

Connecting Travelers With Japan's Regional Stories

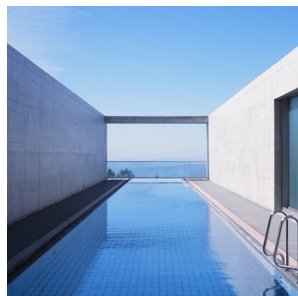
Japan's tourism leaders are reshaping the visitor journey, opening regional gateways, improving access and creating stays rooted in local culture, connection and discovery across Japan.

BY DANIEL DE BOMFORD AND BERNARD THOMPSON

Japan is aiming for 60 million visitors by 2030, and the challenge is how to lead them beyond the well-traveled Golden Route. With over 70 percent of Japan's inbound travelers moving through Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, there's a wealth of regional destinations that are being underserved in itineraries. JALPAK Co., Ltd. is tackling that challenge directly through its platform "Activities JALPAK" that bridges the gaps between the Golden Route and attractions. President and CEO Yoshiya Omura said that Japan already possesses an extraordinary number of experiences, traditions and destinations, alongside those looking to share them. "Our mission is to connect those experiences, create access, support local operators, and transform individual attractions into complete travel experiences," he said. At the same time, Kansai International Airport is opening up Japan's west to curious travelers. Alongside Osaka and Kyoto, Senior Advisor to Kansai Airports Yoshiyuki Yamaya said that nearby Kobe, the greater Hyogo Prefecture and the Seto Inland Sea are becoming increasingly popular. "Because of this diversity of tourism resources, I believe Western Japan offers a depth of experience that is highly valued by inbound travelers, and this has contributed to its growing popularity," he said.

Accommodation must adapt once travelers leave the standard business-hotel model behind; JHAT Co., Ltd. proves that. Its apartment hotels serve families, groups and longer-stay guests who need space and independence. President and

CEO Akira Hirabayashi explained, "Families often need to stay together in one room. They need space, laundry and sometimes a kitchen." The format lets visitors settle into a city and experience Japan at a natural pace. Kaiei Ryokans Group shifts the focus from access to belonging. Its inns use food, craft and local tradition to connect milestone trips with the places where they are celebrated. President Reo Watanabe said, "For me, the true role of a ryokan is allowing guests to experience the local region." The ryokan becomes both accommodation and an expression of community identity. Rather than reproduce a standard model, Onko Chishin builds each hotel concept from local culture, landscape and people. CEO Tomoki Matsuyama said, "We aim to become a hotel group that represents Japan." Its purpose is to reveal the country's regional depth through stays that could exist nowhere else. Hotel Mikazuki closes the arc by carrying a Japanese resort philosophy overseas. In Da Nang, it has adapted its family-centered mix of bathing, recreation and cultural experience for local and international guests. Chairman Yoshimune Odaka said, "Our concept was to create a destination that could serve as a base for sharing Japanese culture." Regional expertise becomes a form of hospitality that can travel.



Onko Chishin: Storyteller of Hidden Japan

Through a portfolio of concept-driven retreats and culturally rooted properties, Onko Chishin curates immersive narratives that connect guests with the history, people and untold stories of each destination.

BY DANIEL DE BOMFORD, CIAN O'NEILL AND BERNARD THOMPSON

ONKO
CHISHIN 田
温故知新

With 15 destination properties across Japan, Onko Chishin offers a unique experience for travelers seeking the authentic side of Japan. Its philosophy, "Find the Light. Polish it. Pass it on," embodies its approach. Each property is unique and is defined by the irreplaceable craftsmanship, cuisine and landscape of its surrounds. Its RETREAT SELECTION was shaped around sanctuaries of stillness, rooted in architecture, onsen and regional cuisine. SETOUCHI RETREAT AONAGI, designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Tadao Ando and a MICHELIN Key holder (2024 and 2025), is a seven-suite property that offers guests serene spa experiences, locally sourced cuisine and thoughtful spaces punctuated by contemporary art. ASO RETREAT HONO, opening in November 2026 within Aso-Kuju National Park in Kumamoto, is a 17-room retreat shaped by the volcanic landscape of the Aso caldera. Guests experience a direct connection with the land through seasonal foraging, an edible garden of more than 30 native Aso plants and cuisine that traces the region's water and ingredients from mountain to coast.



<https://by-onko-chishin.com/en>

Shaping a New Journey



Explore Japan Through Kansai International Airport

As Japan builds tourism into a pillar of national growth, Kansai International Airport is positioning Western Japan as a richer, better-connected alternative to a single-city visit.

BY DANIEL DE BOMFORD, CIAN O'NEILL AND QUENTIN LANGE

Morning light moves across the tiled roofs of Kyoto, catches the river in Osaka and reaches the cedar paths of Wakayama before the day has properly begun. In Kansai, Japan feels close at hand. A traveler can land by the sea, board a train from Kansai International Airport and be among Kyoto's temples, Osaka's food streets, Nara's ancient shrines or Wakayama's pilgrimage trails in the same day. Today, inbound travel has become a vital part of Japan's growth strategy, bringing international spending directly into local communities. "Japan has had to reconsider how it generates economic value," Yoshiyuki Yamaya, senior adviser at Kansai Airports, said. "In that context, inbound tourism has become extremely important." When Kansai International Airport opened in 1994, Japan still expected strong growth in outbound travel, and the airport was designed in part to serve Japanese travelers heading abroad. The years that followed changed that picture. Japan's economic bubble had burst, and outbound demand softened. The turning point came as Japan began placing greater emphasis on tourism, followed by the privatization of airport operations in 2016. For Kansai Airports, the change reshaped the airport's role. Once primarily serving Japanese airlines, it has begun welcoming all airlines to its runways. That openness has helped reposition Kansai International Airport as one of Japan's most practical gateways for inbound travelers. Its strongest advantage is geography. Kyoto, one of the world's great cultural destinations, is far closer to Osaka than to Tokyo. From there, the region forms a natural travel circuit. Kyoto offers temples, gardens, traditional inns and craftsmanship shaped over centuries. Osaka brings the energy of a major city, with



food culture, shopping and an easy warmth that international visitors often remember long after leaving. Yamaya pointed to the character of Osaka itself, where "people are very approachable and willing to engage with visitors." Nara adds ancient capitals, Buddhist landmarks and open parkland, while Wakayama brings sacred mountain routes, hot springs and coastal scenery into the same itinerary. Together, Kyoto, Osaka, Nara and Wakayama give travelers a route that feels rich without feeling difficult. It suits first-time visitors who want the essentials of Japan, as well as repeat travelers looking beyond the familiar Tokyo-centered journey. Kansai Airports is also looking farther west. Yamaya said the goal is not to keep visitors in one place but to help them move more freely across Japan. "We do not aim to monopolize passengers," he said. "Our objective is to increase the total number of visitors to Japan as a whole." Better links among airports, railways and ground transport can connect Osaka with Hiroshima, the Seto Inland Sea, Shikoku, Fukuoka and other destinations across Western Japan. Long-haul markets are central to that future. Travelers from Europe and North America have traditionally entered Japan through Tokyo, but Kansai offers a direct and efficient alternative for those focused on Kyoto, Osaka and the wider west. For inbound travelers, the message is simple: Western Japan no longer needs to be an extension of a Tokyo itinerary. Through Kansai, it can be the place where the journey begins.



 **KIX DUTY FREE**



"If you want to come to Kyoto or Osaka, KIX can be the choice."

Yoshiyuki Yamaya
Senior Advisor, Kansai Airports.

<https://www.kansai-airports.co.jp/en/>





JALPAK: Discover Japan off the Beaten Track

Roughly 70 percent of Japan's inbound visitors never leave Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. JALPAK President and CEO Yoshiya Omura is determined to change that, one hidden experience at a time.

BY QUENTIN LANGE AND KYANN EDOUARD

Picture a dawn sumo training session, the thud of wrestlers echoing through a Tokyo stable before the city wakes or the deep blue of the Pacific off Shimoda, where hammerhead sharks circle a reef near Mikomoto Island. These experiences exist, are world-class and are almost entirely invisible to the international traveler. That invisibility is precisely the problem that Yoshiya Omura, president and CEO of JALPAK Co., Ltd., has made his company's mission to solve. The geography of the tourism boom is skewed for inbound travelers. "Roughly 70 percent of inbound demand is concentrated in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto," Omura said. JALPAK, a member of the JAL Group, sits at the intersection of two objectives: drawing more visitors and guiding them deeper into Japan's regions to explore its hidden gems. Algorithmic travel planning has a structural blind spot. Recommendation engines surface only what is already richly documented online, which means they reliably reproduce the same Golden Route itineraries. "AI cannot recommend what is not sufficiently represented in its data," Omura said. The experiences curated through Activities JALPAK, from rural artisan workshops to world-class diving experiences, often lack that digital footprint entirely. JALPAK's edge is its ability to leverage the JAL Group's domestic network and unique expertise to seamlessly combine transportation, accommodation and experiences, thereby guiding international visitors to regional Japan and providing them with richer nature and valuable cultural experiences. The company's strategic pivot centers on a concept called Tabinaka, a Japanese term for everything that occurs after a traveler lands. "Tabinaka is about suggesting how travelers can spend their time at their destination and designing their entire travel narrative rather than simply selling an individual activity," Omura explained. Through a dedicated platform, JALPAK does not merely offer individual sightseeing experiences but rather produces the entire journey and constructs it as a holistic destination experience that brings deep emotion to travelers while driving sustainable economic value to local regions. When those connections align, he argues that sustainable tourism value is generated by delivering this new travel paradigm.

JALPAK



"The challenge is not creating new attractions. The challenge is making existing attractions accessible, discoverable, and meaningful for international travelers."

Yoshiya Omura
President and CEO, JALPAK Co., Ltd.



<https://www.activities.jalpak.co.jp>



Anniversary Ryokans Showcase Japan's Regional Culture

Kaiei Ryokans turns milestone celebrations into immersive stays shaped by local food, traditions, craftsmanship and regional Japanese hospitality.

BY DANIEL DE BOMFORD, CIAN O'NEILL AND BERNARD THOMPSON

Kaiei Ryokans Group has built its hospitality around a simple idea: A ryokan can be where life's important moments are remembered. Under its "Anniversary Ryokans" concept, the group welcomes guests celebrating birthdays, weddings, family milestones and long-awaited journeys, while introducing them to the culture of Japan's regional destinations.

President Reo Watanabe sees the ryokan as more than a place to sleep. "For me, the true role of a ryokan is allowing guests to experience the local region," he said. That belief shapes the group's approach across its properties, where local ingredients, traditions, craftsmanship and community ties are central to the stay.

In Ise, Mie Prefecture, Tsukiyominoza offers villas inspired by the changing beauty of the moon. Each villa is designed as a private



"The deeper purpose of the ryokan is its connection to the local area."

Reo Watanabe,
President, Kaiei Ryokans Group.



<https://www.kaiei-ryokans.com/>



retreat, with private open-air hot spring baths and a setting connected to the spiritual atmosphere of Ise. The property was recognized as "Highly Comfortable" in the Michelin Guide Aichi, Gifu & Mie 2019 Special Edition.

In Matsuyama, Ehime Prefecture, Okudogo Ichiyu No Mori's Villa Tsubonakagawa offers a different expression of regional hospitality. The private villa features traditional Japanese architecture and access to a heliport, making it suited to exclusive itineraries through western Japan.

For Kaiei, anniversaries are not treated as fixed packages. Watanabe said, "Every guest is differ-

ent. There is no single anniversary package that applies to everyone." Instead, staff seek to understand what each guest is marking and how the ryokan can become part of that memory.

The same thinking guides Kaiei's view of Japan's tourism future. As travelers move beyond Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, Watanabe believes regional inns have a larger role to play. "The future is not simply about increasing visitor numbers," he said. "It is about providing meaningful experiences."

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海栄RYOKANS



CONTENT BY THE WORLDFOLIO

Mikazuki Takes Japanese Hospitality Global



In Vietnam's coastal city of Da Nang, Mikazuki is reimagining family holidays through Japanese hospitality, wellness and all-in-one resort leisure.

BY [CIAN O'NEILL AND QUENTIN LANGE](#)

As the sun rises over the sandy beaches of Da Nang, Vietnam, three generations of the same family rise for the first of many unforgettable days. In just four years, Da Nang Mikazuki Japanese Resorts and Spa has grown into a truly international destination, drawing 790,000 visitors a year from 105 countries.

Established in 1961, Hotel Mikazuki Group's hospitality identity has been shaped by spa hotels, hot-spring leisure and family-oriented resort stays. Chairman Yoshimune Odaka said the group's hotels are designed around families, especially multigenerational ones. "We wanted to create places where grandparents, parents and children could all enjoy themselves together." Facilities such as onsen baths are developed with children in mind, with a focus on creating memorable experiences.

This philosophy was honed at Ryugujo Spa Hotel Mikazuki on Tokyo Bay, home to the group's "stay-and-play" model, and its entry into Vietnam is a natural extension:

decades of expertise in large leisure complexes where lodging, bathing, pools, dining and entertainment are part of the stay. With cultural activities, entertainment and local family-friendly experiences all on its doorstep, Da Nang is the ideal base for Hotel Mikazuki.

Bringing the Mikazuki Model to Vietnam

When the group entered Da Nang, the city already had 17 five-star hotels in operation. That number has since grown to 30, intensifying competition in one of Vietnam's most active coastal tourism markets. Odaka saw that the only path to success was to differentiate the resort from global hotel brands.

Spanning 13 hectares, Da Nang Mikazuki is the largest investment ever made by a Japanese company, whose land-use rights were secured through an unprecedented verbal bidding process, a first for a Japanese company. Its leadership is just as international—the general director is Korean and the general manager is British, together lead-

ing a team of around 550 staff. "Our concept was to create a destination that could serve as a base for sharing Japanese culture while still appealing to international travelers and local guests," he said. "We wanted to build facilities that existing hotels did not already have, make them high quality and then offer them at pricing that represented strong value."

Da Nang Mikazuki now has 308 rooms and runs at around 75 percent occupancy, with demand outstripping capacity on close to 100 days a year, forcing the resort to turn guests away. That is why Mikazuki is adding 139 rooms, with a goal of 1 million annual visitors. One pillar of the expansion is wellness tourism: exporting Japanese-style health screenings, using all-Japanese medical equipment, to Vietnam—allowing Japanese residents in Asia and affluent travelers to receive Japan-standard checkups without having to travel to Japan.

In June 2026, Mikazuki's villas were reborn under a new concept, Mikazuki Villas – The Ryokan. Blending contemporary luxury with traditional Japanese aesthetics, it is Da Nang's first true Japanese-style villa retreat. Each spacious villa comes with



Mikazuki villas - The Ryokan



its own private pool, offering a tranquil setting and the whole-hearted hospitality of omotenashi. Underpinning this drive is a culture that hands real decision-making power to people on the ground, even for activity investments exceeding \$1 million, encouraging every employee to take on new challenges. The best coach stands at the front when facing questions after a loss, but steps to the back during the championship celebration. Odaka leads the same way: he takes the responsibility, while his team receives the glory.

As the family sets off for the day, Mikazuki's philosophy comes into focus. A holiday should not ask grandparents, parents and children to choose between rest and activity, comfort and culture, value and quality. It should make room for all of it. That is what the group has spent decades refining in Japan and brought to Vietnam with greater ambition. This Phase 2 expansion, linking hotel, villas, wellness and the local economy, is more than new rooms: it is the next test of how far Japanese hospitality can evolve beyond Japan's shores.



MONday Group Builds Japan Travel Gateway



JHAT's MONday Group is expanding apartment-style hotels—purpose-built for the way families and groups actually travel: longer stays, with the space, kitchens and laundry an extended trip needs—across Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and beyond. **BY BERNARD THOMPSON AND LISA KAYASTHA**

For Akira Hirabayashi, president of JHAT Co., Ltd., a structural shift in Japanese accommodation was long overdue. As Tokyo grew into a global city, its hotels naturally catered to business travelers: compact, short-stay rooms built for one. Hirabayashi had spent his career on the traveler's side of the desk as a president at one of Japan's largest travel agencies and saw what much of the industry had missed: there was almost nowhere for families to stay. "When foreign travelers started coming to Japan in larger numbers, I realized there weren't enough places for them, especially in Tokyo and Osaka," he said. "Families want to stay together in one room. They need space, laundry, sometimes a kitchen."

That guest, the inbound family or group staying for multiple nights or months, is who MONday is built for. In 2018, he founded JHAT to close that gap, building the MONday Group of apartment-style hotels.

The name carries its mission: MON is the Japanese character for "gate" (門)—the group aims to be both the gateway into Japan and a comfortable home away from home once you arrive. For Hirabayashi, alongside comfortable, well-equipped suites, MONday places equal weight on

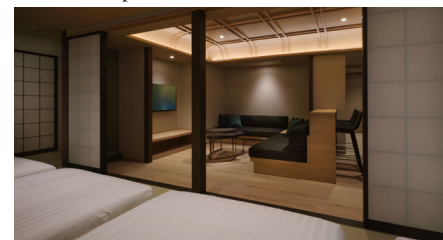
omotenashi—hospitality delivered by people. That focus has been recognized: in 2026, six MONday Group properties earned a place in TripAdvisor's Travelers' Choice "Best of the Best," among the top hotels chosen by travelers worldwide. He reads the awards as a sign that travelers value the warmth of the staff as much as the space itself.

The GRAND MONday series is the fullest expression of this idea. At the flagship GRAND MONday GINZA, and across the series, each suite starts at 37 m² and comfortably sleeps five to six. Because guests stay longer; each suite is built to be lived in: a full-size refrigerator; a washer-dryer and a kitchen handle the practicalities of a multi-night stay away from home. Around that everyday function, the rooms set new and old Japan side by side, with Kutani-ware tea sets and washi-paper lighting drawn from centuries of craft, and global favorites like Nespresso and Simmons mattresses tying it together; so guests feel at home even while living like a local.

That same philosophy takes a different form in TABI, MONday Group's design-led line. Where GRAND MONday is built around family space, TABI offers a refined,

Zen-inspired stay for couples and smaller groups, offering the same MONday comfort, distilled into a calmer aesthetic. That responsibility extends to the environment. Sustainability runs through the group's everyday operations with water-saving fixtures that sharply cut consumption to careful resource sorting and "a Second Life," a circular program in which items guests no longer need are collected and returned to the community rather than discarded. Guests on longer stays can also opt for resource-conscious housekeeping. Small shared choices, MONday believes, add up to a more sustainable way to travel.

The group is growing quickly. With 36 properties across Japan's major cities, including the new 140-room GRAND MONday Resort TOKYO BAY MAIHAMA, MONday Group has around 30 more properties in the pipeline through 2027. Its sights are now turning to Japan's regions, so that MONday becomes not just the gateway into the country but the path through it. Hirabayashi wants MONday to be the first name travelers think of. "A MONday apartment is more than a place to sleep," he says. "It's your home in the city you've come to explore."



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