

JAPAN

WITHOUT THE CROWDS, FOR NOW

Kyoto was overrun with visitors before Covid-19. Rather than deter them from coming back, the city hopes to enlighten them. **By Ben Dooley and Hisako Ueno**

IN THE MONTHS before March 2020, the food sellers in Kyoto's Nishiki market often wished for an end to the constant stream of photo-hungry visitors from abroad who always seemed to be underfoot.

"We weren't used to foreign tourists," said Nobuyuki Hatsuda, who leads a business alliance promoting the shopping street in the city center, where vendors sell a dizzying array of traditional Japanese foods, carefully displayed and attractively packaged.

Nishiki has long been a working market, and the parade of visitors — riffling through the merchandise, haggling with frazzled shopkeepers and blocking storefronts with their luggage — interfered with the flow of daily business, driving away locals who had long done their shopping on the street.

But then the pandemic hit. The tourists — along with their money — evaporated, and sellers had a change of heart, said Mr. Hatsuda, who sells kamaboko, a fish cake often formed into delicate pink and white loaves.

"We realized that we can't choose our customers," he said.

Other than China, Japan had maintained the strictest border controls of any major economy. Since the start of 2021, fewer than 800,000 foreign visitors have set foot in the country. As other countries began welcoming tourists back in numbers close to their prepandemic highs, Japan let only a trickle of travelers in. The country eased restrictions on trips for business and study in the spring, but as of last month, it was still limiting tourism to travelers on package tours who were willing to negotiate a labyrinth of red tape.

That will soon change. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the country would further ease border controls in October, eliminating a cap on daily entries and allowing tourists to travel independently. (Even after normal travel resumes, however, Chinese visitors, who accounted for more than 30 percent of inbound traffic in 2019, are unlikely to return in large numbers until Beijing relaxes its strict zero-Covid policy.)

As tourism slowly returns, Kyoto, like other tourist destinations worldwide, is grappling with how to accommodate the crowds without sacrificing quality of life for its residents.

In the absence of a clear solution, Kyoto's government is betting on a change of perspective: After years of promoting "omotenashi" — a Japanese word for punctilious hospitality — it's trying to take more time for self-care.

"Kyoto isn't a tourist city, it's a city that values tourism," Daisaku Kadokawa, the city's mayor, said during a recent interview at its city hall, where he wore the formal kimono that has become a trademark during his almost 15 years in office.

GROWING POPULARITY

Kyoto is home to several globally known companies, like Nintendo and Kyocera, and has produced more Nobel Prize winners in the sciences than any other city in Japan. But in the years leading up to the pandemic, it had become dependent on the flood of tourists that bumped, clattered and pushed through its streets.

Kyoto had always been a popular destination for domestic travelers. Before Japan opened to the world in 1851, pilgrims trekked from around the country to visit its more than 2,000 temples and shrines. Spared from the ravages of World War II, it later became something close to a living museum, a destination for school trips and people hoping to get a sense of the country's history and tradition.

No one comes to Kyoto looking for a party. Visitors are seeking a particular vision of Japan, one that is found in the koi ponds of meticulously kept temple gardens; the smell of roasting brown tea, known as hojicha, that wafts from the door of ancient storefronts; and the clatter of a geisha's wooden sandals down a cobbled alleyway.

But in the years before the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, the realities of the modern travel industry had begun to compromise Kyoto's anachronistic charms. Japan launched an all-out effort to promote inbound tourism, and Kyoto experienced a surge in popularity among foreign visitors.

Starting from a base of around 10 million in 2013, the number of foreign visitors had more than tri-

pled by the pandemic's start, according to government data. Nearly a third of them traveled to Kyoto, where the tourism industry employed one of every five workers. Taxes from the sector comprised nearly 13 percent of the city's revenue.

But locals quickly became fed up with what they called "tourism pollution." Suitcases jammed the aisles of city buses. Eager visitors harassed geisha's apprentices, maiko, for photographs on their way to work. And lost tourists stumbled into people's homes while searching for their Airbnb.

Social media, especially, shaped tourism in the city. And not for the better.

Masutami Kawaguchi, who offers private English tours of the city, said that before the pandemic his clients' itineraries were almost entirely determined by Instagram. Tourism became laser-focused on the city's picturesque areas, with people getting off the train at Kyoto Station and then rushing to the three best photo spots — the bamboo groves of Arashiyama, the orange gates winding up the mountain behind Fushimi Inari Shrine and the golden pavilion at Kinkakuji Temple — creating traffic jams and massive crowding in the surrounding areas.

Kyoto's residents, widely known as polite, began to express their displeasure with uncharacteristic bluntness.

In Nishiki, signs popped up among the stalls admonishing tourists not to eat while walking, a peeve in Japan. Neighborhood shoppers, tired of the crowding and commotion, began going to supermarkets, and some long-established sellers closed.

Even Buddhist monks lost their cool.

In autumn and spring, when the streets became clogged with tourists gawping at pyrotechnic bursts of maple leaves and cherry blossoms, "people couldn't even leave their houses. The city was barely livable," said Kojo Nagasawa, the secretary general of the Kyoto Buddhist Federation, which includes three of the city's well known temples.

The group has long called for moderation in Kyoto's economic development. In 1991, it took out a full-page ad in *The Times* opposing the construction of high-rise hotels, which it said would destroy the city's unique character.

"Before we knew it, the economy was nothing but tourism," Mr. Nagasawa said. "The city didn't know when enough was enough."

Looking to curb some of the worst problems, the city in 2018 cracked down on investors who were snatching up traditional houses in residential neighborhoods and converting them into Airbnb rentals.

THE PANDEMIC'S DAMAGE

In the spring of 2020, Japan slammed its borders shut. The fire hose of foreign money turned off, and Kyoto, which had long struggled with financial problems, found itself on the verge of bankruptcy.

The city got a taste of life without tourists, and the combination of the coronavirus and red ink was "a double punch," Mr. Kadokawa, the mayor, said.

At the beginning of the pandemic, "people in the city were saying, 'We've returned to the old Kyoto, isn't that great?'" said Toshinori Tsuchihashi, the director of the city's tourism department. But, as the economic damage mounted, he said, residents "have come to recognize tourism's importance."

Many businesses have yet to recover. Before the pandemic, it was nearly impossible to get a reservation at one of the many restaurants lining Pontocho, an atmospheric alleyway running parallel to the Kamo River in Kyoto's city center. But on a recent weekend night, "for lease" signs hung in darkened shop windows, and many of the terraces looking out on the water sat unused.

Hotel The Mitsui Kyoto, a Western-style luxury hotel, opened in late 2020 and has operated well below capacity for most of the pandemic, according to Manabu Kusui, its general manager.

As tourists begin returning to Kyoto, the Mitsui hopes to differentiate itself by providing guests with exclusive experiences it has arranged with some of Kyoto's beautiful but less trafficked destinations. One of the first is a private tour of Nijo Castle, the residence of Japan's first shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, which is next to the hotel.

It's a style of tourism the city is trying to promote as part of its plan to address prepandemic



crowding. But Mr. Kusui knows that people come to Kyoto with a certain itinerary in mind.

"We can't tell them not to go to someplace like Kiyomizu Temple," he said, referring to the Buddhist temple perched on a mountain face on Kyoto's east side.

SOME POLITE SUGGESTIONS

With no legal options for instituting hard limits on visitors, the government hopes to dilute traffic so it is less concentrated in the same times and places. Planners are also discussing how to fix problems, like crowded city buses, that irritate residents. So far, though, the initiatives mostly consist of soft measures like trying to educate visitors about Kyoto's traditional etiquette and hoping for the best.

In that spirit, the Nishiki market has decided it will try to encourage tourists to behave instead of admonishing them, exchanging its list of "don'ts" for a list of "pleases." Visitors who scan a large QR code at the entrance are presented with a list of suggestions for enjoying the market and rewarded with free Wi-Fi for reading it.

At the same time, many in the city are trying to improve the experience for tourists and residents alike by reimagining Kyoto's overall approach to the industry.

Kiyomizu Temple is among the institutions that have taken up the gauntlet, trying to promote a new kind of tourism that encourages visitors to think of the city as a place to live, not a theme park. Before the pandemic, the temple was as famous

for its congestion as for its sublime architecture and its spectacular view of the city below. In high season, pushing through the crowds clogging the temple's graceful walkways had become an enervating and dispiriting ordeal that few locals would willingly undergo.

When Covid-19 hit, the temple's abbot, Seigen Mori, was already experimenting with ways to allow visitors to experience it as it was intended — as a tranquil place of worship — but with limited success.

The past two and a half years, however, have given him an opportunity to "press reset," he said, and explore different ways of interacting with visitors. In recent months he has begun opening the temple at night to small groups, taking the time to personally lead them in prayer and conversation.

Seeing the temple at night fundamentally transforms visitors' relationship with the space, he said, as the disorienting press of the usual crowds is replaced with the chirr of cicadas, the rich aroma of incense and the soft flicker of shadows on ancient statuary.

Mr. Mori is eager to welcome guests from abroad, he said, as long as they understand that the experience is focused on contemplation.

Kyoto is anticipating the inevitable return of those guests with a mix of longing and apprehension, said Takeshi Otsuki, a general manager at the Japanese travel giant JTB.

"We're hoping the number of visitors increases gradually, and we have a soft landing," Mr. Otsuki said.