

Visit Japan, Visit Tohoku!

*With inbound tourism now little by little picking up in Japan following the disaster of March 11, the Japan Journal's Junko Nakanishi asked **Tadatoshi Mamiya**, president of the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), for his thoughts on the prospects for the industry.*

What is the current status regarding the visitor arrivals to Japan from overseas for sightseeing or business?

Tadatoshi Mamiya: After the March 11 earthquake the number of foreign visitors decreased drastically. However, since about one month after the disaster the numbers have been recovering little by little. From around the middle of April, the warnings against travel to Japan issued by different countries began to relax, and tour groups started arriving from Asia, Europe and the United States again. At the end of May we also had around eighty volunteers from Oregon in the United States to remove debris in Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures. The tour members, ranging in age from teenagers to people in their eighties, stayed in Japan for about a week.

Senior figures from tourist bureaus and travel agencies from all over the world as well as the media have also been arriving in Japan in large numbers.

Because of these things, it appears as if the word is spreading that, "I went to Japan, but everything was completely normal."

What is the JNTO doing to restore visitor arrivals to Japan from overseas?

Tadatoshi Mamiya,
president of the Japan
National Tourism
Organization (JNTO)



TADASHI ALZAWA

The JNTO is attending tourism conventions being held in countries all over the world and raising awareness about the safety of tourism in Japan. For example, I participated in the World Travel and Tourism Council's (WTTC) Global Travel & Tourism Summit held in Las Vegas from May 18. Partly because the summit will be held in Tokyo next April, this year a very large delegation was sent from Japan. We explained to the leaders of the sightseeing industry of every country that, except for a few areas such as around TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, there are no problems with conducting tourism in Japan. We also explained that the government is taking responsibility for monitoring radiation levels in food, and that only food which is safe is going to market. Through these explanations we gained everyone's understanding. Immediately, the chairman of the British Tourist Authority, Visit Britain, said, "I'd like you to give this presentation in Britain. I'll get the travel companies together for it."

I strongly believe it is necessary to conduct "information catering," whereby people actually meet face to face and share information directly.

There are many kinds of information available on the JNTO website. What information can we get to understand how safe sightseeing in Japan is?

A “Japan Travel Updates after the 3.11 Earthquake” page was made on the JNTO website. There you can find easy-to-understand detailed explanations about the safety of sightseeing in Japan. For example, there is information such as the distance of various places from where the nuclear power plant accident occurred, an illustration showing the amount of radiation received from things like an x-ray or an airplane flight, and comparisons of the amount of radiation in Tokyo and other cities overseas.

What’s more, you can view video messages from famous people like Canadian pop star Justin Bieber and British fashion designer Paul Smith. There are also video messages from foreigners sightseeing in places like Kyoto and Osaka, and expatriates living in Japan. The live streaming broadcasts of Shibuya and Akihabara in Tokyo are also popular.

What tourist spots do you recommend in Tohoku?

There are many tourist spots in Tohoku where you can enjoy Japanese history and nature. The best examples are the World Nature Heritage Site Shirakami-Sanchi, and Hiraizumi, which is scheduled to become a World Cultural Heritage Site in the near future. There is also Sakata, Yamagata Prefecture, which flourished as a port city during the Edo period [1603–1867]. Many old buildings remain that are reminiscent of that era. If you take the Gono train line that

runs along the coast between Akita and Aomori, you can enjoy the beautiful views of the blue Sea of Japan and Shirakami-Sanchi, which is covered in virgin Japanese beech forest.

The scenery of Matsushima in Miyagi Prefecture is also fabulous. To show our appreciation to people overseas for the support received from around the world for the earthquake, the JNTO, with the cooperation of the Japan Association of Travel Agents, distributed photo postcards at airports to Japanese tourists departing from Japan. We also distributed them at JNTO overseas offices. The photos were of Japanese scenery with “Thank you” “Hope to see you again in Japan” printed on them in English and other languages. When I handed a postcard of Matsushima to the head of the Singapore Tourism Board who had come to Japan, he said, “I definitely am going to visit this place.”

There are also many hot springs in Tohoku. At Mount Zao in Yamagata and Miyagi Prefectures, besides the hot springs, you can also see *juhyo* [snow-covered “monster” trees] in winter.

The food is wonderful as well. You especially must try fruits such as Aomori apples, grapes from Yamagata, and cherries from Fukushima.

But most of all, the people of Tohoku are incredibly friendly. Even after the Tohoku region suffered so much damage from the earthquake, the kindness and hospitality of the people there hasn’t changed in the least. Without a doubt, a vacation in Tohoku will be something you remember forever. By coming to Tohoku for sightseeing, foreigners can also bring happiness to the people there. You can have great confidence in the safety of Japan, so please do come and visit us. 