

Guiding Japan Visitors with Firsthand Information

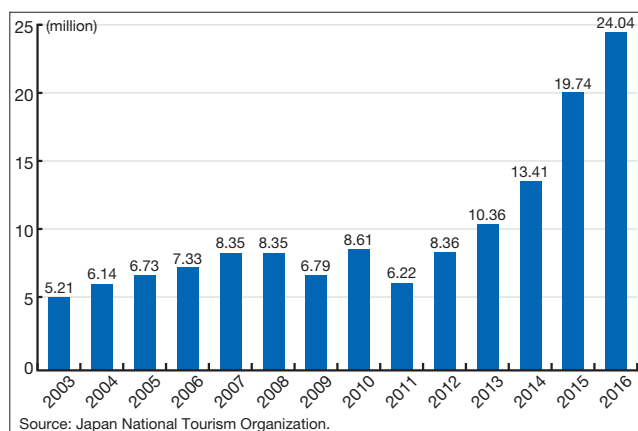
When Stefan Schauwecker launched the site japan-guide.com in July 1996 he was excited to use the Internet, still in its infancy then, to present an unbiased view of the country to a worldwide audience. “In the mid-90s, access to reliable information on Japan was limited, and reports in the media frequently sensationalized stories or reinforced stereotypes,” says the soft-spoken Swiss native. “I wanted to offer a more realistic perspective that reflected what I saw in my travels.”

After more than 20 years of running the site, Schauwecker has built it into one of the most extensive and trusted online sources of English-language information for travelers in Japan. His success is in large part due to an unwavering dedication to providing what he calls “practical details” covering a vast range of topics and destinations. A cadre of around five diligent writers and editors, all of whom are native English speakers, now help create and update the site’s original content, an aspect that distinguishes it from many of its competitors. Team members travel frequently, using their expert knowledge of Japan’s differing regions to sniff out the latest information and uncover new, interesting locations.

Schauwecker, who moved to Japan permanently in 2003, says a lot has changed over the last two decades. “The web has made it easier to find information and make bookings,” he explains, pointing to a growth in Japanese websites offering service in different languages and the emergence of low cost carriers. He insists, however, that the friendliness of locals along with the safety and depth of culture have remained major draws for tourists. “Travelers want to see something they cannot see at home,” he declares, which in Japan can include historical architecture, gourmet dining, shopping, or something as mundane as snow.

He is confident the current boom in travel to Japan will maintain its upward course and he gives high marks to national and local efforts aimed at making travel easier for overseas visitors. These include improving wi-fi access, expanding options for accommodations, and providing foreign-language information. “The government has done a good job at identifying critical elements and taking action on those fronts.”

Number of Foreign Visitors to Japan



Stefan Schauwecker

President of japan-guide.com. Born in Switzerland. After making his first visit to Japan in 1995, he launched japan-guide.com the next year. He has also published several books introducing beautiful Japanese scenery from a foreign perspective.

While an advocate of the “golden route” that includes established destinations such as Tokyo and Kyoto for first-time visitors, Schauwecker hopes more return travelers will seek out the charms of out-of-the-way locales. He points out that the Japanese countryside can give visitors “a genuinely different experience.” One of his top recommendations is a stay at a traditional hot spring inn as guests can enjoy authentic Japanese cuisine, dress, and bathing amid old-style architecture, and impeccable service.

Regardless the destination, though, Schauwecker intends for the site to continue providing top-notch information to help people explore Japan.

Schauwecker introduces several must-see destinations

Hida-Takayama

Set among picturesque mountains in Gifu Prefecture, Takayama offers travelers an exquisite peek into life in rural Japan. Easily accessible by train, the beautifully preserved town is populated by welcoming locals and has scenic streets lined with old-style buildings housing a variety of establishments, including shops selling new and traditional items, sake breweries, and art galleries. Visitors can also take advantage of the area's rich natural surroundings by hiking the many mountain trails. The historic village of Shirakawa-go, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and Okuhida, which boasts some of Japan's nicest outdoor hot spring pools, are also located in the area.



Inside a preserved traditional house in Hida Folk Village, an architectural museum.

Nyuto Hot Springs

Located inside the Towada-Hachimantai National Park, Nyuto Hot Springs in Akita Prefecture is a collection of several rustic hot spring *ryokan*, or traditional inns, that retain the old-fashioned comforts of days gone by. One of these establishments, the 300-year-old Tsurunoyu, still uses gas lamps and has several rooms featuring a sunken hearth called an *iroiri*, making it appear to guests as if they have stepped back into feudal times. The milky white thermal waters of Nyuto are known for their curative powers, and bathers in the area's many outdoor baths may even discover heated artesian percolating directly beneath them as they quietly soak.



Fukuoka Outdoor Food Stalls

Fukuoka's profuse outdoor food stalls, called *yatai*, provide visitors the opportunity to rub elbows with local residents while savoring a variety of simple, tasty dishes. Spread throughout the city, the cozy stands accommodate only a few customers at a time, an arrangement that encourages friendly banter among the closely packed patrons. *Yatai* are generally open from the early evening until the early hours of the morning and serve up a diversity of hearty fare along with sake and other drinks. Popular menu items include such scrumptious selections as grilled chicken skewers, seafood, and pork-bone *tonkotsu* ramen, a local delicacy.

Naoshima Island

Among the scores of quaint islands that dot the beautiful Seto Inland Sea, Naoshima in Kagawa Prefecture presents visitors a unique opportunity to enjoy exquisite works of modern art among charming pastoral scenery. Easily accessible by ferry, it is one of the main venues of the Setouchi Triennale art festival. Even when the event is not being held visitors can visit the island's many museums that feature captivating works of contemporary art by internationally renowned artists. An especially intriguing element of the community is the way in which residents have combined its rural setting and art by converting traditional structures into arthouses.

