

This Week in Asia / People

JAPAN TRAVEL SECTOR CHEERS AS CHINESE TOUR GROUPS RETURN, BUT OVERCROWDING CONCERNS REMAIN

- Before the pandemic, Chinese travellers were a major driver of Japan's tourism sector, accounting for around 30 per cent of all foreign arrivals
- There are some concerns, that with the return of Chinese travellers to Japan, there will also be a return to overcrowded tourist attractions



 **Julian Ryall** [+ FOLLOW](#)

Published: 9:30am, 11 Aug 2023

 Why you can trust SCMP



China is resuming Japan-bound tour groups following a 3-year ban due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Photo: Kyodo

Japan's travel industry has welcomed the news that [China](#) lifted its ban on tour groups to the country after a three-year [Covid-19](#) hiatus, but some fear old concerns of overcrowding may return.

The Chinese embassy in Tokyo informed Japan's foreign ministry on Wednesday of its [decision on tour groups](#). [Independent Chinese travellers](#) have been permitted to visit since April. An estimated 134,400 Chinese arrived in May, an increase of roughly 660 per cent from the same month last year, but still well short of figures before the health crisis.

Some 9.59 million Chinese visited Japan in 2019, the last full year before the pandemic impacted global travel. That figure accounted for around 30 per cent of all foreign arrivals, with Chinese spending 1.77 trillion yen (US\$12.3 billion), nearly 37 per cent of all foreign tourists' spending.

While Japan's travel firms will undoubtedly welcome Chinese tour groups, there are some concerns, notably around a return to overcrowded tourist attractions in the top destinations of Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, as well as staff shortages and limitations to tourism infrastructure.

Packages are typically aimed at less adventurous first-time visitors and tend to focus on the most popular cities and sights. There is a connected fear that other destinations will miss out on the tourism windfall, in spite of government efforts to get more visitors into the more far-flung parts of Japan.

"Our tourism industry is tiny in comparison to somewhere like Kyoto, and I'm not sure that relaxing the rules on Chinese tour groups will have a direct impact on the number of people coming to Tokushima," said Yuuki Bando, the owner of the Bang-Do travel guiding and translation business in Tokushima City, on Shikoku Island.

"Perhaps we will benefit because crowded cities will encourage some travellers to go somewhere else, where there are fewer tourists, while second-time visitors who like what they saw the first time will want to go to a new place," she added.

Japan

[+ FOLLOW](#)

Get more with myNEWS

A personalised news feed of stories that matter to you

[Learn more](#) →















But Naomi Mano, president and CEO of high-end inbound travel firm Luxurique, said her firm had noticed a shift in the profile of wealthy Chinese travellers.

“The return of Chinese tourists presents a huge opportunity for Japan, not just in the sheer number of travellers, but also their growing maturity as globetrotters,” said Mano.

“We have noticed that they are more open to exploring new cities, not just the normal package tours,” she said.

“After the restrictions of the coronavirus, I think the Chinese have become more aware of their individuality and their own personal interests,” she said. “This, we hope, will in turn help Japan to expand the types of tours that are available.”



Pre-pandemic, the Chinese were the gasoline in Japan’s tourism engine

Naomi Mano, travel agent



Ashley Harvey, a travel marketing analyst who has worked in Japan’s travel sector for more than 15 years, said the return of Chinese tour groups was welcome, but Japan needed to step up to the challenges that an uptick in tourist numbers would bring.

“Pre-pandemic, the Chinese were the gasoline in Japan’s tourism engine,” he said. “Independent Chinese travellers have been back in Japan for some months, but now they are going to be coming back in far larger numbers, the question is where are they going to go?”

“The supply-side shortages in Japan are extreme, even in major cities that should be able to cope, and include tour bus drivers, guides, hotel staff, translators and so on,” he said. “And places like Kyoto are already rammed.”

Harvey agrees there is “massive pent-up demand” for Japan as a destination, but worries that the people needed to support the existing tourism infrastructure are not in place “and are not likely to be ready even in 2024”.

“It’s great that Chinese tourists are coming back, but I worry that this is just going to compound the existing problems and I fear that the tourists will get the blame – when it really is not their fault,” he added.

