The Silver Age of Travel

The Japanese tourism industry is gearing up to accommodate an increasing number of older tourists. **Tony McNicol** packs a rucksack and investigates.

In the historic city of Kamakura near Yokohama, the thatched roof of Sugimoto-dera temple nestles under a canopy of early summer greenery. A steady stream of visitors ascends the steep steps to the temple to arrive panting in the tranquil courtyard. After catching their breath, they approach the altar to make their prayers. The temple is stop number one on the Bandou pilgrimage of thirty-three Buddhist holy places. On a busy day as many as a thousand people will come here, and according to temple staff, visitor numbers are slowly increasing. Most of the visitors are men and women of around retirement age.

Japan's temples aren't the only tourist spots welcoming more and more elderly sightseers. Over the next few years, 7 million Japanese baby boomers born between 1947 and 1949 will start to retire. The tourism industry is one of a number of industries vying for a share of an estimated 7.7 trillion yen (67.5 billion dollars) in pension money and nest eggs. "It's definitely true that the travel companies can sense an opportunity," says Koga Manabu, director of the Japan Tourism Association Research Institute.

Travel agents are already taking advantage of demographic change with pilgrimage tours for the elderly. Of the hundreds of ancient pilgrimages on the Japanese archipelago, by far the most popular is the eighty-eight-temple pilgrimage on the southern island of Shikoku. Last year an estimated 150,000 people completed the circular route, many as part of large organized tours. Their average age was sixty or seventy years old. "There have always been a lot of elderly pilgrims, but now there are more and more," says Fuchikawa Hounin of the Shikoku 88 Holy Places Association.

In fact it's rather apt that pilgrimage tour companies will benefit from Japan's aging society, as the roots of the tourism industry itself are closely connected to pilgrimage. Back in the Edo period (1603–1867), a trip to the Ise-jingu shrine in central Japan was one of the few ways ordinary people could get permission to travel. Another was to visit one of Japan's thousands of natural hot springs. During the agricultural slack season, groups of farmers would make long stays in hot springs for relaxation and recuperation. The tradition lasted until around the middle of the last century.

Japan's modern domestic tourism industry was also built on hot springs, literally. Sprawling concrete complexes catered for hundreds-strong groups who ate together in giant dining rooms, bathed together in the resort's baths, and laid out their futons in communal rooms. Yet now, hit by recession and a drop in corporate entertainment budgets, the large hot spring resorts are almost empty. The industry is catering to couples and small groups of friends rather than giant tour groups. "The Japanese tourism industry needs to provide products to meet individual needs," says the Japan Tourism Association's Koga. Travel agents are now endeavoring to provide a wider range of themed travel to match individual needs, interests, and budgets, including packages designed to appeal to baby boomers.

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—Hashiya Satoru, Kinki Nippon Tourist

In May, large Japanese travel company Kinki Nippon Tourist held a meeting with sixty-six hoteliers from the area surrounding Tokyo. They discussed a planned range of travel packages specially for next year's retirees. KNT Planning Department Manager Satoru Hashiya says that the decline in the tourist market has left hotels struggling to fill their rooms. But rather than reducing prices still further, KNT wants to find a way to add "something extra." Instead of cheap, one-size-fits-all packages, they will provide holidays tailored to individual interests and charge a little more. What will the extra somethings be? "That's a secret,"

TONY McNICOL

Retirees ascend the steps at Sugimoto-dera, Kamakura.

says Hashiya. The packages won't go on sale until October this year.

However, Hashiya does give a few hints. He points to baby boomers' interest in learning and the recent popularity of qualifications in local history and knowledge. In 2005 over 13,000 people took an examination on the city of Kyoto. The *Asahi shimbun* newspaper reports that seventeen tests have been set up to date and that twenty-two new tests are scheduled to hold their first examinations this and next year. Cultural and study-based tours are one possibility. "Up to now, if the holiday package had 'history' or 'culture' in the title, people would shy away. It sounded too much like hard work," Hashiya says. "We think that baby boomers are different."

Return to the Country

Another innovative kind of tourism with a draw for older travelers is eco-tourism. The Organization for Urban-Rural Interchange Revitalization was set up five years ago to encourage rural tourism, including eco-tourism. The Organization operates a small travel agency in Tokyo and maintains a database of 540 places to stay where eco-tourists can participate in activities such as picking wild edible plants, rice transplanting, making buckwheat noodles, and milking goats.

Many of Japan's baby boomers already have a strong connection with the countryside. About half were born in the country and went to work in the big cities during Japan's rapid postwar growth. As they reach retirement age, many consider joining the sizeable "U-turn" movement of country-born city-dwellers returning to their roots. Yet, even if they want to go back to live in the country, their family's land has often gone to older siblings, and there is little suitable employment for the many young retirees who want to keep working.

According to Department Manager Chihara Hiroaki, eco-tourism may be the answer. Baby boomers can make short trips to the countryside to experience the country life and learn. "It's a kind of study," he says. "They can see traditional festivals, learn about agriculture by trying it themselves." Visitors bring much needed tourist income to Japan's depopulated rural areas. Many build a strong relationship with local people and return to the same area year after year.

Meanwhile, other green-fingered city-dwellers are organizing less formal varieties of eco-tourism. Retired newspaper journalist Miyazaki Takanori has been visiting an agricultural village near Tokyo for the last twelve years with a group of friends. He describes their trips as "hobby agriculture." On their twice-monthly visits they grow rice and vegetables, enjoy the scenery and exercise, and find an "escape from everyday life," says Miyazaki. "The natural environment there is much better than the everyday environment we live in," he says. "There are fields and rice paddies, greenery, woods and forests . . . it's the complete opposite to Tokyo."

TONY McNICOL

A silver pilgrim rests a while at Sugimoto-dera, the first stop on the Bandou pilgrimage route.

We can expect a variety of innovative travel products targeted at older travelers to appear over the next few years. Though, at the same time, whether 2007's baby boomers will go for those products remains to be seen. "I wonder if they will take part in tours set up by travel companies," says the Japan Tourism Association's Koga. "It's possible that they may just do their own thing."

If anything is sure though, it's that Japan's baby boomers will decide for themselves how to make the most of their retirement years. "I think they are going to be proactive and find their own individual styles of travel," says Koga. "There are baby boomers who go surfing. They are the kind of people who do lots of different things."

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