



365 DAYS

LATER

One year after the tsunami, an Australian tourism leader calls for greater support to help the devastated parts of Japan make full recoveries

BY JOHN KING

Chairman of the Japan Association of Travel Agents (JATA) Akira Kanai, pledging on behalf of the travel and tourism industry to assist in the rapid recovery from the tragic events of March 11, spoke last April of the “dynamic power of travel”.

Among the roles he saw for tourism were helping the affected communities keep their spirits up, shoring up their economies and promoting travel to areas whose communities have been profoundly affected by the huge earthquake and subsequent tsunami.

As part of the role being played by tourism, the Japanese government invited myself, a well-known Australian tourism industry leader and PATA member, to visit Tokyo and two of the affected prefectures in mid-November. During the visit I met with high-level government representatives and tourism promotion and industry organisations, and also visited Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures, two of the three worst-hit areas by the quake and tsunami.

Both prefectures are famed for their gorgeous geography of mountains, lakes, islands and coasts complemented by history and



(Top) A panorama of the devastation following the March 11 tsunami in Ishinomaki Miyagi prefecture with some of the estimated 220,000 wrecked cars piled up in the background. (Above) Chairman of the Australian Tourism Export Council John King receives a warm welcome in Aizu-Wakamatsu, Fukushima. (Opposite page) An 11th generation artisan in a village near Koriyama, Fukushima Pref, continues to make authentic souvenirs in his more than 400-year-old workshop.

heritage, with plenty of itinerary-fillers like festivals, great food, sake, and, above all, their highly reputed hospitality.

Sadly, for some communities, particularly in Fukushima province, their recovery has been hindered by on-going reports of the dangerous aftermath of the damaged nuclear Fukushima-Daiichi power plant, even though most regulators and foreign governments now recognise the safety of travel outside the 20-kilometre exclusion zone.



Bruce Miller, the Australian Ambassador to Japan in Tokyo, told me that visitors could travel and eat with safety in the areas outside the official exclusion zone. According to my own estimates, the land area affected by the ‘off limits’ exclusion zone represents about 1.5% of the total area of Fukushima Prefecture and none of the more than 7,000 square kilometres of Miyagi Prefecture.

In fact, none of the most renowned tourist sites in the two prefectures suffered any damage. Whilst some coastal towns are still in bad shape, the most famous of them all, Matsushima was barely touched by the monstrous waves. Ironically, it was the bay of

260 small islands covered in pine trees that is the area’s main draw and best defence during the tsunami, when they served as a barrier. Today they are as beautiful and tranquil as ever.

The only thing missing from so many of these tourism sites and attractions are visitors, although many Japanese tourists are now returning in rapidly growing numbers. Even in one of the most affected towns, Ishinomaki, where tragic real time images of the unfolding devastation were beamed around the world to horrified viewers, as some 4,500 locals lost their lives, the town’s leaders are seeking tourists to assist the economic recovery of the town and help it return to a semblance of normality.

Far from being ghoulish or insensitive to visit, the locals need visitors to remind them that life goes on and there’s no need to wallow in grief.

I reckon that the only thing that possibly exceeds the warmth of the hospitality with which I and many other visitors were feted, was the optimism and resilience of the many people I met, from town mayors, business leaders, tourism industry representatives and many professionals and volunteers involved in the ongoing recovery programmes.

Dr Hiroshi Kameyama, Mayor of Ishinomaki city, said to me that visitors can witness the effects of a once-in-a-thousand-years event while also playing a dual role as a wandering philanthropist.

According to JNTO, inbound tourism

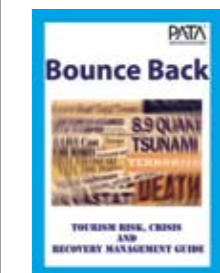
GLOBAL SUMMIT

Perfectly timed for the balmy spring, when the cherry blossoms bloom, the 12th annual WTTC Global Summit brings together 1,000 of the industry’s leaders for events and seminars in two different locations. First up is Sendai City on April 16-17. A year after the Tohoku region was devastated by the earthquake and tsunami the Global Summit commences with the Sendai Recovery and Asia Outlook Forum, in association with PATA, to be held in the provincial capital of the Miyagi Prefecture and a focal point of last year’s disaster recovery efforts.

Recently, PATA announced the launch of the PATA Rapid Recovery Tourism Task Force. The Chairman of the task force, Bert van Walbeek, will tell delegates in Japan what the purpose and scope of the task force is and explain some of its activities during its ‘soft opening’ phase over the last few months. The event in Sendai will also assess the impact and crisis response of Japan since the earthquake and tsunami of last year. In addition, there will be a debate on how the travel and tourism industry at large deals with crises such as terrorism, pandemics, natural disasters and political uprisings.

The plenary session of the 12th Global Summit will then be held in Tokyo on April 17-19 to examine a wealth of subjects, such as the role of travel and tourism as key drivers of economic and social advancement in a time of fiscal turbulence and political upheavals. These sure-to-intrigue sessions are slated for the International Convention Centre Pamir in Tokyo.

CRISIS WEBINARS



PATA has launched a series of webinars for 2012 that will tackle topics such as crisis management, social media, sustainability and cross-cultural

training. Webinars are scheduled for two Wednesdays every month at 1300 hours Bangkok time. PATA CEO Martin J Craigs said: “Seismic shocks in the shape of earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, bombs, political uprisings, and diseases do great harm to the travel industry. With due diligence, organizations and destinations can take practical steps to be prepared, minimize impacts and speed the bounce back. PATA’s crisis management webinars will give you insights, procedures and checklists to deal with crises much more effectively.” The webinars are free to PATA members and US\$100 to non-members. All participants will receive a copy of PATA’s “Bounce Back” crisis management booklet.

For the crisis webinars the schedule is:
March 7: Risk evaluation and avoidance preparation
April 11: The 4 ‘Rs’ of Crisis Management
May 16: Crisis Communication

to the whole of Japan was profoundly affected in the immediate aftermath of the March tragedy, with April figures showing a plunge of 62.5% year-on-year. Subsequent months, however, have shown a steady rise in arrivals. By September, visitor numbers were only 25% less than the year before.

This April, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) will be holding its 12th annual Global Summit in Sendai, capital of Miyagi prefecture, as a gesture of support and solidarity with local communities and tourism professionals of the affected areas. This will be an important catalyst in helping communities return to normal, but there’s no substitute for those personal touches and human warmth that come from one-on-one encounters with visitors eager to appreciate these coastal communities and their pastoral beauty.