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Japan's Officialdom--

A Major Stumbling Block to Tourism Promotion

A major stumbling block to the promotion of foreign tourists to Japan, who plummeted after the catastrophic trio of the earthquake, tsunami and the ensuing nuclear accident and yet gradually came back in the following months, is the red tape in the central and local governments, the Waseda Guardian has learned.

Recovery from Disasters

Data by the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) shows that foreign tourists to Japan registered a whopping 62.5 % year-to-year decrease in April 2011 in the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, but, after gradual recovery toward the end of the year, finished with a much milder 11% year-to-year decrease in December 2011.

Koichi Takatsuki, a government official of the International Tourism Promotion Section, at Japan Tourism Agency (JTA), said foreign governments issued advice to stop or cancel visits to Japan following the disaster, triggering a series



Koichi Takatsuki, a government official of the International Tourism Promotion Section, at Japan Tourism Agency (JTA)

of cancellation of tours not only to the disaster-stricken areas in northern Japan but also to the rest of Japan. JTA is an outer agency of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism.

"In April and May, foreign visitors from various countries decreased in the 50 to 60 % range and, in the case of a country, more than 70 %," Takatsuki said. He noted that recovery was prominent in Asian tourists comprising a major portion of foreign tourists to Japan.

Data by the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), an independent administrative institution of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, shows a 2.1% growth in the number of visitors from Taiwan in October 2011 and an over 30 % growth in mainland Chinese in November 2011.

JNTO spokesman Nozomi Tsuji said, "Taiwanese tourists were quick to come back. Taiwan people were also the largest donors. With Taiwanese show biz stars holding concerts supporting Japan and friendly exchanges held immediately after the quake, and other efforts in the



Nozomi Tsuji is spokesman of JNTO, an independent administrative institution of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism

background, Taiwanese tourists are coming back fast."

Government PR on the Web

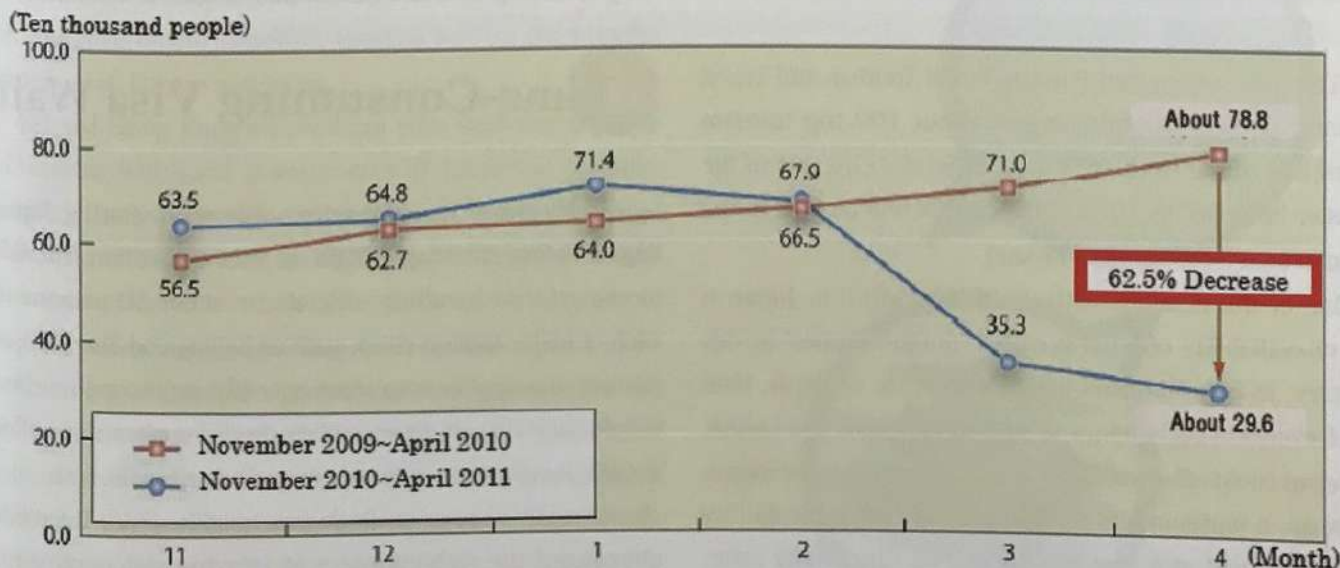
On its part, JNTO, aware that foreigners were scared off by the danger of radiation from the accident of the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant, began a PR campaign aimed at providing accurate information on radiation levels.

Tsuji said JNTO global website, available in 13 languages, posted, still does, daily renewed radiation levels in major cities of Japan, in comparison with foreign cities, assuring the world that radiation levels in Japan is not high. The website also has video posts of foreigners visiting Japan without trouble.

Tsuji also noted the importance of SNS and other word-of-mouth communication. "Through power bloggers and people posting their views on SNS, we are trying to relate facts about Japan to the world, saying despite the disaster we had, trips to Japan could be a lot of fun."

According to a government plan, JTA will have a budget of 600 million yen for a year starting in April 2012 to give incentives to foreigners who come to Japan and post articles about their trips on SNS. The plan is a come-alive of a failed

Number of foreign tourists visiting Japan on a year-to-year basis from November 2010 to April 2011



(Note) Prepared by JTA based on materials of JNTO

free round trip tickets to Japan as a means of revitalizing the then sluggish in-bound travel. When what became a very popular project flopped due to a lack of budget, a disgruntled Wall Street Journal ran an article "Dream Over for Free Flights to Japan."

MICE for Japan

Experts on international travel are unanimous that "MICE" is the key to tourism promotion. A short for Meeting, Incentive travel, Convention and Event/Exhibition, MICE means business travel bringing in a larger number of travelers and a larger amount of money spent per head.

Kaneyuki Ono, Director of JNTO's Touristinformation Center, said there had been a large number of international meetings after the quake, including Union Internationale des Architectes (UIA), an international group of architects, which held, as scheduled, its worldwide convention in Tokyo in September-October 2011, putting together over 5,100 persons from 11 countries.



JTA's Takatsuki added that the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC), a gathering of about 100 top tourism executives of the world, will meet in Sendai City, one of the disaster-hit areas, in 2013. "I hope MICE will be held in the Tohoku area from now on," he said.

One of the troubles with promoting MICE in Japan is the unavailability of what is called "unique venues" in this country. JNTO's Ono said while Britain, for example, held MICE events in such unique venues as museums and castles, all Japan could offer was hotel rooms and conference rooms. In Japan, a museum was made available by Yokohama City and party held at a castle in Kanazawa City. Many other cultural facilities, however, shy away from making part of

their facilities available on the grounds of protection of cultural assets or from offering cooked meals for a fear of catching fire.

Japan's unreadiness for MICE is seen elsewhere as well. Chikayoshi Kawahara, Manager-in East Japan of the Hong Kong Tourist Board (HKTb), said in Hong Kong, an airport, train stations and hotels all have taken barrier-free measures, installing slopes and elevators, for international travelers carrying heavy luggage.



Masaru Suzuki, a Tourism study professor of Faculty of Business Administration at Oberlin University, Tokyo, added that only a small number of flights was being run at Japanese airports, making it impossible to handle a large number of international travelers. "Suppose 10,000 people need to come to Nagoya City for a large international conference. Is it possible?" Suzuki asked, replying, "There are not enough flights to take all those people to Nagoya."

Prof. Suzuki said international hub cities, such as Singapore, where many direct flights arrive from and depart for all destinations, making it possible to catch return flights on the same day, have an advantage to invite international meetings. In that sense, he said, international airports in Tokyo and Osaka do not run as many flights as necessary

Time-Consuming Visa Wait

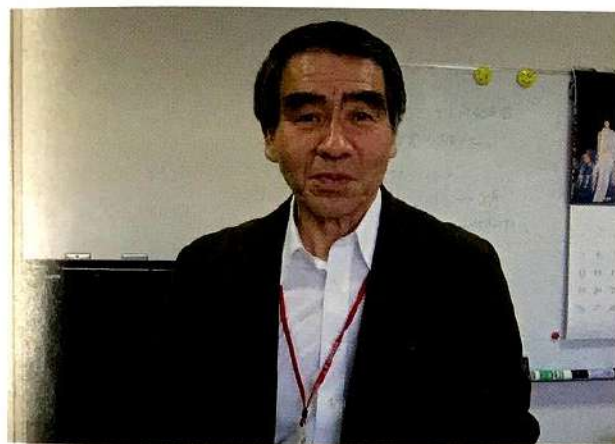
Oberlin's Suzuki said trouble with visiting Japan begins before catching a flight, in visa application. The U.S. increased visa handling officials by about 50 persons in each of major foreign cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, to process visa applications more speedily, promoting tourism, Suzuki said. He said Japan still made visa applicants wait for a week, leaving them with a sense of being unwelcome.

Some argue against issuing visas quickly. JTA's Takatsuki questioned the righteousness of relaxing visa control for the sake of increasing foreign visitors, mentioning to the

possible increase of illegal entrants and workers. "JTA cannot decide on the visa issue by itself. We have to talk to the Foreign Ministry as well as the Justice Ministry," he said.

Local Governments Help Themselves

As seen in the three-some deadlock over visa issue, Japan's central government, notorious for overly compartmentalized jurisdiction and budgets, does not have a coherent policy to promote tourism. Oberlin's Suzuki said local governments, prefectures and municipalities, are doing a better job of promoting their regions. He said just a look at tourism-related statistics shows how they are doing.



Masaru Suzuki, a Tourism study professor of Faculty of Business Administration at Oberlin University, Tokyo

For example, Suzuki said, Hida-Takayama, or Takayama City in northern Gifu Prefecture, has in-depth statistics breaking down foreign visitors by nationality as well as analyses about their activities and spending. On the other hand, the central government classifies tourists just by the broader region--Asia, Europe and so on.

Echoed Hong Kong's Kawahara who said was in favor of working with local governments of Japan for mutually beneficial two-way tourism promotion. In this year's Lunar New Year, on January 23, he said, Saga Prefecture and Saga City teamed up to join in a Hong Kong event to promote Saga's local specialties as well as tours to Saga.

According to Kawahara, prefectures and municipalities are agile and can do whatever they want to do. "Hong Kong has a position of strength as a city-size government capable of making a coherent tourism policy," he said. In Japan's new Open Sky policy, any governor who has a local airport in the prefecture can come up with attractive tourism plans and

negotiate charter deals with foreign countries to increase travelers to the prefecture, he said.

Person-to-Person Promotion

An official of a foreign tourism bureau, who declined to be identified, said the private sector can also contribute to the promotion of tourism. The official said RareJob Inc., an online English conversation school based in Tokyo, began a cut-rate English teaching service using Skype and Philippine teachers based in the Philippines, making a lot of news in newspapers and TV. "That alone is the great promotion of the Philippine tourism," the official said. He said the conversations Philippine teachers have with Japanese students over the Internet are a means of PR for the Philippines, the official added.

By the same token, JTA's Takatsuki said, "When you show the way to a foreigner in the street corner, you are promoting Japan."



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