

Japan This Week in Asia / Economics

Japan's Ginza Onsen limits day trippers to tackle overtourism and safety concerns

The town, popularised by the film "Spirited Away", has seen a surge in visitors, leading to congestion, confrontations, and even ambulance access issues

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The picturesque mountain town of Ginza Onsen plans to impose a cap on day trippers as it struggles to deal with an influx of tourists, the latest Japanese city forced to take action to deal with overtourism that is threatening to overwhelm the community.

While the problem of too many visitors is well-known in places such as Kyoto, Kamakura, and Hiroshima, it is particularly severe in this 400-year-old town in Yamagata Prefecture, which has designated certain areas as vehicle-free. Unfortunately, the remaining narrow roads have previously made it difficult for ambulances to reach individuals needing medical care due to congestion.

On November 14, the Ginza Onsen Association announced new traffic restrictions starting December 23 and lasting until early March. These restrictions coincide with winter, which is the busiest season for the town, as many foreign visitors come to experience the region's renowned deep snowfall.



A cold, snowy winter evening in Ginza Onsen. Photo: Shutterstock

The town has also become popular among [social media](#) influencers, in part because the area is believed to have inspired the hugely popular 2001 Hayao Miyazaki animated film *Spirited Away*.

Visitors will be required to park and take a shuttle bus to the town. Starting at 5pm, the number of day trippers will be limited to 100 per hour.

The association has been exploring various solutions to this issue since 2013. However, the situation has worsened in recent years as tourist numbers soared, even leading to confrontations among visitors jostling for photos.

Local residents have also been unable to rescue people stuck in snow drifts and have been met with "unbearably abusive comments" by visitors, one town official said.



The first hurdle for Ginza Onsen is to find ways to get people to stay the night, eat in local restaurants and use the onsen

— Naomi Mano, travel agent

"I think that in this case, the local people do not have much choice but to impose some sort of cap on the number of people who are arriving," said Naomi Mano, president and CEO of high-end inbound travel firm Luxuriq.

"The first hurdle for a town like Ginza Onsen is to find ways to get people to stay the night, eat in the local restaurants and use the onsen," she told This Week in Asia. "If the short-term visitors are not restricted, then that means the people who are paying more to stay do not get to enjoy the money they are spending because it is too crowded."

The result of that might be that people choose to go elsewhere, threatening local residents' livelihoods.

Ginza Onsen is not alone in dealing with an overwhelming number of tourists, Mano said, but each community must find its own solution.

That pressure is increasing, with the [Japan National Tourism Organisation \(JNTO\)](#) announcing on Wednesday that a record 3.31 million visitors arrived in October, up from 2.87 million in September and even surpassing the all-time monthly record of 3.29 million arrivals in July.

This brings the total overseas arrivals this year to 30.2 million, just shy of the pre-pandemic record of 31.9 million in 2019.

The travel industry is also becoming increasingly important to the national economy. Travellers spent 5.86 trillion yen (US\$37.8 billion) in the first nine months of 2024, surpassing the 5.3 trillion yen they spent in all of 2023.

However, this surge in tourism is putting significant pressure on an unprepared sector.

The prefectural government of Shizuoka is planning to introduce a fee of up to 5,000 yen for anyone wanting to climb Mount Fuji, following in the footsteps of Yamanashi Prefecture, which introduced a fee this summer and restricted the number of people on the mountain's hiking routes.

Earlier this year, tourists were banned from the narrow streets of Kyoto's Gion district due to obstructing Japan's famous geishas while taking photos, with some even trying to touch their hair ornaments or kimonos.

Elsewhere, a new fee of 100 yen has been introduced for anyone setting foot on the holy island of Miyajima, near Hiroshima, known for the Unesco-listed Itsukushima Shrine and its towering "torii" gate in the bay. Additionally, there has been controversy over a plan to sharply increase the price of entry to the world-famous [Himeji Castle](#), but only for foreign tourists.

In June, the mayor of the town of Himeji suggested the price of entry for Japanese visitors remain at around US\$5, while the fee for international visitors would rise to US\$30. An estimated 1.48 million people visited the castle in 2023, with about 30 per cent being foreign nationals.



Himeji Castle has overlooked the town of the same name for seven centuries. Photo: Shutterstock

Ashley Harvey, a travel marketing analyst who has worked in Japan's travel sector for more than 15 years, says dual pricing can be a beneficial strategy for iconic locations that are presently overcrowded as tourists take advantage of the historically weak yen.

Regarding Mount Fuji, he suggests that the proposed prices are too low and that the high number of climbers is causing damage.

"I also see Mount Fuji as being symbolic to the people of Japan, whereas for foreign visitors it is just a mountain that they want to be able to say they climbed," he added. "I think there needs to be a system that gives priority to Japanese who want to climb the mountain because it is an important part of their culture."

It is a similar situation at Ginza Onsen, he said.

"I do not see what choice they have," he said. "Day trippers contribute very little to the local economy and if ambulances are being conducted from getting through then clearly large numbers of tourists are causing a danger to themselves as well as local people."



Julian Ryall [+FOLLOW]

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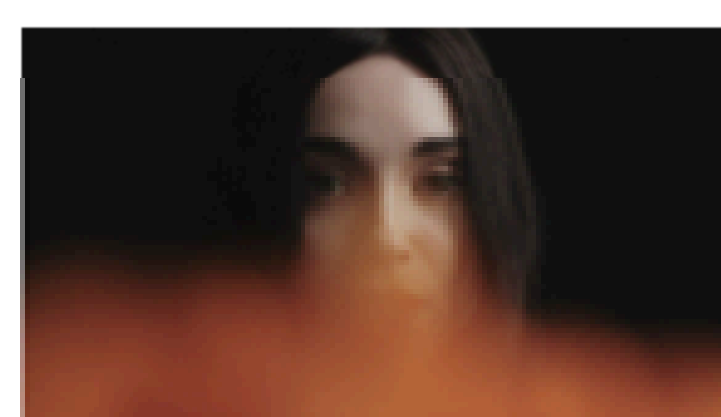
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