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Story by AFP • 23h • 3 min read



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Japan aims to attract a yearly 60 million tourists by 2030. Photo: Kazuhiro NOGI / AFP
Source: AFP

Record numbers of tourists flocked to Japan last year, figures showed Wednesday, as the weak yen bolstered the appeal of the "bucket list" destination despite overcrowding complaints in hotspots like Kyoto.

The country logged more than 36.8 million tourist arrivals in 2024, topping 2019's record of nearly 32 million, according to estimates from the Japan National Tourism Organization.



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It marks a return to a boom that began over a decade ago before being interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, with numbers up more than four-fold from 2012.

That is partly thanks to government policies to promote attractions from Mount Fuji's majestic slopes to shrines and sushi bars in more far-flung parts of the archipelago.



Authorities say they want to spread sightseers more evenly around the country. Photo: Kazuhiro NOGI / AFP Source: AFP

Another factor is the cheap yen, which has plunged against other currencies over the past three years, making everything from a bowl of ramen to a handmade Japanese kitchen knife more affordable.

Japan has long been a "bucket list" destination for many people, said Naomi Mano, president of hospitality and events company Luxurique.



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But it's "prime time because at the moment it's like Japan is on a 30 percent off sale", Mano told AFP.

Double trouble?

The government has set an ambitious target of almost doubling tourist numbers to 60 million annually by 2030.

Authorities say they want to spread sightseers more evenly around the country, and to avoid a bottleneck of visitors eager to snap spring cherry blossoms or vivid autumn colours.



Japan has long been a 'bucket list' destination for many people. Photo: Nicholas SHEARMAN / AFP Source: AFP

But as in other global tourist magnets like Venice in Italy, there has been growing pushback from residents in destinations such as the ancient capital of Kyoto.

The tradition-steeped city, just a couple of hours from Tokyo on the bullet train, is famed for its kimono-clad geisha performers and increasingly crowded Buddhist temples.

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Locals have complained of disrespectful tourists harassing the geisha in a frenzy for photos, as well as causing traffic congestion and littering.

In a bid to improve the situation -- and cash in -- Kyoto on Tuesday announced plans to hike lodging taxes "to realise 'sustainable tourism' with a high level of satisfaction for citizens, tourists and businesses".

"If there's a burden on the infrastructure, I do think taxing tourists is a good idea" but Kyoto must find the "right balance", Australian tourist Larry Cooke, 21, told AFP.

Capsule executives

Exasperated officials have also taken steps elsewhere, including introducing an entry fee and a daily cap on the number of hikers climbing Mount Fuji.

Last year a barrier was briefly erected outside a convenience store to stop people standing in the road to photograph a view of the snow-capped volcano that had gone viral.



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Several managers told AFP they are seeking cheaper alternatives, from Airbnb lets to Japan's famously claustrophobic capsule hotels.

IT company chief Yoshiki Kojima told AFP that he had chosen one with slightly more comfortable bed-sized pods that his employees had liked.

"It's clean, convenient and has a traditional shared bath house. My

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Economy

The economic benefits are clear, however, with experts noting that tourism is now second only to vehicle exports in terms of earnings.



The economic benefits of tourism are clear. Photo: Philip FONG / AFP Source: AFP

Japan, population 124 million, still receives far fewer tourists than top destination France, which has a population of 68 million and welcomed 100 million visitors in 2023.

So its overtourism woes are mainly because the influx "is centred around specific cities", Luxurique's Mano said.

For example, the number of foreign visitors to Tokyo has doubled since 2019, and was up 1.5 times in Osaka.

But Mano thinks the government can take steps to change this by promoting other parts of Japan and "making it easier to access -- having more information available, being able to book activities in other rural areas."

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