

FUKUSHIMA CAN'T STOP GROWING TOURISM ANY MORE



The disaster of 2011, an earthquake and successive tsunami, that devastated the Tohoku coastline, killed thousands, and resulted in the worst nuclear crisis in a generation, also brought Japan's tourism industry to its knees. Growing concerns about radiation discouraged scores of tourists from visiting Japan, and in the weeks after the disaster struck, the idea of drawing them in once more seemed impossible. Due to lingering fears about the fallout from Fukushima No. 1, expectations for the number of tourists have been low.

After four years of healing and rebuilding, tourism is now making a comeback. **Last year, Japan welcomed a record-shattering 13.41 million international visitors, which is twice the number of 2011** and over half the 20 million visitors that the Japanese government aspires to attract for the 2020 Summer Olympics. Experts attribute this increase to fading concerns about radiation and the recent drop in the yen's value, which made it more affordable for visitors to come into Japan. This draws in many potential tourists.

Since the Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts to revive the dying economy launched in 2013, the yen's value has dropped 20% compared to the euro and a staggering 40% against the dollar, making things like sushi and sake far more affordable for visitors.

Though many people still conjure up images of tsunami-beaten communities and struggling workers wearing biohazard suits, Japan has progressed a long way since the Fukushima disaster.

According to Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) the lingering stigma that resulted from the disaster is in decline, but has yet to disappear completely. People are beginning to understand that eating and living in Japan are not a problem, because dangerous radiation is limited to restricted areas near the Fukushima power plant. Mamoru Kobori (JNTO official) reported that they have said several times that the radiation in both Tokyo and the other main tourist areas is at "absolutely insignificant" levels.

In the opinion of Akihiro Ota, industry minister, a realistic tourism target is 15 million visitors, which is supported by an expected increase in regional visitors from China, South Korea, and Taiwan due to relaxed visa restrictions. Many of these tourists, he says, will be drawn to luxury boutiques located in Tokyo's Ginza shopping district.

Mika Hatakeyama, the Japan product manager for a noted French tourist agency, Voyageurs du Monde, said that the **top draw-ins for visitors to Japan are cuisine, ryokan inns, and famous hot springs**. She said that tourists who find themselves delighted with Japan's friendliness and hospitality are returning home and telling their friends and family, spreading the positive image of the country. She added that Japan's newfound reputation as a safe travel destination has helped increase sales by 40% since 2013.

Hatakeyama also said that the recent influx of visitors has been a strain to key tourist destinations, including hotels in Kyoto, which are booked to capacity months in advance. Efforts have been made to draw visitors to less popular areas in rural Japan as a result.

Also, the building permit applications have skyrocketed in anticipation of the 2020 Tokyo Games. Tokyo alone anticipates having 10,000 more hotel rooms by the year 2020.

While Japan aims to reach the tourist numbers of Britain and Turkey, which are around 30 million tourists per year, France remains the world leader in tourism, with 80 million yearly visitors.

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