

JAPANESE TOURISM HOPES TO ATTRACT MORE EUROPEANS



Japan tourism is finally growing. The numbers are positive. The experts however point out that the origin of visitors and their choice of stay are still too homogeneous.

It is a figure by which the Japanese tourism authority is quite pleased. While the country is officially targeting 20 million tourists for the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, this threshold has already been reached. **According to data from the National Organization of Japanese Tourism (JNTO), not less than 19.74 million visitors came to the Land of the Rising Sun in 2015.**

The figure represents an increase of 47% compared to 2014 and shows that the target has been reached five years ahead of the original plan.

At first sight, the data are very positive. However, in reality, Japan's emergence on the world tourism map hides huge disparities. On the one hand indeed, there is the "golden route" axis that runs from Tokyo to Osaka, via the mythical Mount Fuji, which captures the essence of the foreign tourist trade.

On the other hand, there is the "underside Japan," poorly connected to the megacities, composed of small-sized towns, lacking attractions despite the local culinary development or spa tourism, an area where Japan has an unrivalled potential on the continent.

Japanese tourism notably benefits from a relatively favorable environment in Asia, where, even if growth remains shaky, there is an emerging middle class ready to travel. This middle class, before dreaming of group travel in Europe, first visits the more accessible Japan.

The numbers speak for themselves about the attraction Asian tourists have to the archipelago. Last year there were + 45.3% Koreans, + 107.3% Chinese visitors, and + 29.9% Taiwanese tourists - the three main sources of foreign tourists. In 2015, as many as 16.37 million Asians visited Japan, representing 83% of foreign visitors.

There is an over-representation of Asian visitors in Japan which tends to render the officials encouraging the development of tourism in Japan uncomfortable. "We are of course very pleased by the number of visitors and by being so attractive to Asian tourists," assured the tourism officials from the prefecture of Hyogo to Figaro, in the center of the island of Honshu, the main archipelago which has one of the biggest tourism potential of the country.

"But it is true that we would rather attract other tourists ... westerners," admitted the office staff. Explanations of this attraction to the "Western" visitors are rather abashed: "Europeans and Americans spend more money, and, as they come from much further away, they stay longer. Also, Asian tourists sometimes come only for shopping, and are less interested in our heritage. This suits Tokyo perhaps, but in rural prefectures, the relationship is more difficult..."

Aware of the difficulty of attracting tourists in remote areas in the same way as the Tokyo area,

Japanese tourism authorities in the regions are trying to play other cards: nature and hot springs, of which the country has more than 3000. They sometimes use astonishing arguments. For example, the village of Misasa, in the very rural Tottori Prefecture, hasn't hesitated to come forward with very bold health statements: their hot springs, containing radium, would benefit the fight against cancer. The municipality even claims that the prevalence of the disease is twice as smaller here as it is in the rest of the country. The hotels in the city can also rely on their high quality service to attract those who want to try this type of "treatment".

These are arguments that, despite the real potential of the Japanese countryside, do not take across borders. Even with the exchange rate, lower airfares, and fall in oil prices, causing costs to lower, for European visitors Japan remains weighed down by high hotel rates. Oddly, it also seems to suffer from an apparent overcapacity regarding hotels in thermal areas where the real estate boom in the 1980s led to the construction of oversized establishments, which often ring hollow in low season. It is also not uncommon to come across more employees than customers. **A context which maintains high tariffs and, despite lower airfares, make the Japanese countryside an expensive destination for European visitors.**

Japan desperately needs these visitors if it wants to develop tourism. The country is still unable to rely on the domestic market to develop its tourism sector. Partly due to a sluggish growth, in turn preventing widespread enrichment and pushing towards more tourism.

Secondly because the Japanese still do not take their twenty days of paid leave (variable according to length of service) to which they are theoretically entitled. Some employees even take 0 days off over the year, other than public holidays. The government was even considering legislating to force workers to take at least five days of paid leave a year, which would boost the sector minima. Tourism's salvation will therefore not be the Japanese themselves. Their only wish is that it doesn't come solely from China.

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