the previous years. One of the reasons for this growth was the global economic upswing and the robust outbound demand from many traditional emerging source markets according to UNWTO.

Tourism being one of the most important industries for the world's economy, in my opinion it was a very visionary step taken by the United Nations General Assembly to declare the year 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. Tourism development without following sustainable principles would not help in the continuation of growth in this great industry.

The concept of Sustainable Tourism has emerged with the aim of reducing the negative effects of tourism activities, which has become almost universally accepted as a desirable and politically appropriate approach to tourism development. Sustainability covers all elements that constitute a complete tourism experience. 'Sustainable tourism development' concerns an economic, social and environmental tourism development that aims at the continuous improvement of tourists' experiences.

The tourism industry has the potential to contribute to sustainable development, particularly through job creation, including employment for women, among others. The purpose of sustainable tourism is also to make a balance between protecting the environment, maintaining cultural integrity, establishing social justice and promoting economic benefits, meeting the needs of the host population in terms of improved living standards both in the short and long term in both developed and emerging nations. Therefore, it is extremely important that all host destinations are following sustainable development principles to maintain this great economic driver for most of the economies.

Talking of the future, it is encouraging to note that the current strong momentum will continue in 2018 as well.

I take this opportunity, to request all Members to provide details of the growth and the initiatives taken to improve the Tourism Industry of their countries. Sharing of those information will fulfil the objectives of CACCI and will enable Members to improve the Tourism Industry of their respective Countries.

Anura Samarawickrema Lokuhetty
Chairman, Asian Council on Tourism

Airbnb Said to Be Planning New Tier for Luxury Vacation Rentals

By Mark Gurman and Olivia Zaleski



- 'Airbnb Lux' is aimed at wealthy travelers and fatter margins
- Company previously started testing hotel-like 'Select' tier

Airbnb Inc. is planning to launch a new rental service for mega-homes, mansions and penthouses that will be inspected to ensure they pass muster.

The company will start testing the new offering in some markets at the end of year, according to people familiar with the matter. If the tests are successful, the San Francisco-based company will roll out the service broadly, the people said. Airbnb declined to comment.

Looking to appeal to well-heeled travelers, Airbnb has been segmenting its offerings much the way hotel chains do. The company has already started testing a tier called Airbnb Select, which requires hosts to maintain consistent standards for their lodgings. Just like you can walk into any hotel and expect a consistent set of towels, blankets, and quality, Airbnb Select is designed to do the same. Those homes must also be inspected.



The new tier is fancier -- penthouses versus apartments, mansions versus family homes. It's known internally as "Airbnb Lux," but an official name has yet to be determined, said the people, who requested anonymity to discuss a private matter.

Its creation follows Airbnb's acquisition earlier this year of Luxury Retreats, a Canadian company that before its sale listed more than 4,000 villas and vacation homes. Those listings are not yet featured as a separate section on Airbnb's website.

A luxury tier of rentals represents a lucrative revenue source for Airbnb. The company takes a percentage of the cost of each booking it brokers, so more-expensive inventory would generate higher margins and help justify the privately held company's \$31 billion valuation.

Pushing high-end rentals also enables Airbnb to target the sort of clientele willing to pay for its more expensive tourism services. In November, the company began offering truffle tastings, mushroom hunting and guided tours provided by local experts. Airbnb is looking to expand into other parts of the travel business and is working on a flight-booking tool.

Source: Bloomberg, June 29, 2017

ANA invests in Myanmar airline venture planning international debut in 2018

Bloomberg



ANA Holdings Inc. has invested in a new airline venture in Myanmar that aims to start international flights in 2018 as the Japanese carrier seeks to capture demand in Asia's fastest-growing economy.

ANA has a 49 percent stake and a local company holds the remainder, Shinya Katanozaka, CEO of Japan's largest airline, said in an interview in Tokyo on December 12, 2016. The companies made a combined initial investment of \$150,000 (about ¥17.3 million) in the venture, he said.

The carrier is expanding abroad as more people take to the skies in developing economies such as Myanmar, which the International Monetary Fund forecasts will expand 8.1 percent this year, the quickest pace after Iraq. ANA is betting on international travel from the Southeast Asian nation after the carrier in 2014 cited intensified competition in Myanmar for its decision to cancel a plan to buy 49 percent of Asian Wings Airways Ltd., a domestic airline.

"Myanmar's economic power is growing," said Kata-

nozaka. "We want to help contribute to the boom in business and overseas holiday travel from the new middle class."

ANA, which bought a stake in Vietnam Airlines Corp. in 2016, is also considering adding flights across the globe, Katanozaka said.

The Myanmar venture will start with a couple of airplanes and plans to increase the fleet, he said. ANA's investment will rise as the venture adds aircraft, the CEO said.

ANA joins companies including Coca-Cola Co. and Unilever PLC in expanding in the nation, after the U.S. eased sanctions in Myanmar four years ago as the country shifted toward democracy following five decades of military rule.

The carrier restarted flights to Myanmar's airport in Yangon in 2013 and is the only airline to offer direct flights between Japan and the country.



Shinya Katanozaka, president and CEO of ANA Holdings Inc.

Source: Japan Times, December 12, 2016

Anime tourism invites overseas fans to join festivities

By Roland Kelts



A priest throws paper wishes into a bonfire at the Kanazawa Yuwaku Bonbori Festival, which is based on a fictional festival in P.A. Works' 'Hanasaku Iroha' | © YUWAKU ONSEN TOURISM ASSOCIATION



A scene from 'Hanasaku Iroha,' which can be viewed on streaming site Crunchy Roll. | CRUNCHY ROLL



Overview of the bonbori lantern festival in Yuwaku Onsen from 'Hanasaku Iroha.' | CRUNCHYROLL

Yuwaku Onsen is a 1,300-year-old hot-springs resort tucked between mountains along the Asano River south of Kanazawa. Ten mid-size traditional inns line its slim main street, leading to a small hillside shrine and a man-made pond. Earlier this month, I shuffled behind a procession of lantern-bearing priests and local residents in yukata (summer kimono) for the town's seventh annual Bonbori Matsuri (lantern festival). Some 15,000 other tourists joined me.

We weren't there for the inns, which had been booked months ago. The one-day Bonbori Festival has become Yuwaku's biggest draw. Six hundred attended the first event in 2011; this year's numbers are 25 times that. Local officials peg the town's single day's earnings at more than \$100,000. Not a windfall, but a boost to a rural economy in Japan's aging and neglected hinterlands.

"The Bonbori Festival is a big deal for us, but it's only one day," says Shinichiro Yamashita, chair of the Yuwaku Onsen tourism association. "We have fans visiting throughout the year, using our local transportation, dining at our restaurants and buying souvenirs. (Anime fans) are very important to us."

The entire festival is an anime invention: a fictional tradition imagined by artists seven years ago that has now become a real happening. The festival was introduced in the anime series. "Hanasaku Iroha," created by P.A. Works, a studio in the nearby city of Nanto. The series' fans who flood the village each year are participating in a time-honored Japanese tradition called seichi junrei (sacred pilgrimage).

Our solemn procession to the shrine, the quasi-religious pronouncements of spiritual fealty and the climactic bonfire at the synthetic Gyokusenko Pond, where sparks flew and faded into the sky like Japan's iconic cherry blossom symbols of mortality, were all fabricated re-enactments of a non-existent

historical ritual.

The Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) invited me and a handful of other non-Japanese journalists to Kanazawa for a taste of "anime tourism," where anime fans explore real sites in Japan featured in their favorite anime series.

This is nothing new in the domestic market. In the early 1990s, "Sailor Moon" drew its fans to sites featured in the series, and the

line between anime fiction and reality in Japan has long been blurred. (In 2007, 3,000 fans of "Fist of the North Star" attended the Tokyo funeral of its fictional fighter, Raoh.)

But many overseas fans of anime and manga know only the over-sold bastions of fandom — Tokyo's Akihabara and Nakano Broadway neighborhoods, and maybe Kyoto's Manga Museum. Worthy sites, to be sure, but generic.

"One big problem is, the foreign fans have no guidance on where to go," Fumiya Kakizawa, public-relations director of the recently launched Anime

Tourism Association (ATA), tells me at his office in the Ichigaya neighborhood of Tokyo. The ATA is a partnership between publisher and producer Kadokawa Corp., Japan Airlines, and Japanese travel agency JTB Corp. Founded a little over a year ago, the ATA in August released a list of 88 locales in Japan for overseas visitors to pursue an "anime pilgrimage."

"The other problem is, once they get there, all they can do is take pictures," Kakizawa adds. "There's no interaction with the local community, and no exclusive products they can buy to take home. It's a missed opportunity."

But there's a hitch — and it's a very Japanese paradox: anime creators such as Ghibli seek to avoid crass merchandising strategies, partly out of a sense of artistic purity, and partly out of respect for their fans.

Back in Kanazawa, Nobuhiro Kikuchi, P.A. Works



The paper-wish burning scene in the anime 'Hanasaku Iroha' that inspired the real-life ritual in Kanazawa's Yuwaku Bonbori Festival. | HANAIRO RYOKAN ASSOCIATION

executive producer, admits that the Yuwaku Onsen festival is an exhausting project: “I think if someone asked me to do it again, I would say no. It’s too much work.”

He also admits that it was a concession: After torrential rains flooded Yuwaku in 2008, its city officials begged the studio to create an anime and festival that would bolster the local economy. Kikuchi agreed, but he didn’t want to serve only otaku. He was worried about a potential conflict between the nerdy young fans and elderly local townspeople.



Shinichiro Yamashita, chair of the Yuwaku Onsen Tourist Association, greets 15,000 festival attendees and anime fans from the steps of a local shrine. | © YUWAKU ONSEN TOURISM ASSOCIATION

The current festival, he says, is withdrawing from its anime roots to widen its appeal.

“In the first few years, we had voice actors and cosplayers and just targeted otaku who might come to Yuwaku Onsen. But we’ve actually reduced the anime angle. This year, we invited traditional musicians who play shamisen and shakuhachi, and we see more couples, families and foreigners attending the festival.”

Like so many neglected rural regions of Japan, Kanazawa is an untapped well of culture and stories. Anime tourism may be one way to exploit its potential. But as I visited the area’s absurdly desolate towns rich with tradition — wood carvers, washi paper artisans, silk weavers, seafood chefs and architects — with no one but me passing by, I began to doubt whether anime tourism alone can save them.

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A poster of the bonbori festival, featuring characters from the anime. | © YUWAKU ONSEN TOURISM ASSOCIATION



Source: *Japan Times*, October 22, 2017

Beyond Airbnb: Minpaku market poised for growth

By Alex Martin / Staff Writer



This old house rented as a minpaku private lodging in Tokyo is one of many accommodations offered on the Airbnb site. | AIRBNB INC.

Firms look to cash in as law outlines rules for short-term lodgings

Needing a place to stay before moving to a new home, James Degan recently went on Airbnb and found an apartment in Tokyo’s upscale Minato Ward. At ¥8,000 per night with a double bed and fully equipped kitchen, it came cheaper than staying in a hotel and was conveniently located near a station close to his workplace.

Degan, a Franco-British financial trader, said he looked at other short-term minpaku (private lodging) sites but couldn’t find any operating in Japan with the variety offered by Airbnb. He attributed that advantage to the service’s early entry into the nation.

“I think Airbnb benefits from the innovator’s edge,” he said.

An impending law change, however, could shake up Airbnb’s dominance in a market experiencing an unprecedented tourism boom.

Airbnb’s success here took a similar trajectory the American firm has followed elsewhere: fighting often difficult regulatory environments and sometimes operating in legal gray zones. While Japan has no laws specifically outlawing short-term lodging services, the hotel law lays out conditions few private homes can meet.

Facing a surging number of visitors and an accommodation shortage, however, the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in June passed a new law giving the green light to such services. The change brought on a roster of new players looking to play catch-up in one of the hottest areas of the sharing economy.

E-commerce giant Rakuten Inc. recently announced the launch of a joint venture with real estate listing operator Lifull Co. Rakuten Lifull Stay Inc. aims to begin offering services after the law takes effect sometime in the first half of next year.

Rakuten is a household name in Japan, with 90 million members, its own professional baseball team and a platform that offers myriad services from banking and credit cards to travel and e-books. Lifull, on the other hand, operates a real estate and housing information site with around 8 million listings, and the firm has a network of more than 22,000 affiliated real estate stores.



A luxury family chalet in Hirafu, Hokkaido, listed on the Airbnb site is one of many minpaku private lodgings offered in an area popular with tourists. | AIRBNB INC.

“I think it’s an ideal joint venture — Lifull can reach corporate clients while Rakuten can reach out to individual customers,” Munekatsu Ota, representative director and chief operating officer of the new company, told The Japan Times in an interview.

The venture has so far announced a series of partnerships with major players, including American powerhouse HomeAway and China’s largest vacation rental site, Tujia.

Rakuten said it will supply the firms with property listings from its tentatively titled Vacation Stay minpaku service. In return, the overseas operators will drive demand for Japanese properties by promoting travel to Japan through their platforms.

Ota said his company also plans to offer property management services for hosts and said it has its eyes set on eventually working to convert the growing number of vacant homes — a product of the nation’s aging population — into lodgings.

With an estimated 8 million empty houses in the country, even having a small portion renovated would lead to a boom in listings, he said. “I think we are looking at property listings in the league of hundreds of thousands,” Ota said.

Hitoshi Sato, a senior analyst at InfoCom Research, said despite its global popularity, many in Japan are still unfamiliar with Airbnb and its services.

“In that sense, Rakuten’s strong presence here is an asset which it can use to lure domestic property owners who may feel more comfortable working with a well-known Japanese company,” he said.

The bill passed in June will let people rent out property for a maximum 180 nights a year if lodging providers register with local governments. It also calls on absentee landlords to outsource property management to firms that can guarantee hygiene and safety.

Meanwhile, service platforms like Airbnb and HomeAway will be required to register with the tourism agency, which plans to create an online system to grasp the accommodation situation at all minpaku businesses.

The push to loosen related restrictions comes as the number of inbound visitors continues to rise thanks to a weaker yen and the easing of visa requirements.

Japan saw 13.4 million visitors in 2014, 19.7 million in



Munekatsu Ota, CEO of Rakuten Lifull Stay Inc., speaks at the company’s office in Tokyo earlier this month. | ALEX MARTIN

2015 and 24 million last year. The government wants to increase that number to 40 million by 2020, when Tokyo will host the Olympic Games.

The surge in visitors has also seen travel spending swell to a record high ¥3.7 trillion in 2016. The government projects that figure to double to ¥8 trillion in 2020.

But the rosy tourism numbers are dogged by a shortage of accommodations, particularly in popular destinations such as Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, where room occupancy rates at city hotels exceed 80 percent.

The introduction of the minpaku law could help ease that crunch by prompting players who had been on the sidelines to enter the market.

Japan’s largest travel booking site JTB Corp. last week said it is throwing its hat in the ring via a partnership with Japanese startup Hyakusenrenma Inc. The collaboration will allow visitors to JTB’s multilanguage travel booking site Japanese to access the roughly 800 minpaku properties listed on Haykusenrenma’s vacation rental site, Stay Japan.

Yuki Okuno, business development manager for Squeeze Inc., a company that runs a management system for minpaku properties, hotels and ryokan inns, said businesses like monthly apartments are looking at using the law change to increase occupancy rates by filling vacancies in between reservations with short-term guests.

At the same time, he said the 180-day cap and legal penalties could see some hosts opt out of the minpaku model due to risk and profitability issues.

Hosts making extra cash from listing rented apartments may not be able to turn a profit under the new law because of the 180-day cap. A revision to the existing hotel law is also up for deliberation in the Diet, possibly raising the maximum fine for unlicensed hosts to ¥1 million from the current ¥30,000.

“Still, I think the overall size of the market will get bigger,” Okuno said.

Spike Data, which tracks the minpaku market in Japan, estimates the sector will swell to ¥200 billion by 2020 compared with ¥13 billion in 2015 as the number of minpaku businesses and users grow.

Foreign players are also eyeing a piece of the pie.

In announcing its partnership with Rakuten in Tokyo last month, Tujia Chief Operating Officer Yang Changle said the company is confident it can boost its presence in Japan by focusing on serving Chinese visitors through its experience and strong name recognition back home.

Chinese tourists accounted for one-fourth of all visitors to Japan last year, and could reach 10 million by 2020 and 13.5 million by 2025, said Tomoko Suzuki, Tujia's Japan head. HomeAway, a subsidiary of Expedia Inc. that operates one of the world's largest vacation rental sites, is also increasing its presence since opening a Japan office last year with a focus on luxury properties.

Airbnb, meanwhile, has been expanding the breadth of its services beyond private rentals, embracing broader categories of accommodation, including boutique ryokan and hotels through partnerships with travel startups.

It also has the first-mover advantage, which it can capitalize on.

The San Francisco-based company lists over 3 million properties in 65,000 cities in 191 countries. In Japan alone, Airbnb lists over 55,000 properties, by far the largest such provider in the nation. It began selling travel experiences like bonsai art and sake and food pairing this year, and in June launched its first television commercial in Japan.

Yasuyuki Tanabe, Airbnb's Japan chief, said he welcomed the new legislation for its clarity and simplicity, adding that Japan is the company's most popular destination in Asia and saw 5 million guest arrivals in the past 12 months.

"Hospitality is a large, growing market and we strongly believe that helping more people to travel is good news for everyone," he said.

Source: Japan Times, September 17, 2017

Bureau unveils campaign to promote ecotourism

By Shelley Shan / Staff reporter

ECOLOGICAL DIVERSITY: Taiwan's biodiversity index on land and in the sea is higher than the global average, making it ideal for promoting ecotourism, an official said

The Tourism Bureau launched on April 25, 2017 its "2017 Ecotourism Year" campaign, with an eye on attracting more foreign visitors to participate in ecotourism activities across the nation.

The bureau showcased 20 ecotourism routes across the nation, which were selected by the Taiwan Ecotourism Association. These include firefly and milkweed butterfly habitats, whale or dolphin watching, as well as tours of Aboriginal villages, wetlands or forest trails, bureau officials told a news conference in Taipei.

The bureau said it has appointed ultramarathon runner Kevin Lin and travel blogger Hsieh Hsin-hsuan as the nation's ecotourism ambassadors. The campaign was launched amid reports that inbound tourism dropped 9.9 percent in the first quarter of the year compared with the previous year.

It was the first decline in foreign tourist numbers in 13 years.

Should the trend continue, Taiwan might have difficulty reaching its target of attracting 10 million international tourists this year, which it achieved in 2015 and last year.

Minister of Transportation and Communications Hochen

Tan said he does not view the 10 million target as a goal that he must meet.

Rather, he is more concerned with encouraging people to return and visit Taiwan multiple times, he said.

"We want to make friends with people who will return and visit us again and again, and spend some time with us.

Those who come and leave quickly or never return will not have a profound understanding of Taiwan. What we should be really working on is increasing the percentage of repeat visitors," he said.

The government is stepping up its efforts to promote ecotourism, as the nation's ecologically diverse environment is one of its most important assets, he said.

"We hope that more foreign visitors will take part in ecotourism activities when they visit Taiwan, whose biodiversity index on land and in the sea is higher than the global average. Taiwan is the natural

habitat of many different species, which have so many stories to tell. These stories should be shared among our people and with international tourists," he added.

The nation has been too focused on Chinese tourism and lagged behind in promoting its tourism resources, such as its natural environment, he said.

Information on these resources should be available in multiple languages and widely distributed around the world, he



Tourism Bureau officials and local representatives launch the Ecotourism Year campaign on April 26, 2017 in Taipei. Photo: Central News Agency, courtesy of the Tourism Bureau

added.

Tourism Bureau Director-General Chou Yung-hui said the bureau's goal is to have ecotourism account for about 16 to 20 percent of international visitors in the next few years.

Asia Ecotourism Network secretary Supaporn Prachumpai told the news conference that the group was impressed with Taiwan's efforts to restore the natural habitats of fireflies in Taipei.

"This can be a model for other Asian nations to follow," Prachumpai said. "Since Taiwan has a very rich diversity of nature and culture, we believe that Taiwan

would be successful in the development of ecotourism and be able to attract many high-quality tourists."

Prachumpai said that she was also surprised to find that Taiwan offers whale-watching tours and visits to milk-feed butterfly habitats, which she said not many Thai tourists know about.

To boost ecotourism, the bureau said it is working with local travel agencies specializing in ecotours, with the agencies arranging tours for groups with fewer than 20 people.

Tourists would have a better appreciation of the natural environment through guided

tours provided by local residents, the bureau said.

The bureau said it plans to roll out different tourism themes in the coming years, including tours to outlying islands, small towns and mountain ranges.

Source: Taipei Times, April 26, 2017

Cherry blossom fever boosts companies' bottom lines

By Maiko Takahashi and Connor Cislo

Every spring people across Japan are enraptured as the cherry trees explode into bloom, clothing the country in pink. The blossoms last for only a few short weeks, but in that time the fleeting flowers make for good business.

The blossoms are a gift to corporate marketers and a boon for tourism. As spring approaches, sakura-themed goods fill stores as companies use the season to introduce new products.

While the impact isn't enough to show up in top-tier statistics, pockets of the economy perk up and springtime spending gets a boost. Household purchases of alcohol jump about 10 percent in March from February, as blossom-viewing parties get underway. Foreign tourists also begin flocking back into the country after a winter lull.

Nestle SA repackages its KitKat chocolates for spring, Starbucks Corp. goes a step further with sakura-flavored frappuccinos and lattes, and Japan's three biggest convenience store chains — Seven & I Holdings Co., Lawson Inc. and FamilyMart UNY Holdings Co. — offer a host of seasonally-flavored treats and snacks.

Asahi Group Holdings Ltd., the nation's largest beer vendor, beat its sales targets for the last two years for sakura-themed beer packages. It's hoping for strong sales again and sees the campaign as a chance to reach people who don't normally drink its Super Dry beer, like women and young adults, said company spokesman Takuo Soga.

Japan has been experiencing a tourism boom in recent years, with 2016 marking a record high of 24 million arrivals from overseas.

"The number of tourists from Asia who come to see the cherry blossoms in March and April is increasing," said Kana Usami, who works in corporate planning at H.I.S. travel agency.



Cherry blossom-themed products include Ito En Ltd.'s Ocha green tea, Suntory Beer Ltd.'s Kin-mugi low-malt beer, Karuizawa Brewery Ltd.'s Ouka-ranman beer and Ezaki Glico Co.'s Pocky chocolate. | BLOOMBERG

"People in China and other parts of Asia are learning about the cherry blossoms through social networking sites, so they want to experience flower-viewing in the same way as the Japanese."

A survey conducted by the Japan Tourism Agency found that of international tourists who came to Japan in the second quarter of 2016, about 16 percent participated in seasonal activities, such as viewing the cherry blossoms. Some 91 percent said they were satisfied with the experience and 33 percent wanted to take part in

seasonal activities during their next trip to Japan.

"It fits with the shift from the consumption of things to the consumption of experiences," said Takayuki Miyajima, an economist at Mizuho Research Institute. "It contributes to bringing back repeat visitors."

The blossoms usually last for seven to 10 days, but cooler temperatures through the end of March will stretch the viewing period a bit longer this year, said Ai Hasebe, from a private Japanese forecaster called Weather Map. The viewing season in Tokyo started officially on March 21 this year, a little earlier than usual.

"When the cherry trees bloom, my spirit picks up and I want to have a drink," said Hiroshi Nogishi, 68, a stock trader who came to see some early blossoms in Tokyo's Ueno Park. "The season overlaps with turning points in life, like entering school and graduation, joining a company and retiring. The cherry blossoms are connected to a lot of memories. They're different from a normal flower."

Source: Japan Times, March 24, 2017

Cruise ship tourism on the rise

By Shelley Shan



SHIPS AHOY: More cruise companies are choosing to dock at Taiwan's ports, prompting the Taiwan International Port Corp to reconsider the Jinlongtou Cruise Terminal project

The nation's international seaports saw an increase in tourists arriving on cruise ships in the first half of the year, with nearly a 26 percent increase compared with the same period last year, Taiwan International Port Corp said.

Between January and June 2017, 484,188 cruise ship visitors accessed ports around the nation, up by 25.7 percent compared with last year, the state-run company's data showed. Taiwanese tourists accounted for the majority of the cruise ship passengers with 210,000, with most of them cruising to Ishigaki Island in Japan, and about 128,000 were travelers from overseas, the company said.

The company estimated that the total number of cruise ship passengers could reach 1 million this year, representing 25 percent growth.

The increasing popularity of cruise ship tours in the region, as well as the variety of tours offered by cruise operators are why passenger numbers are increasing, the company said.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong-based Star Cruises, Carnival Cruise Line, and Costa Cruises are using Keelung and Kaohsiung ports as their home ports for some of their cruises, which further bolstered passenger numbers, it said.

The Port of Keelung on June 30 saw a record 15,533 people arrive or board one of five passenger ships in one day, including Star Cruises' SuperStar Virgo and SuperStar Aquarius, China Ocean Shipping Co's Cosco Star and Taiwan-based Taima Star's Taima Star.

Port of Kaohsiung also saw a boom between April and June as Star Cruises launched 14 cruises to Hong Kong and Laoag and Manila in the Philippines.

The port company said that it has met with Carnival Cruise Line shore operations vice president Bruce Krumrine to discuss Keelung port.

Keelung can accommodate large cruise ships, so building cruise ship terminals in the outer harbor is being considered, the company said, adding that it would include parking for tour buses and an area to process passengers' luggage. The port would have three large wharves to serve cruise ship passengers, the company said.

The Kaohsiung port spent NT\$18 million (US\$590,357) building a mobile passenger bridge with a 4.5 percent gradient and paved with silicon carbide to serve elderly or disable passen-

gers, as well as people with luggage, the company said.

The company plans to reopen bidding to build Penghu's Jinlongtou Cruise Terminal after increasing incentives for investors.

The company signed a letter of intent in 2014 with Royal Caribbean Cruises to jointly develop the terminal and the surrounding area. The deal was canceled because the second-largest shareholder in Royal Caribbean wanted to change the terms of the partnership.

Source: Taipei Times, July 13, 2017

Into the dark: exploring Laos' cave tourism industry

By Jennifer Meszaros

Home to some of the most complex rock formations in Southeast Asia, Laos looks to cash in on cave tourism

Since the late 19th century, the geological wonders of Laos have captured the interest of foreign explorers, not just for its striking mountain ranges, fertile Mekong River floodplains and waterfalls – but also for what lies beneath the surface. Countless caves have been revealed within the towering karst massifs and limestone mountains that dominate much of Laos' picturesque landscape.

While many of these subterranean beauties have been transformed into worthy tourist attractions, others are in a continual state of exploration. For fast-developing Laos, whose major economies are mining and tourism, the caves represent an opportunity to unlock the potential of swathes of the landlocked country's remote areas to the world. As the sport of spelunking gains traction, isolated villages are looking to cash in on this rise in visitors. Yet as experts have pointed out, great care needs to be taken in balancing the complex needs of locals and the conservation of the cave's delicate ecosystems – one wrong step can cause irreversible damage – with the commodification of Laos' natural assets.

“Cave tourism can have a highly positive impact on local employment and development, and a very large positive impact on the reputation of Laos, but not all caves are suitable for tourism,” said Claude Mouret, a French geologist who has spent

the last 25 years researching and documenting caves in Laos.

“Developing cave tourism means selecting caves that are not too fragile with respect to the underground life. Safety must also be a concern. Caves have a risk of flooding even if there is no underground river. If you move a boulder or drill a hole, you can change the stability of the cave. Precautions need to be taken, but it’s not so easy to have all the aspects satisfied at the same place.”

Mouret together with his expedition partner Jean-François Vacquié carry the distinction of being the first two explorers to embark on modern cave and karst investigations in Laos. Since 1991, the caving duo has mapped roughly 100 caves in the small nation, totalling 170km. Moreover, Mouret and Vacquié have contributed to the opening of several “safari” and “tourist” caves such as the infamous Tham Konglor in Khammouane province as well as Xe Bang Fai – one of the largest river caves in the world, with a 7km channel snaking through it.

“Regarding tourism, we have to consider two kinds of caves: Tourist caves such as Konglor or Tham Nang Aen Cave have dedicated installations such as walkways and steps to improve visitor safety,” said Mouret. “Safari caves such as Nam Non and Tham Heup have no dedicated installations. They inspire the unknown, and I think people like the mystery, the feeling of being an explorer – even if they are not really one. [They enjoy] overcoming the physical possibilities of their body and fighting mental fears.”

According to the Department of Planning and Investment in Laos, there are 32 villages in Khoun Kham district with a combined population of 22,163 people.

In 2015, 27,448 tourists visited Konglor cave in Khoun Kham, a substantial increase of 86% from the previous year. The total revenue from tourism for the district amounted to roughly \$334,000.

Recognising the economic value of caves as tourist destinations, the local Khammouane tourism authority in central Laos’ Ban Nahin village is now embarking on an ambitious endeavour to open up a little-known but magnificent cave called Khoun Keo. Home to venomous vipers, long-legged centipedes, furry huntsman spiders and other cave-dwelling critters, Khoun Keo is certainly not for the faint-hearted. But from the standpoint of the ambitious tourism authority, the cave’s twisting labyrinth of striking stalactites, stalagmites and delicate columns is the perfect playground to lure in the growing number of adventurous explorers.

“We have an opportunity to increase tourism to Nahin by opening Khoun Keo to the public,” said Vilaisak Souvannarath, director of the Khammouane Information, Culture and Tourism Authority. “We also have an opportunity to develop community-based ecotourism to raise employment in the village.

But we have to do it right.”

Situated in the permo-carboniferous limestone at the base of the Phou Phaman mountain range in Ban Khoun Kham district, Khoun Keo is well revered among the locals and tourism authority alike. According to Souvannarath, the cave – only discovered in 2012 by a subsistence farmer named Seng – holds spiritual element for Ban Nahin.

“Seng discovered the cave after God appeared to him in a dream, telling him to open up the way. After finding the cave, he discovered it had three underground lakes,” said Souvannarath. “God wants us to open the cave but he also wants us to protect it.”

The significance of the cave pools is not lost on the tourism authority. According to Souvannarath, hundreds of locals once lived beside the Nam Theun River, a tributary of the mighty Mekong, and used it to irrigate their crops. This changed in 2011, when the Nam Theun 2 Hydropower plant (one of Laos’ biggest hydroelectric projects), upstream from the village, started diverting the river.

While scores of people had to be relocated, Nam Theun 2 Power Company built more than a thousand new homes as well as rainwater collection tanks and water pumps. Early on, the measures that the company took to mitigate the dam’s environmental and social impacts were applauded by the World Bank as a model to emulate, yet according to the latest report from the International Panel of Environmental and Social Experts, challenges regarding resettlement still need to be addressed. Some NGOs have also questioned the impact of the dam on the river’s ecosystem and the communities that depend on it further downstream.

Some NGOs have also questioned the impact of the dam on the river’s ecosystem and the communities that depend on it further downstream.

In Ban Nahin, Seng and a few of his neighbours opted to relocate to a parcel of land beside the Phou Phaman Mountains. While the dam had cleared the land, the villagers did not have easy access to water. According to Souvannarath, the discovery of cave pools inside the mountains has allowed the villagers to greatly improve their food security.

“Locals use these underground lakes to water their crops. Instead of planting just rice they’re now growing different crops like pineapple and cassava all year-round,” he said. “We really have to take this into consideration.”

Until recently, Monenoy Keomanixai – a former tour guide in Ban Nahin – was working with authorities towards opening the cave to tourists. While Keomanixai now works as an administrator for a power scheme in Bolikhamxay province, he continues to keep a close eye on the project’s development.

“We want people to come and we want people to stay, but we also need to focus on conservation of the region’s natural and cultural heritage. We can’t have tourists trekking through farmer fields and destroying crops to get to Khoun Keo. We can’t have them getting hurt while they’re exploring the cave, and we



Photography by Gabriele Stoia

don't want to have tourists not care about the village and its people. We don't want another Vang Vieng," he said.

Situated some 450km away, Vang Vieng serves as a cautionary tale for Keomanixai, who remembers hearing stories about the village and its transformation into an epicentre for scantily clad backpackers looking to get wasted and 'tube' down the river. After a spate of deaths and injuries, the government shut the party down in 2012. While no longer in its hedonistic heyday, the village continues to attract drunken revellers – albeit on a much smaller scale.

"In the past few years, more tourists come through Nahin. They do a motorbike loop starting from Thakhek. It's becoming very popular and bringing money to the area," said Keomanixai.

While tourism has become an increasingly important component of Laos' development policy, enabling poverty reduction in many rural communities, Keomanixai said Khoun Keo will not open until 2017 or 2018.



"A boulder from the cave entrance has already been removed to improve visitor access and safety. Mr. Seng and another village guide will lead the cave tours, but there is still so much more to consider," he said.

Under review are walkways and steps to improve safety and prevent damage to the natural cave floor. Mapping and a clear understanding of the cave's ecosystem are also required to move the project forward. Still, if plans come to fruition, Keomanixai sees more positives than negatives.

"Khoun Keo is like stepping into a magical world. We know that once it's open, the beauty of Khoun Keo will be shared among tourists, especially those who love nature. It will bring very good luck to Nahin."

Source: Southeast Asia Global, December 12, 2016

New home-sharing law may give HomeAway the edge over rival Airbnb

By Pavel Alpeyev

Japan's home-sharing market is poised for a shift away from couch surfing toward professional services after the passage of a law regulating short-term rentals.

The change will help HomeAway play to its strengths in the battle against Airbnb Inc., according to Natsuko Kimura, country manager for Expedia Inc.'s home-rental subsidiary.

The bill enacted in June lets people in Japan rent out property without the risk of running into regulatory hurdles. The law limits total stays to 180 nights a year and requires that accommodation providers register with local governments. The regulations also increase oversight of absentee landlords, requiring owners to outsource property management to parties capable of guaranteeing safety and hygiene.

While Airbnb has taken the lead in Japan with 52,000 listings, HomeAway's focus on luxury vacation properties gives the company an advantage as the market expands beyond individuals sharing spare rooms, according to Kimura. Entire homes for rent already account for about 90 percent of HomeAway's less than 10,000 listings in Japan, she said.

The regulatory green light for home-sharing has been accompanied by looser hotel regulations as the country struggles to accommodate an influx of overseas visitors. Relaxing rules such as the one requiring a separate bathroom for men and women could help bring new properties to the market where an aging population has resulted in about 8 million homes sitting empty.

Overseas companies aren't the only ones sensing an opportunity: e-commerce giant Rakuten Inc. and real-estates

listing operator Lifull Co. last week announced plans to enter the home-sharing business. The two companies and HomeAway will hold a joint briefing next week to discuss new services and strategy.

"The market is going to change completely," Kimura said. "Major real-estate companies, for example, had to stay on the sidelines before the legalization. Now, large corporations can enter the market on the supply side."

HomeAway's first priority in Japan is to increase supply to meet demand from overseas visitors, Kimura said. More than 24 million tourists visited Japan in 2016, topping the record for a fourth straight year, according to the nation's tourism organization. The number will probably continue to reach records as Japan prepares to host the Rugby World Cup in 2019 and the Olympic Games the following year. HomeAway is looking to increase its listings in the country to 100,000 by 2020, Kimura said.

While HomeAway is a relative latecomer to Japan, it boasts a longer history overseas than its main rival, Airbnb. Founded in 2005 and traded publicly since 2011, HomeAway was acquired by Expedia for \$3.9 billion in 2015. The company's 2 million properties worldwide attract an older, better-heeled demographic than Airbnb, making its platform more appealing to prospective hosts, Kimura said.

The two competitors have increasingly converged in their business models. HomeAway switched from charging the hosts to list on its site and now takes the same percentage



Tourists visit Lake Kawaguchi near Mount Fuji. HomeAway, Expedia Inc.'s home-rental subsidiary, expects the June enactment of a new law to help boost its business in Japan. | BLOOMBERG

of transactions as its rival. Airbnb, on the other hand, has sought to set targets on luxury tourism, airfare aggregation, group payments and guest management. The San Francisco-based company plans to launch a new service that will match guests with quality-inspected home and apartment rentals, intended to lure travelers away from fancy hotels.

HomeAway last year ran TV spots in the U.S. poking fun at Airbnb with a title “It’s your vacation, why share it,” illustrating the perils of sharing economy with examples of obnoxious guests and hosts. The message would also find a receptive audience in Japan, where the culture of politeness can make it difficult for people to relax in somebody else’s home, Kimura said. She related the story of a co-worker who felt obligated to clean the host’s bathroom after using it.

“Japanese equate home-sharing with cultural exchange, something young people do when they travel abroad to learn English,” Kimura said. “Our model is just the opposite: no host on premises, luxurious home-sharing.”

Source: Japan Times, June 30, 2017

Music and Ancient History in the Caucasus

By Celestine Bohlen

The idea was to take a trip with my 22-year-old daughter, Liza, an adventure worthy of a college graduation present. We settled on a 10-day journey through the small Caucasus country of Georgia, with a swing through neighboring Turkey, in search of the long-lost kingdom of Tao.

It sounded vaguely Chinese and the scenery did look at times like Chinese scroll paintings: rocky, pine-covered mountains cut through by waterfalls, fast-moving rivers and vast upland plateaus with alternating patches of snow and wildflowers.

But the stunning landscape was just the backdrop for the trip. Although the boundaries of the Tao-Klarjeti kingdom, as it is sometimes called, once part of a larger realm ruled by the Bagratid dynasty, had vanished from the map by the 11th century, its Georgian rulers left behind an astonishing collection of churches, monasteries and fortresses. Said to number 300, they are scattered across territory later disputed by, notably, the Byzantines, the Mongols, the Persians, the Seljuk Turks, the Ottomans and the Russians.

These remnants of ancient Georgian culture were what drew us to join John Graham, an American musicologist and tour leader who lives in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, and seven other travelers on a journey that began in the Black Sea city of Batumi, circling through the Turkish cities of Kars, Yusufeli and Ardanuc, before ending in Tbilisi.

John himself, whom I had met in Paris when he was touring with a choir of Georgian singers, provided the other lure. An academic expert in Georgian polyphonic chant, with a doctorate from Princeton, he had promised us music along the trip, and

he delivered — including in a Georgian restaurant and a Turkish tearoom, isolated mountain churches and a rousing summer jazz concert in a Tbilisi park.

On our first evening in Batumi, we were joined by three professional singers from the Adjarian State Song and Dance Ensemble who sat down at our table and burst into song, working their way through a powerful repertory of sacred, folk and

“urban” chants. The men sang without accompaniment, without notes, their eyes focused on a space above a feast of Georgian dishes.

As John explained, the typical Georgian men’s choir sings in three-part harmony, with a tenor who leads the song, and two other voices improvising backup. Mixed-gender choirs are rare, mainly because of the close harmonies required by the music.

During the trip, John put his skills as a choirmaster to the test and managed to corral two of our members — Alex, a college classmate of Liza’s and a jazz pianist

who was also traveling with his mother, and Tom, a British arts administrator — to join him in liturgical chants in the ruined Orthodox churches on our itinerary.

Inside Georgia, all the churches we visited had been restored and returned to the Georgian Orthodox church since 1991, when the country won independence from the Soviet Union.

In Turkey, most of the Christian churches were in ruins, their vaulted ceilings now rubble, with battered carvings and faint traces of once-colorful frescoes left on the walls. During Ottoman rule, many had been converted into mosques, then abandoned.



The bell tower at the monastery in Sapara; the church of St. Saba was added in the 14th century. Credit Danielle Villasana for The New York Times



A field of poppies along the road to the monastery of Sapara in Georgia. Credit Danielle Villasana for The New York Times

We stopped in one former church in Khakhuli, now a mosque guarded by a sleepy imam who nodded his permission for our group to sing under an apse that still bore traces of frescoes. At Ishkhani, a 45-minute drive from Yusufeli in Turkey, an ancient cathedral, rebuilt in the ninth century by Sabas, a disciple of St. Gregory of Khandztha, is being restored in a desultory, and not entirely convincing way.

Ruined or restored, these churches have maintained a haunting serenity through centuries of neglect and destruction. Our trio's solemn, melodic chants — wedding songs, Easter and other liturgical hymns — conjured up their original purpose as places of worship, learning and reflection, monuments to the glory of God and the Georgian kings and monks who built them.

“The development of multivoice chanting in Georgia in the Middle Ages was unique in the region; almost all of the surrounding countries were then singing in monophonic music styles,” John explained. In Georgia, he said, the process seems to have been homegrown. The Georgians learned to sing three-voiced chants from existing polyphonic folk music traditions. In other Orthodox churches, like the Russian and Greek, monophonic chant remained the dominant style until at least the 16th century.

Some of the monasteries that we visited in Tao were the very sites where medieval chantbooks called *iadgari* (heirmologies) were collated by 10th-century scribal monks. But for many centuries, it was mostly an oral tradition; it wasn't until the late 19th century that this polyphonic music was transcribed into Western notation. This required adapting the dissonances and harmonies peculiar to Georgian music to five-line notation, and deciphering the cryptic shorthand used by medieval monks to guide contemporary singers through melodies they already knew.

At almost every stop, John had a story about the monks and church leaders who had left their mark on these mountainsides. Manuscripts from the monastery at Otkhta in Dortkilise, a village near Yusufeli, eventually made their way to the St. Catherine monastery on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. St. George the Athonite, revered father of the Georgian Orthodox church who wrote some of the texts we heard, had been educated at the monastery at Khakhuli, now a mosque buried in brambles also outside Yusufeli.

St. Gregory of Khandztha, a leading church figure in the eighth century, began his ecclesiastical life founding the Khandzta monastery in Klarjeti (now in Turkey), and helped his disciples establish other ones such as the monastery of Ubisa in



The honeycomb cave complex at Vardzia, Georgia, into which a church has been carved. Credit Danielle Villasana for The New York Times

central Georgia. “They were crawling all over these hills building churches,” John said.

Our trip wasn't just about churches. A determined hiker, John led us up scraggly paths to explore mountain fortresses: one built in the fifth century above the Turkish city of Artanuc, another above Borjomi, an old Soviet spa town in Georgia. We scrambled through Hell's Canyon, outside Artanuc, whose soaring cliffs provided good acoustics for our singers to exercise their vocal cords and visited two cave complexes, one at Uplistsikhe, built in 1500 BC, and the other at Vardzia, about 35 miles from the Georgian border city of Akhaltsikhe.

Built in the 12th century as a haven during a time of Persian invasions, the honeycomb cave complex at Vardzia is associated with Georgia's famed Queen Tamara, a charismatic ruler who can be seen in a fresco in the Church of the Dormition, itself carved out of soft rock. Legend has it that when an earthquake struck in 1283, crumbling the rock face that hid the caves, the population and resident monks were safe inside the church, celebrating Easter; it was deemed a miracle.

Looking out over the valley below from a newly installed safety barrier, Liza compared the view to a scene from “The Lord of the Rings.” Another group member, Michael, an intrepid Australian, said, as he crouched through a low tunnel, that it reminded him of the mountains of Ethiopia.

Farther south, after turning off a new highway (declared a dramatic improvement by our driver), our bus climbed up a steep, dirt road to the monastery of Sapara, nestled in the woods below a ruined fortress. Used as a summer music camp during the Soviet era, the church of St. Saba, added to the monastery in the 14th century, is largely intact, with vivid wall paintings of apostles and the local noble families. A young monk was so moved by our trio's chants that he gave us souvenir icons in gratitude.

We were often alone on our visits, particularly in Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country with an ambiguous attitude toward monuments of other cultures. At some stops, villagers came out to chat, curious about how our crew had managed to make our way up to their isolated mountaintop.

We even had all of the empty vastness of Ani, a former Armenian capital poised on a high riverbank on the now-closed Turkish-Armenian border, about 24 miles from Kars, to ourselves. Once said to rival Constantinople with a population of 100,000, Ani's glory years were brief, destroyed by invaders and earthquakes; by the 15th century, its dozens of churches, includ-



The church of St. Saba, added to Sapara monastery in the 14th century, is largely intact. Credit Danielle Villasana for The New York Times

ing one built by Georgians during a brief occupation by Queen Tamara, were abandoned “to the owl and the jackal,” as one guidebook put it.

When we did see crowds in Turkey, they were typically Georgians, making the cross-border pilgrimages to their now-abandoned holy places. At Bana, near the Turkish village of Benek, priests led their flock through high grasses to the giant ruins of a cathedral, site of a Georgian king’s wedding to a Byzantine princess, later used as an Ottoman arms depot until it



A view of Sapara monastery in Georgia. Credit Danielle Villasana for The New York Times

was blown up by the Russians in the 19th century.

At the 10th-century Tbeti church in the Turkish province of Artvin, we ran into a festive group of Georgian schoolteachers from Batumi, who were surprised and thrilled by our trio’s chants. They soon joined in, adding their voices to music that filled the ruined cathedral.

After reciting the Lord’s prayer, the teachers invited us to share their ample picnic, complete with

homemade wine and khachapuri, the delicious Georgian cheese bread. Asked why they had made the arduous day trip, one teacher began a history lesson.

“This was all ours before the Turks stole it from us,” declared Nona Akhaladze, waving her arms, before she was corrected by a fellow teacher who reminded us that, in fact, it was Lenin who ceded the Tao-Klarjeti region, then part of the Russian empire, to the Turks as part of the Brest Litovsk peace treaty signed before the end of World War I.

The music John had promised us kept popping up, sometime planned, sometime spontaneous. After our picnic at Tbeti, the teachers began a medley of folk songs, punctuated with solos by a part-time opera singer.

A couple of days before, when we were staying in Kars, a city made famous by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk’s evocative novel “Snow,” but also known for czarist-era Russian buildings and its version of Gruyère cheese, we stopped by a local tearoom, known as a gathering place for bards from all over Turkey. During Ramadan, the Muslim fasting period, the room stayed open past midnight, as people sauntered in to take their places on benches along the walls, listening to what we were told was an impressive lineup of performers whose long narrative songs (their lyrics sadly lost on us) were accompanied by strumming on long-necked lutes, or “saz.”

On our last day, we arrived in Tbilisi on a steamy summer evening in time for a lively concert in a city park where Alex had been invited to jam with a jazz quintet headed by the director of the Tbilisi music conservatory. It was a fitting musical finale to our trip — a modern take on the improvisation we had heard in the lonely churches of what was once the Tao kingdom.

Celestine Bohlen was a New York Times correspondent based in Moscow, Budapest and Rome. She now lives in Paris.

Source: New York Times, June 20, 2017

Travel requirements for Japanese visitors relaxed

Staff writer, with Central News Agency (CNA)



Welcome to Taiwan

Japanese will have an easier time visiting Taiwan after the government on August 15, 2017 lifted the requirement that their passports be valid for at least three months from the time of entry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

Japanese can now visit as long as their passport remains valid during their stay, Bureau of Consular Affairs Deputy Director-General Winston Chung said.

“We made the decision based on the friendly relations between Taiwan and Japan and the principle of reciprocity,” he told a regular news briefing at the ministry. “We believe the new measure will facilitate travel by Japanese to Taiwan.”

Japan has allowed Taiwanese to visit Japan with only a valid passport, Chung said, but Taiwan had required Japanese visitors to present a passport with at least three months of validity to enter without a visa.

Taiwan decided to lift the three-month requirement after Tokyo expressed hope for the change, he said.

Japanese and Taiwanese travelers can visit each other’s nation without a visa and stay for up to 90 days, and that will not change under the new passport measure.



Japan is among the main sources of foreign tourists to Taiwan, with 1,895,702 arrivals last year, according to Tourism Bureau statistics. The government is also making efforts to streamline visa procedures for South-east Asian visitors and hopes to receive reciprocal treatment from their governments, Chung said.

The ministry will hold a cross-agency meeting next month to finalize the details of visa-free treatment for visitors from the Philippines, and hopes that Manila will reduce its fee for e-visas

and eventually grant visa-free treatment for Republic of China passport holders, he added.

Taiwan offers visa-free treatment to citizens of Thailand and Brunei and e-visas to Philippine visitors; it issues multiple-entry visas valid for two years to people from ASEAN nations. The measures have boosted visitor numbers from Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines, Chung said.



Source: Taipei Times, August 16, 2017

Regional visas a must for ASEAN's grand tourism ambitions

The Nation/ANN

Visit Asean@50
GOLDEN CELEBRATION 2017

If Southeast Asia is to truly be a single tourist destination, give visitors from afar a single visa to travel freely.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is undertaking a tourism marketing campaign to mark its 50th anniversary this year. It is called "Visit ASEAN@50: Golden Celebration" and aims at increasing the number of international arrivals by 10 percent to 121 million, up from 109 million in 2015.

ASEAN is promoting the 10 member countries — Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam — as a single tourist destination of immense diversity.

The question is whether the average foreign tourist actually knows what ASEAN is, even if he's heard of Southeast Asia. Surely the basic initial task for the policymakers behind this scheme is to make the "ASEAN brand" better known globally.

Next, to promote our region as a single tourist destination, all 10 member-countries will have to achieve a level of harmonious collaboration that's usually beyond them. They will have to abandon the inbuilt tendency to fret that some countries will get more out of this joint effort than others will.

Southeast Asia is indeed physically and culturally diverse, so much so that collective



tourism promotion might be a daunting challenge. Every country has its own unique attractions and all of these must be highlighted if the region is to benefit as a whole.

Thanks to all the wonderful sights and experiences on offer here, tourism is a massive revenue earner for Southeast Asia. More than in any other region of the world, ASEAN's 10 countries depend on tourism (to varying degrees) to fuel their economic engines, says the World Travel and Tourism Council. It reckons tourism contributed 12.4 percent of the region's gross domestic product in 2015, when 109 million foreigners came to visit.

Compared to other industries, tourism requires little government investment to sustain it. However, the governments of our region will have to help facilitate growth in this sector by easing visa restrictions, deregulating the skies, and building the required infrastructure.

Member nations should consider adopting a common visa to make it easier for foreigners to travel around the region. It is far from practical to queue at 10 different embassies for 10 different visas, as would be the case currently. Such restrictions constitute a major deterrent for people to visit from outside the region.

Source: China Post, March 5, 2017

Kyoto working to get its interpreter/guides up to global speed

By Eric Johnston / Staff Writer

With over 3 million visitors from abroad visiting the ancient capital of Kyoto in fiscal 2015, getting around with an official interpreter would have meant relying on government-qualified guides.

But critics have claimed that interpreter/guides who have passed national tests on language, history, culture and politics aren't necessarily well-versed on the details of Kyoto's rich history and culture.

That's why the city has founded the Kyoto Visitors Host program, aimed at nurturing tour guides who have in-depth knowledge on the city and are fluent enough in a foreign language to explain it to visitors.

The program, which began in November 2015, trains residents and visitors of any nationality to become professional city guides.

While Kyoto still lacks the broad range of interpreter/guides offering the kinds of highly specialized historical tours one finds in cities like London or Paris, the Kyoto Visitors Host program is a first step toward recognizing the need for local experts who can provide a special localized experience for foreign

guests.

The inaugural group of students specialized in English and Chinese. The second class, which began the program earlier this month, will include those who can explain Kyoto in English, Chinese and French.

For those whose native language is Japanese, some proof of English proficiency, such as a TOEIC score of at least 730, is necessary to be an English interpreter. Nonnative speakers are required to have passed at least the second level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test.

The program ends in September. Successful graduates can register their names and contact information on a website where interested foreign tourists and tour groups can directly contact them.

Classes include basic instruction in interpreter guide principles and the hospitality industry, as well as Kyoto's history and culture. Students also take specialized classes in Kyoto's traditional craft industries and culture, cultural properties and cuisine.

Source: Japan Times, February 26, 2017



Tourists take photos of snow-dusted Kinkakuji Temple in Kyoto in December. The city is nurturing local tour guides who can provide in-depth knowledge on Kyoto in foreign languages. | KYODO

New visa measures for Asian visitors take effect

Staff writer, with CNA



"new southbound policy," Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

Citizens from Sri Lanka and Bhutan can now apply for visitor's visas, while those seeking to enter on business visas are no longer required to have a Taiwanese company as guarantor, the ministry said.

Businesspeople from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have the option to apply for e-visas to visit Taiwan, once they obtain recommendations from the branch offices of the Taiwan External Trade Development Council in their respective countries, the ministry said.

In addition, a conditional visa-free program has been expanded to include citizens of Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines and Vietnam, the ministry said.

Several new visa measures that apply to select Asian nations took effect on June 1, 2017 as part of the government's

Under the visa-free program, nationals from eligible countries can file applications for multiple-entry permits to

Taiwan on the Web site of the Ministry of the Interior if they have held a Taiwan visa or an Alien Resident Certificate at any point over the past 10 years and have no record of visa violations.

The permits, which are issued free of charge, allow eligible visitors to stay up to 30 days in Taiwan within a three-month period, MOFA said. Since the program was launched in 2009, about 160,000 people from Southeast Asia have been using the service each year on average, it said.

The number of users is expected to increase to 1.35 million per year with expansion of the program, it added.

Source: Taipei Times, June 2, 2017



Unhooking tourism from regulations

By Huang Ming-jye

Speaking at the opening ceremony of the Taipei Tourism Expo on May 5, 2017, Vice President Chen Chien-jen said that travel and tourism would become the nation's next "trillion-dollar industry."

Chen announced that the government would launch five strategies for sustainable tourism: diversifying tourism markets, encouraging domestic tourism, assisting business transformation, developing "smart" tourism and promoting experiential travel.

It is significant that someone of the rank of vice president has proclaimed the important role that travel and tourism will play in economic development and transformation, and indeed proposed concrete development strategies to attain that goal.

It will be great if the plan succeeds.

However, if grand policy goals are not matched by a framework of complementary laws, they might turn out to be just pie in the sky. Notably, while destination management is becoming a mainstream trend in tourism and travel, the regulatory framework is stuck in the old pattern of centralized authority, which has long since ceased to meet contemporary needs.

Take for example the question of homestay establishments, which are popular among both domestic and foreign tourists. What makes Taiwan's homestays so popular is not just that they are in buildings, but that they represent a particular mode of travel and a certain lifestyle.

Homestays are organically integrated with the culture, history and geographical environment, embodying the ideas of experiential travel and cultural interaction.

Unfortunately, if one looks at the Act for the Development of Tourism, the regulations governing the management of homestays treat them simply as buildings, and they impose a single set of management regulations for buildings, land-use zoning and fire prevention for the whole of Taiwan.

This uniformity makes it difficult for local authorities of areas that have top tourist destinations to match the requirements with local characteristics, historic buildings, cultural artifacts and so on when setting out standards for homestay buildings and facilities.

The most absurd thing is that the act restricts homestays to being run as subsidiary businesses rather than fulltime ones. This makes it impossible to apply ratings schemes like the star rankings that are given to hotels and restaurants. If homestays are subject to such regulations, how can they play a leading role in developing experiential travel?



The same kind of problem exists with a regulation that requires youth hostels, which provide accommodation for backpackers, to provide car-parking facilities.

Experiential travel and in-depth tourism involve close connections with local people, culture and history, so there is a clear need for people who are thoroughly familiar with local culture, history and geography to plan tour routes, act as guides and provide personalized in-depth tour services.

However, the framework for travel businesses set out in the act starts out from the perspective of overseas and nationwide travel.

To qualify as guides, people are tested on their knowledge of the history and geography of Taiwan as a whole, while local conditions, customs and cultural monuments are not taken into consideration at all.



People who are enrolled by local governments as guides to local culture and history have sometimes even been reported to the authorities for breaking the law by acting as guides without having the required qualifications.

Do Taiwan's policies to develop the tourism industry aim to go beyond the shallow stage of foreign tourists coming here for shopping and eating?

Do we want visitors to really get to know the unique scenery, human warmth and culture of various parts of Taiwan, and to fully enjoy its unique natural environment? Such visitors could promote international exchanges and become spokespeople for the nation in the international community.

If that is what we want, then in-depth experiential travel based on local themes and emphasizing local characteristics is sure to become a trend, and local actors, such as travel businesses and guides, will play a key role in deciding the success or failure of this form of tourism.

Other countries that have successfully developed their tourism industries share the four key factors of climate, nature, culture and food as indispensable to their success.

Luckily, Taiwan, with its mingling of different ethnicities and special natural landscapes, offers plenty of variety in these four categories.

However, centralized uniform management has unfortunately prevented local destinations from effectively integrating the four factors based on their particular characteristics and developing their own unique features.



That would embody the real meaning of a nation built on tourism.

Huang Ming-je is the Tsai Wan-tsai chair professor of law at National Taiwan University's College of Law.

Translated by Julian Clegg

Source: Taipei Times, June 29, 2017

Officials bullish on Philippine visitors

Staff writer, with Central News Agency (CNA)



Tourism officials and operators on October 27, 2017 expressed optimism about inbound tourism from the Philippines thanks to a trial program starting next month that offers Philippine nationals visa-free entry to the nation for up to 14 days.

The Tourism Bureau said about 202,000 Philippine nationals visited Taiwan from January to September 2017, a 69 percent year-on-year increase.

The bureau expects even better figures in the fourth quarter, Tourism Bureau Chief Secretary Eric Lin said, adding that a promotional event at Taipei 101 would be targeting South-east Asian tourists.

Philippines-based Golden World Travel & Tours president Jose Lim Letran said the number of tourists could grow quickly, especially as there are already well-established air links which could support growing demand.

“We send about 600 tourists to Taiwan each year and that number is very likely to grow as a result of the new policy,” said Letran, whose company is based in Quezon City.

Taipei 101 is boosting its efforts to attract tourists from Southeast Asia, said Chen Shih-ming, president of Taipei Financial Center Co, which manages the nation’s tallest building.

There is to be a promotional campaigns targeting those tourists from November 2017 to February 2018, with lucky draws, discounts and souvenirs.

Visits from South Asian tourists to the Taipei 101 observatory grew by 68 percent to 259,000 during the first nine months of the year.

Thai and Vietnamese tourists accounted for 50 percent and 30 percent of those visitors respectively, observatory project manager Eddie Hsiang said.

Tourism is software, not hardware. It is not a matter of traffic and how many light rail and tram lines get built, but rather a cultural question of how to use each location’s characteristics to entice tourists to visit.

Conventional tourism policies, laws and regulations start out from the Ministry of Transportation and Communications’ hardware-oriented mindset.

Clearly these things should instead be placed under the remit of the Ministry of Culture.

At the same time, legal regulations that were instituted on the grounds of consumer protection should be reviewed regarding whether they obstruct innovation in the tourism industry or prevent the emergence of new travel businesses.

Government departments should use the idea of a regulatory sandbox to encourage the development of new business models in tourism and hospitality.

Senior levels of government now recognize that travel and tourism is the locomotive of the service sector. What is needed is to promote innovation and development of the industry with a readiness to do it in nonstandard ways.

Taiwan could even adopt legislation akin to the Japanese Tourism Nation Promotion Basic Act, which defines the development of travel and tourism as an important national strategy.

Formulating brand-new regulations on innovation and development of the industry would make it possible to turn around the government’s understanding of travel and tourism, as well as that of the public.

We could then put into practice the idea of running the industry in a way that puts localities first, while the central government plays a secondary role.

We also need to recognize that tourism is an extension of culture and put a different agency in charge of the industry.

The value and purpose of homestay establishments need to be redefined. Locals should be allowed to plan local tours from the angle of regional development, and to recruit and train local guides. Such changes would create win-win solutions for local economic development and cultural exchanges, so that tourism goes beyond just seeing to really experiencing.





With the introduction of the visa-free program, the Philippines could soon challenge Thailand for the most visitors to Taiwan from Southeast Asia, Hsiang said.

“The observatory is a microcosm of tourism in Taiwan and we have seen the government’s initiative working,” Chen said, referring to the New Southbound Policy.

However, the region remains only the fourth-largest source of foreign visitors to the observatory after China, South Korea and Japan.



Source: Taipei Times, October 28, 2017

Southeast, South Asian numbers set tourism record high

Staff writer, with Central News Agency (CNA)



The number of tourists from the 18 nations targeted by the government’s “new southbound policy” who visited Taiwan in January rose 42.8 percent from the same period last year to 68,000 people, the Executive Yuan’s Office of Trade Negotiations said.

The number represents a record high for the same month over the past four years, the office said, adding that Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines were the five largest sources of visitors to Taiwan from the 18 nations.

The number of Thai travelers in January was 170 percent higher than the same month last year, breaking the 10,000 mark, the office said.

The office attributed the increase to the increased interest in Taiwan generated by the launch in August last year of a three-month trial visa-exemption program for ordinary Thai passport holders.

The number of tourists from Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Myanmar and Laos all increased more than 50 percent, due to the government’s new visa policy for tourists from the region, it added.

Since the government last year launched the “new southbound policy” — which aims to develop comprehensive relations with ASEAN members and South Asian nations, as well as Australia and New Zealand and promote regional exchanges and collaboration — Taiwan has seen a 25.83 percent year-on-year increase in the number of tourists from nations targeted by the policy between August last year and January, a record high for the same period over the past five years,

the office said.

Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines made the biggest contributions to the growth, although Cambodian and Burmese numbers also rose, the office added.

The government is to offer visa exemptions to tourists from more countries under the policy over the next three years, including Indonesia, India, the Philippines, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, the office said.

Source: Taipei Times, March 27, 2017



Tourist spending up in Japan as foreign travelers take in more cultural experiences

By JIJI

Consumption by inbound tourists in Japan has started picking up as retailers and the tourism industry encourage spending on unique experiences and personal items, rather than souvenirs.

Department store operators had been ringing up big sales from foreign tourists, especially Chinese travelers, in a phenomenon that came to be known as “bakugai” — literally, “explosive shopping” — in which they snapped up products such as home appliances for families and friends.

According to the Japan Tourism Agency, travel-related spending, including hotel and meal charges, by foreign tourists totaled ¥1.08 trillion in the April-June period, a quarterly record.

Of that total, spending on shopping grew 15 percent from the year before to ¥414.6 billion.

But spending per person dropped 5 percent to ¥57,420, sharply lower than the ¥77,000 for April-June 2015, when bakugai demand was brisk.

The figures suggest that a fall in the amount of per-visitor spending has been more than offset by growth in the number of overall foreign visitors to Japan, industry sources said.

“There have been changes in how foreign tourists use their money during their stays in Japan, compared with the period when bakugai demand was strong,” an official of the Japan Tourism Agency said. “An increasing number of tourists are spending much on items such as cosmetics and cameras for their own use.”

Four major department store operators enjoyed double-digit growth in their sales of duty-free items in July.

“Demand was especially high for skin-lightening cosmetics,” noted an official of Isetan Mitsukoshi Holdings Ltd.

Sogo & Seibu Co., a unit of Seven & I Holdings Co.,

posted strong sales of duty-free goods after some outlets started accepting payments from the Alipay electronic settlement service, the largest such settlement platform in China, in late June.

The government has set a goal of increasing spending by foreign tourists to ¥8 trillion in 2020, more than double the amount spent in 2016.

One key to achieving the target is stimulating spending on leisure services.

According to a survey by the tourism agency, spending by foreign tourists on leisure services totaled ¥34.3 billion in the April-June period, up 24 percent year on year but accounting for only some 3 percent of overall expenditures by tourists from overseas.

“There is room for further growth in such spending, while (leisure services) are expected to help increase the number of repeat tourists” to Japan, an agency official said.

The tourism industry is also boosting efforts to encourage foreign tourists to spend more.

This summer, Izuhakone Railway Co., a unit of Seibu Holdings Inc., started offering services at a tourist facility in the hot spring resort town of Hakone, Kanagawa Prefecture, to help foreigners experience Japanese culture, such as wearing a kimono.

The number of users has been growing steadily, with foreign tourists accounting for more than 70 percent of the total.

In late July, major travel agency JTB Corp. started selling coupon books through a subsidiary with vouchers for discounts on items such as rickshaw tours and kimono rental services.

Source: Japan Times, August 21, 2017



A Chinese tourist waits for a tour bus in Tokyo's Ginza district in April 2016. | BLOOMBERG

Travel sector zooms in on gay market

By Emmanuelle Michel, Agence France-Presse (AFP)

The travel sector is jazzing up its offer for gay tourists, who tend to spend more than most when away from home, taking it beyond parties in sunny hubs like Ibiza.

The trend was underscored at the Fitur tourism fair in Madrid, one of the world's largest, which wraps up on Sunday, where tourism boards plugged cultural attractions and nature activities to this market.

Spain's western region of Extremadura for example featured posters promoting annual gay pride festivities in the city of Badajoz which began in response to homophobic comments made by a local politician.

But it also promoted bird watching trips, local architecture and rural tourism to gay and lesbian travelers at a special section of the fair dedicated to the market segment.

The goal is to appeal to the growing number of gay and lesbian couples who are having children, said Hugo Alonso of the Extremadura's tourism promotion agency at the fair.

"We are interested in volume," he said. Gay and lesbians make up around 10 percent of all tourists, he said.

But for most destinations this segment is attractive because gays travel all year round since they are rarely tied down by school holidays, and spend more on trips.

"They have more disposable income" since there are fewer couples with children, said Juan Pedro Tudeal, the director of Diversity Consulting International, a Spanish firm which advises firms targeting the gay and lesbian market.

Thomas Bomkes of Diversity Tourism, a German consultancy, said gay tourists spend "even more when they know they're accepted."

'Dynamic segment'

While it is difficult to estimate how much gay travelers spend, the United Nations World Tourism Organization said in a recent report that "there is no denying" that they "are a dynamic and influential segment within the tourism sector."



The Spanish capital generated about 150 million euros (US\$160 million) from its annual gay-pride festivities last summer, which feature one of the world's biggest pride marches.

The windfall is expected to be even higher this year as Madrid will host World Pride in late June and early July.

Some three million people are expected to take part in

the event. Spanish airline Iberia as well as several hotels have launched special offers for this time of the year to appeal to gay travelers.

Pride festivities are used by many Spanish coastal destinations to attract gay travelers outside of their high season.

The beach resort of Maspalomas on Spain's Canary Islands stages three pride events each year, which generate up to 20 million euros each, said the organizer of the event, Fernando Ilarduya.

There has also been a boom in the number of cruises, vacation clubs and bungalows geared specifically at the gay market.

"Certain details make the trip more enjoyable, like for example a hotel that does not provide separate beds to two women who book a room together," said Marion Couturier of event management agency Hansen&Partner.



'Difficult to target'

While destinations like Spain, — which was one of the first nations to legalize gay marriage — Thailand and Bali are already well established as "gay friendly," others are seeking to follow their example.

At Fitur, Argentina's tourism board highlighted in its brochures that it was the first nation in Latin America to approve gay marriage while Colombia promoted several destinations specifically for gays.

But Bomkes warned that some gay people may actually be turned off by special offers and package tours that openly target the gay community.

"It can be difficult to reach the target group: some people don't want these special offers," he said.

"Most of them are very educated. They know how to book everything by themselves."

Source: China Post, January 23, 2017

Taiwan: Where Japanese go to feel at home on vacation

By Kaori Shoji / Special To The Japan Times



Examples of Japanese pop culture are everywhere in Taiwan's shopping districts. | KAORI SHOJI



The streets of Taiwan's cities present an eclectic range of fashion and style. | KAORI SHOJI

Asia is brimming with exciting travel destinations. Each country is like a world unto itself, with new languages and customs to learn, food to try and experiences to have.

Like everyone else, Japanese take vacations for any number of reasons, but the majority seem to prefer sticking to what feels comfortable over seeking adventure. Most want something low-key, a place to relax and let their hair down — but finding the right spot can present difficulties.

Guam is all right, though it can feel at times like a U.S. military base with better shopping malls, and although Singapore is nice, it's hard not to feel like you're on a business trip. China and South Korea, both fascinating destinations, carry for some Japanese a tinge of discomfort stemming from ongoing disputes over Japan's past military aggression.

Even travel within Japan can have its problems. Northern Hokkaido brings the territorial dispute with Russia to mind, while the Okinawa Islands remind one of the ongoing issues there with U.S. military bases. It's no wonder why so many Japanese, especially Millennials, who tend to be more aware and sensitive about such issues than their parents, often avoid Asia as a travel destination.

The exception to this seeming rule, however, is Taiwan. Situated a few hundred kilometers southwest of the Okinawa archipelago, Taiwan was Japanese soil for about five decades until the end of WWII. Amazingly, this is the one country where the Japanese imperialists managed to do more good than harm when they colonized it in 1895.

The man behind much of the change in Taiwan in the colonial years was Shimpei Goto, an upper-crust bureaucrat who acted as deputy governor of the island and remains a popular figure there today. Goto, who later became Japan's foreign minister, stamped out opium in Taiwan, while building schools and hospitals and the bones of modern infrastructure. He also oversaw construction of the wide, tree-lined streets that became a symbol

of Taiwan's modernization and prosperity.

By all accounts, Goto was several cuts above the typical, oppressive and militaristic Japanese bureaucrat — he was a liberal with a Western democratic slant who had a genuine love for and interest in the people and culture of Taiwan. Thanks in part to Goto, Taiwanese seem to have a soft spot for Japan and the Japanese.

On the streets of Taipei and Tainan, there's evidence of that soft spot everywhere: in the bilingual store signs written in both Mandarin and Japanese, the number of restaurants advertising *nisshiki* (Japanese style) dishes, and the way everyone seems to go out of their way to be friendly to Japanese tourists.

Traces of Goto's legacy are visible in Taipei, especially its surrounding areas: The wide, vehicle-friendly streets are crammed with Japanese scooters, and the Office of the President of the Republic of China occupies the exact same building used by the governor general of Japan until 1945.

Interestingly, when Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan on the heels of the Communist victory in China in 1949, one of the first things he did was restore this structure — which had been bombed by the Allies but was still standing — to its former glory. Although Chiang Kai-shek had fought the Japanese Army in China long and hard, apparently he had no interest in demolishing the work of Japanese imperialists in Taiwan.

This is the reason why many old Japanese buildings in Taiwan are still in use, and they stand as a testament to Japanese architecture from a time when Japan was trying to catch up to the West and hybrid was the name of the game in heavy industry, engineering and architecture. Similar examples in Tokyo are rare, but in Taipei, pieces of Japanese history have survived the war as well as the tides of time.

These days, it's not uncommon for elderly men and women to approach Japanese tourists and start speaking in Japanese, and many still recall a time when every Taiwanese citizen



Old streets host new culture in Taiwan's ever-changing cities. | KAORI SHOJI



You never know what you'll find when strolling through the streets of Taipei. | KAORI SHOJI



The streets of Taiwan's cities are busy but friendly, and free of the kind of crush found in Tokyo | KAORI SHOJI

could speak at least the basics of the language. Meanwhile, Japanese video games, manga and books are prominently displayed in malls and stores, and the No. 1 film sensation of late 2016 was “Your Name.,” the mega-hit animation by Makoto Shinkai. “Your Name.” broke box office records across Taiwan, selling more tickets than “Ring,” another beloved Japanese movie.

Japanese culture is so ubiquitous, in fact, that Taiwan can seem a bit like a parallel universe. Compare the experience to parts of Okinawa, where many elderly people retain bitter memories of how, at the end of WWII, the Japanese Imperial Army ordered civilians to commit suicide in the event of an American invasion, then promptly fled the area.

With a whiff of such bad history still in the air, it can be hard for a mainland Japanese to break the ice and start communicating with local people, and in many ways, Okinawa feels like a foreign country. Taiwan, by contrast, feels somehow familiar, and more than 12,000 Japanese now live in Taipei.

The feeling appears to be mutual. Taiwanese filmmaker Hsiao-Hsien Hou, a renowned Japanophile, has even made a film in Japanese (“Cafe Lumiere,” 2003), dedicating it to director Yasujiro Ozu. And the late Taiwanese artist and filmmaker Edward Yang once said to me in an interview: “Some of my favorite places to hang out are in Japan. I feel such an affinity to Japanese culture which is not surprising because most Taiwanese feel the same way.”

“Japan is a lovely country,” said a woman in her 80s who gave her name as Miao. “I was taught by Japanese teachers and as a child, I played with Japanese friends. They were all so polite, and very disciplined.” Miao smiled, and took up my hand as she spoke in perfect Japanese. She added that she made it a habit to talk to Japanese tourists, “so as not to forget the language.” In Asia, it’s very rare for a Japanese to be on the receiving end of such benevolence.

This is probably why 1.89 million Japanese people chose to visit Taiwan in 2016, according to travel agency JTB, especially women who travel in small groups or, increasingly, solo. Mitsuko Ohtake, who works for a government agency in Tokyo, says she tries to visit Taiwan every other month.

“It’s less than a three-hour plane ride from Tokyo and everything is cheaper than in Japan,” explained Ohtake. “The place is so relaxing for me, because I don’t feel obligated to think about history or having to be a certain way so as not to offend anyone.”

Ohtake is even thinking about retiring in Taipei.

“There’s a sense of community in Taiwan that Japan lost long ago,” she said, “and even though I’m traveling alone, I never feel lonely or isolated, whereas in Tokyo, it’s the other way around.”

Youki Tsunoda, 32, who works for a Japanese electronics manufacturer, is a recent Taiwan transplant. His firm, which was based in Kumamoto, transferred Tsunoda to their Tainan factory after the earthquakes last year. Initially crestfallen about leaving his home city, now Tsunoda finds his new environment so comfortable that he’s horrified at the thought of returning to Japan. “I’m gay, and that was a pretty miserable predicament for me when I was living in Kumamoto,” he said. “I couldn’t find a partner and I knew my family would never understand. But life in Tainan was a complete game-changer.”

Tsunoda now has a Taiwanese boyfriend who’s teaching him the language, and they can be open about their relationship without feeling like outcasts. “In many ways, Taiwan is a lot more liberal than Japan,” said Tsunoda. “I feel that I’m more valued as a human being, and my sexual orientation doesn’t matter. People don’t care about rules so much here. In Japan things are harsher, everything is more rigid.”

Who knew that the seeds of goodwill planted by a Japanese bureaucrat would someday provide an escape hatch for Japanese who are tired of life in Japan, or of being Japanese? Personally, I’m ready to buy a plane ticket for Taipei immediately.

Source: Japan Times, March 18, 2017



Tainan to attract Muslim travelers with halal meals

By Wang Han-ping and William Hetherington / Staff reporter, with staff writer



In the face of a decline in Chinese tourists and an emphasis on developing economic relations in Southeast Asian countries under President Tsai Ing-wen's "new southbound policy," Tainan has begun promoting the city to Muslim tourists.

The Tainan Bureau of Economic Development announced that, starting next year, it would promote restaurants that serve food in accordance with Islamic customs.

The bureau said that 117 million Muslim tourists traveled internationally last year, accounting for 10 percent of total tourists. The Ministry of Transportation and Communications said that the majority of Muslim visitors to Taiwan come from Southeast Asian nations like Malaysia and Indonesia.

The number of Malaysian tourists has increased from 300,000 in 2011 to 430,000 last year, while Indonesian tourist numbers have increased from 156,000 to 177,000 over the same period, the department said.

The number of Muslim visitors from the Middle East has also increased by about 5,000 people, the department added. In Tainan, the Tayih Landis Hotel, the Tainan Wei-Yat Grand Hotel and restaurant and the Silks Place Tainan Hotel have been approved for a new promotional campaign, while the Wei-Yat restaurant is a certified halal restaurant.

The department said that starting next year it would work closely with the China Muslim Association and the Industrial Development and Promotion Committee of Tainan City to assist food and beverage establishments in Tainan to obtain halal certification.

The Tainan City Government has said it would arrange training courses for interested business owners, adding that it hopes that people in the industry will be able to better understand the needs of Muslim travelers.

The city government said it hopes to compile a halal certified restaurant guide for Muslim travelers in the area.

The bureau said that nearly 400 businesses nationwide are Halal certified, adding that Tainan could be considered a "halal strategic town" with 72 certified businesses. Businesses that can apply for halal certification include food and beverage providers and cosmetics retailers, the bureau said.

Source: Taipei Times, November 26, 2016

Thai arrivals to Taiwan forecast to hit 360,000 in 2017

By Liu Te-chang and Frances Huang

Taiwan's visa-free treatment of Thai nationals has stirred up interest and could nearly double Thai visitor arrivals in Taiwan to around 360,000 in 2017, the Thai Travel Agents Association (TTAA) said on January 20, 2017.

In 2016, 195,640 people from Thailand visited Taiwan, slightly higher than the 180,000 estimated earlier in the year by Taiwan's government, and the TTAA attributed the growth to Taiwan's visa-free policy.

Thai visitor growth was particularly strong in the fourth quarter, when their numbers rose 85 percent year-on-year with the help of the visa-free program that took effect in August.

Citizens of Thailand and Brunei have been allowed to visit Taiwan without a visa under the one-year trial program as part of Taiwan's "new southbound policy" that seeks to strengthen Taiwan's relations with Southeast Asia.

TTAA Vice President Adith Chairattananon said his group is upbeat about an increase in Thai arrivals at Taiwan this

year and will do its best to promote Taiwan as an ideal destination for Thai travelers.

At a conference held by the TTAA in Bangkok on January 20th to encourage Thai travel agencies to organize tours to Taiwan, about 120 travel agencies showed up, 20 more than expected. Only 50 to 60 companies typically attended similar conferences in the past, the TTAA said.

The high turnout reflected the growing interest in Taiwan among Thai travel operators since Thai nationals were given visa-free status in August.

Adith was confident that as long as the visa-free treatment continued and airlines provided more flights the number of Thai arrivals in Taiwan could reach 360,000 in 2017.

The TTAA executive said many Thai tourists are interested in Taiwan's New Year countdown parties, in particular the one held in front of the Taipei 101 skyscraper, one of Taiwan's best known landmarks.



More than 500 Thai tourists took chartered flights to attend the 2016 countdown party in front of Taipei 101, Adith said, and he believed other countdown parties around Taiwan could also attract Thai visitors.

The New Southbound Policy is an initiative pushed by the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government to develop closer ties with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members and India.



The DPP government, which took office in May 2016, hopes the policy will diversify investment and trade so that Taiwan is less economically dependent on China, including in tourism.

The new government is less well-disposed toward Beijing than the pro-China Kuomintang administration that came before it, and Beijing has taken a harder line against Taiwan as a result, including reducing the number of Chinese visitors.

The number of Chinese tourists to Taiwan in 2016 fell to 3.51 million from 4.18 million in 2015, and industry sources say the number could fall further to 2.1 million in 2017, making it unlikely Taiwan can attract 10 million foreign visitors this year as it has the past two years.

Source: Central News Agency, January 20, 2017

Osaka, Japan's gritty second city, suddenly a destination amid Asian tourist boom

By Masahiro Hidaka / Bloomberg



People pose for a selfie in front of the famous 'Glico Man' advertisement in the Dotonbori district in Osaka on October 9, 2017 | BLOOMBERG

Amid the gloom and struggle that Osaka has gone through in recent years, a tourism boom has been an unexpected boon for Japan's gritty second city.

The commercial roots and boisterous and friendly people of Osaka and the surrounding Kansai region provide a contrast to the relative coolness and formality of Tokyo that's winning favor with tourists from Northeast Asia.

The boom is boosting the economy. Duty-free sales at department stores in the region were up almost 60 percent in the first eight months of this year from the same period in 2016, according to the Bank of Japan.

The area's relatively high unemployment rate has dropped considerably, to 4 percent last year, while the number of companies in Osaka grew 16 percent in the 12 months through March, faster than in Tokyo or across the whole nation.

While Japan as a whole has benefited from a massive increase in tourism, it's especially pronounced in Osaka. Almost 10 million overseas tourists visited the city in 2016, a 363 per-

cent jump over five years, versus the 188 percent increase seen nationally.

The city is popular with tourists from Asia, partly due to increased flights by low-cost carriers, such as China's Spring Airlines Co. and Jeju Air Co. of South Korea.

This year looks to be another record, with 5.3 million visitors in the first six months of 2017, according to the city's tourism office.

Within Osaka itself, the southern part of the city around Shinsaibashi is attracting many people. The Daimaru department store in Shinsaibashi sold ¥11 billion in duty-free goods in March-August this year. That was 28 percent of all its sales and more than the combined total of duty-free sales at the company's 14 other stores in Japan.

"This inbound tourism has brought a growth chance to sectors such as the retail and restaurant business, which were shrinking due to the population decline," said Kimihiro Etoh, a BOJ executive and manager of the Osaka branch.

Osaka was traditionally the merchant capital of Japan, with many businesses making it their home base during the Edo Period.

The merchant spirit and tradition of bargaining is one of the things that Chinese probably find attrac-



An employee holds an advertisement with Chinese characters at a drug store in the Dotonbori district of Osaka on October 9, 2017 | BLOOMBERG



People take photographs from the Umeda Sky Building observation deck at dusk in Osaka on October 9, 2017 | BLOOMBERG

tive, according to Xiaoxiao Liu, a Shanghai-born economist at Mitsubishi Research Institute in Tokyo.

“Chinese tourists aren’t just looking to buy stuff anymore, they want to have experiences while spending money. And on that point, Osaka is totally more fun,” she said.

The whole shopping district of Shinsaibashi is entertaining, according to Masahisa Maeda, head of the area’s shopkeepers association. You can eat while walking down the street, “talking to people in shops and stalls, and watching them cook before your very eyes,” he said.

“Osaka has food, culture and shopping,” said 67-year-old Mok Cheong Seng from Macau, while visiting the city recently for the seventh or eighth time. Her son, Peter Lee, who was traveling with her, said, “Tokyo’s too busy, but you can relax in Osaka.”

The city plans to apply to host the 2025 World Expo, and is also looking to host Japan’s first casino resort, when they are legalized, which would increase its appeal to Asian tourists.

Source: Japan Times, October 17, 2017

About CACCI

The Confederation of Asia-Pacific Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CACCI) is a regional grouping of apex national chambers of commerce and industry, business associations and business enterprises in Asia and the Western Pacific.

It is a non-governmental organization serving as a forum for promoting the vital role of businessmen in the region, increasing regional business interaction, and enhancing regional economic growth. Since its establishment in 1996, CACCI has grown into a network of national chamber of commerce with a

total now of 29 Primary Members from 27 Asian countries and independent economies.

It cuts across national boundaries to link businessmen and promote economic growth throughout the Asia-Pacific region. CACCI is a non-governmental organization (NGO) granted consultative status, Roster category, under the United Nations.

It is a member of the Conference on NGOs (CoNGO), an association of NGOs with UN consultative status.

About CACCI Asian Council on Tourism

Asian Council of Tourism is one of the Product Service Councils under the CACCI umbrella. The PSCs have been formed with the primary aim of promoting greater business interaction among CACCI members who are in the same product or service line. There are currently twelve PSCs that are operating within the CACCI umbrella.

The PSCs meet at least once a year, usually in conjunction with the Annual CACCI Conference held in various member countries. Occasionally, officers and key members of the PSCs conduct teleconferences to discuss their activities for the year.

CACCI held its first breakout session on Tourism during

the 60th CACCI Council Meeting held on 18-19 May 2004 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and formally organized a CACCI Asian Council on Tourism (ACT).

The current Chairman of ACT is Mr. Anura Samarawickrema Lokuhetty from Sri Lanka. He is concurrently Chairman of Red Apple Travel & Holidays Lanka (Pvt) Ltd., and Immediate Past President of The Hotels Association of Sri Lanka, the apex body representing all hotels in Sri Lanka.

For more information on the PSCs, please visit the CACCI website at www.cacci.biz

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