

Isao Sawa helps a British traveler plan a journey using a map on the wall of the inn.

# No Reservations about Booking SAWANOYA

**B**“Back to the good old days” might be the perfect way to describe Sawanoya, a traditional Japanese inn (*ryokan*) founded in 1949, which has been catering to foreign guests for the past three decades. And this now seems to hold true even after the dip in those coming to Japan from abroad. Located in the downtown area of Tokyo called “Yanesen”—collectively comprising the Yanaka-Nezu-Sendagi districts known for artisans, temples and the quaint charm of old Edo (the former name for Tokyo)—those accommodated at Sawanoya can experience the Japanese lifestyle of yore, sleeping on futon bedding placed upon the tatami floor or using the collective bath among other things. According to the proprietor, Isao Sawa, although the long waiting list of those wishing to stay there has been shortened a bit

after the events of March 11 (for a month or so after the quake the inn even experienced days when it had no guests at all), guests are now returning.

In terms of statistics, the average room occupancy rate for the month of April (the March rate having



A typical Japanese-style room at Sawanoya

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been 51% due to filled rooms through mid-March) fell below the 50% mark for the first time in thirty years since Sawanoya publicized itself as a “foreigner-friendly” inn. Proprietor Sawa highlighted the point that guests began returning in earnest from May, comprising both repeaters, many of whom have become closely acquainted with the Sawa family, in addition to newcomers. Of the first-timers—who could easily find out the good things on offer and even place reservations via the Internet—most indicated they would like to return again after their delightful experiences at the inn.

The proprietor also stated that since most of its customers were independent travelers who obtained



The Sawa family waves goodbye to two Singaporean guests.

information through guidebooks or other means and decided for themselves where to stay, the mass cancellation of reservations made by agencies had little effect on his inn.

A visit on a typical Monday morning indicated that there were overseas visitors from France, Switzerland, Singapore, the United States and United Kingdom. A guest who has frequented Sawanoya since 1993 is Professor Jean K. Wilcox, stopping over on her way back from Kobe, where during her two and half weeks there with her students from the United

States she found the situation to be the same as always. She said that the news reports being circulated outside of Japan were greatly overblown. She also visited Himeji and discovered things in Kansai to be as normal as could be. The only difference she seemed to notice in Tokyo was that some escalators had been stopped as part of energy-savings efforts adopted to ease the electrical power demand. Dr. Wilcox stated that since staying with the Sawa family was like returning to her second home, given the chance she would again try to stay in Sawanoya before the year was out.

A new visitor coming to Japan after spending three years teaching in Indonesia, a British man named Michael, found his sojourn at Sawanoya to be peaceful, enabling him to sleep well. Michael had always wanted to visit Japan but based on his information sources felt now was the time to see how things were, deciding it was safe. As expected, he found Japan to be a comfortable place to stay. As for this season’s humidity, he smiled and said that after Indonesia, the weather here was not at all a problem.

Another new visitor, a traditional Chinese pharmacy owner Darrel Mok, came on holiday with his wife from Singapore to Japan for the first time. He noted that he had been interested in visiting Japan in spring and found Japan to be fantastic, as he liked the culture, the cleanliness and especially the Japanese people who were very helpful despite the language difference. They were much taken also by the friendliness of the Sawa family and the inn’s facilities. Having visited the Shibuya and Harajuku as well as nearby Ueno and Akihabara shopping districts, they said that they would like to come back again to Sawanoya, next time with their children. 🏠