

The Rise of Excessive Tourism in the Land of the Rising Sun

At Arashiyama Bamboo Grove, one of Kyoto's most iconic tourist spots, a leisurely stroll through the bamboo forest paths is often met with the sight of trash left in the open or overflowing from garbage bins (Figure 1, first photo). At Sensoji Temple, the oldest and most notable in Tokyo, visitors are packed shoulder to shoulder (Figure 1, second photo). In Kanagawa prefecture's Kamakura city, tourists snap photographs at the railroad crossing made famous by the opening scene of a popular anime, *Slam Dunk* – ignoring public signs such as "Please do not go out on the road and take photos" and "Even if the railroad crossing goes down, you cannot go out onto the road" (Figure 1, third photo).¹

Figure 1: The sight of overtourism in Japan²



These are just a few manifestations of overtourism in the land of the rising sun. The term 'overtourism' has resurfaced in recent years as global travel and tourism surged following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. From Barcelona to Venice, Bali to Kyoto, visitors swarm the same tourist destinations at the same time. Excessive tourism is a thorny policy issue. Inbound tourism is vital to the economy of many countries, generating government revenue, consumption, and livelihood. But too many tourists overwhelm local communities, disrupt the daily lives of residents and even dampen the tourism experience of visitors themselves.

This case study explores the state of overtourism in Japan, which has led the post-pandemic inbound tourism recovery in Asia-Pacific, welcoming record numbers of foreign travellers since reopening its borders in 2022. (The Japanese government has set an ambitious goal of receiving 60 million international tourists by 2030.) It illustrates the ill effects of excessive tourism while demonstrating how crucial the tourism sector is to Japan's economy. The case study discusses at length the policies implemented in Japan to address overtourism and promote sustainable tourism. It also considers several initiatives in other countries that Japan may adopt to further bolster its policy response. For a more nuanced understanding, the case study begins with an overview of overtourism.

¹ Faith Leong and Shauna Tan, "Suffering from its own success? Japan's love-hate relationship with its millions of tourists," *CNA*, November 7, 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/japan-love-hate-relationship-tourists-overtourism-record-numbers-culture-5381891>; Ryan Noble, "Overtourism in Japan: How Bad Is It?" *Japan Travel*, October 23, 2025, <https://en.japantravel.com/tokyo/overtourism-in-japan-how-bad-is-it/72026>

² Leong and Tan, "Suffering from its own success"; Ryan Noble, "Overtourism in Japan."

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What is Overtourism?

Overtourism is a complex phenomenon that deeply affects the identity and character of a place, as well as the experiences of residents, visitors and other stakeholders involved, directly or indirectly, with tourism. Whether tourism is excessive depends on the number of tourists, the location and timing of their visit, the nature of recreational activity, the destination's carrying capacity; and the perceptions of encounters between residents, visitors, local businesses, public agencies and other stakeholders. At its worst, overtourism can diminish the essence of a place; adversely affect residents' lives; contribute to environmental, social and cultural degradation; and dampen visitor experience. With this relational view, overtourism can be characterised as a localised situation wherein too many tourists go to the same destination at the same time, leading to overcrowding. The number of visitors exceeds the destination's carrying capacity, leading to a range of negative consequences.³

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) defines tourism carrying capacity as the maximum number of visitors in a tourist location at any given time that the destination can sustainably support – without causing damage to the physical, sociocultural and economic environment; and affecting the quality of visitors' experience and the quality of life of the local community.⁴ There are different dimensions to carrying capacity in the tourism sector, namely, physical, environmental, psychological, sociocultural, economic and political capacity thresholds (Table 1). Overtourism occurs when one or more of these thresholds are exceeded.⁵

Table 1: Dimensions of tourism carrying capacity⁶

Dimension	Description
Physical	The threshold beyond which the location's physical aspects (eg space, facilities and infrastructure) deteriorate due to excessive use or inadequate infrastructure.
Environmental	The limit beyond which environmental degradation occurs.
Psychological	The capacity of people (mainly residents and tourists) to cope with overcrowding. A critical element of this dimension is individual perception – how much crowd a person can tolerate before feeling uncomfortable in a tourist spot. For residents, the discomfort stems from the perceived need to change their daily routines due to the overwhelming presence or poor attitude of visitors. For both residents and tourists, the discomfort comes from crowding and congestion (eg traffic jams, packed buses and trains), deterioration of the physical environment, and decline in overall experience.
Sociocultural	The threshold beyond which the host community's culture is ruined, and the social activities of residents are excessively disrupted by tourism activities. The situation often leads to conflicts between residents and tourists, causing social tensions.
Economic	An area's ability to absorb tourist functions without crowding out desirable local activities. This concept assumes that limits to carrying capacity can be overcome at a cost – environmental, cultural, social or even political.
Political	The capability of governments, especially at the subnational level, to govern the tourism sector and manage the consequences of tourism growth.

In other words, overtourism is not simply a problem of too many tourists – there are, in fact, a myriad of factors at play. Within the free market regime, the tourism supply chain stimulates demand, often with minimal consideration of the destination's capacity and the resulting negative externalities. The issue becomes even more contentious when those who stand to benefit from tourism – the local communities – end up

³ Paul Peeters et al., "Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses," European Union, October 2018, <http://bit.ly/2srgoyg>

⁴ United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism), "'Overtourism'? – Understanding and Managing Urban Tourism Growth beyond Perceptions, Executive Summary," 2018, <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284419999>

⁵ Peeters et al., "Overtourism."

⁶ Summarised by author based on Peeters et al., "Overtourism."

paying a hefty price for tourism growth, particularly where overtourism results in marginalisation and displacement. With the influx of tourists, local communities face competing demands for key resources and services (eg water, energy and waste management), leading to shortages and price increases. Residents are priced out of their neighbourhoods with the surge in cost of living, particularly in terms of rent and food prices. As tourists come and go, local communities are left to deal with the consequences of environmental degradation, and the wear and tear of roads, public facilities and other infrastructure.⁷

Beyond economic and environmental aspects, cultural difference is also a key facet of overtourism: when the host community's culture is at odds with that of tourists, overtourism manifests as breaching of public norms, unacceptable behaviours, irritating habits and inconsiderate occupation of space. Japan stands out as an example where overtourism is arguably a social phenomenon as well. In contrast, in India and China, the two most populated countries in the world where space is a premium, crowded spaces are socially more accepted, and overtourism concerns are seldom raised, if at all.⁸

Excessive Tourism in Japan

According to UN Tourism, Asia-Pacific lags other world regions⁹ in terms of inbound tourism recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, with international arrivals in 2024 still at 87% of 2019 levels. The 2024 arrival numbers in the Middle East, Africa and Europe have already surpassed pre-pandemic figures, while that of the Americas is at 97%.¹⁰ While most countries in Asia-Pacific are still coaxing foreign tourists back to their pre-pandemic arrival levels, Japan topped its 2019 inbound tourist arrivals two years after reopening its borders in 2022. Exhibiting one of the fastest recoveries since the global economy emerged from the pandemic lockdown, the country welcomed a record 36.9 million international visitors in 2024 – 16% more than the 31.9 million foreign tourists in 2019 (the previous all-time high) and 47% above the 2023 arrivals of 25 million. The upward trajectory continued in 2025, with arrivals reaching a new all-time high of 42.7 million. This figure is more than double the annual average of 18.3 million visitors in the pre-COVID years of 2010–2019.¹¹

Several factors are behind this tourism surge. Pent-up travel demand from the pandemic is the primary reason. Being a popular travel destination is another. Japan, with its unique blend of natural scenery, cultural heritage and modern attractions, coupled with high levels of safety and hospitality, consistently ranks as one of the most attractive destinations in the world. Being visited by influencers and going “viral” on social media surely helped as well. According to the Social Travel Index by travel site Titan Travel, Japan reigned as the most popular country on social media in 2024 and 2025. The rise of low-cost carriers, the weakened yen, the expansion of visa-free travel, and a growing and travel-eager middle class in nearby countries (particularly China and India) are significant contributing factors too.¹²

Beyond the sheer increase in total international arrivals, it is the concentration of visitors in a few prefectures, cities and specific tourist destinations that has led to the overtourism dilemma in Japan. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), overseas travellers typically begin their sightseeing journey in

⁷ Joseph Cheer and Marina Novelli, “What is overtourism and how can we overcome it?” World Economic Forum, October 17, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/10/what-is-overtourism-and-how-can-we-overcome-it/>

⁸ Cheer and Novelli, “What is overtourism.”

⁹ The UN Tourism categorises countries into five regions: Africa, Americas, Asia-Pacific, Europe and the Middle East.

¹⁰ UN Tourism, “International tourism recovers pre-pandemic levels in 2024,” January 21, 2025, <https://www.untourism.int/news/international-tourism-recovers-pre-pandemic-levels-in-2024>

¹¹ Mastercard Economics Institute, “Did you know? Inbound tourism has contributed more than half of Japan's economic growth,” March 25, 2025, <https://www.mastercardservices.com/en/advisors/economic-consulting/insights/did-you-know-inbound-tourism-has-contributed-more-half-japan>; Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), “Japan Tourism Statistics,” accessed November 24, 2025, <https://statistics.jnto.go.jp/en/>; Leong and Tan, “Suffering from its own success”; Kyodo News, “Japan 2025 foreign visitors at record 42.7 million, spending at all-time high,” January 20, 2026, <https://english.kyodonews.net/articles/-/68869>

¹² Joe Yogerst, “Bad behavior, overcrowded streets: In Asia's travel hot spots, overtourism is creating European-style problems,” CNN, November 1, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/asia-overtourism-issues-tourist-hotspots-intl-hnk-dst>

Tokyo, exploring the capital's main attractions, before taking a bullet train to the ancient city of Kyoto and continuing onward to Osaka. This is famously known as the Golden Route.

In terms of visit rate, the bulk of foreign tourists go to only four out of the 47 Japanese prefectures: the prefectures within the Golden Route (ie Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto), along with Chiba. In 2024, Tokyo prefecture received more than half (51.5% or 19 million) of the 36.9 million overseas travellers; Osaka prefecture was visited by four out of ten (39.6% or 14.6 million), while Kyoto prefecture was visited by three out of ten (29.5% or 10.9 million) foreign tourists. Chiba prefecture, part of the Greater Tokyo Area, welcomed 13.5 million international visitors (36.6% visit rate). Outside of the four prefectures, the rest had an average visit rate of 2.3%. More than half (24 out of 47) of all prefectures were visited by only 1% or fewer of all foreign tourists (eg Akita, Fukui, Gunma, Iwate, Mie, Niigata and Tottori).¹³

Around 60% of total overnight stays among international visitors in 2024 was concentrated in the Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto prefectures. Chiba accounted for only 2.9% of overnight stays as most foreign tourists visited this prefecture as a day trip from Tokyo. The coastal city of Kamakura (Kanagawa prefecture) is another popular day trip destination from Tokyo. With an average of 44,000 travellers arriving each day, it is Japan's most tourist-dense city.¹⁴ Other popular cities include Nara (Nara Prefecture), Sapporo (Hokkaido Prefecture) and Fukuoka (Fukuoka Prefecture). Foreign visitors typically flock to these tourist destinations: Sensoji Temple, Meiji Shrine and Tokyo Skytree (Tokyo); Tokyo Disney Resort (Tokyo Disneyland and DisneySea) (Chiba); Osaka Castle, Universal Studios and Dotonbori (Osaka); Fushimi Inari Shrine, Arashiyama Bamboo Grove and Golden Pavilion (Kyoto); Mount Fuji and surrounding areas (Yamanashi and Shizuoka prefectures); Nara Park and Todaiji Temple (Nara); and Himeji Castle (Hyogo).

Adverse Impacts of Overtourism

The overconcentration of foreign tourists in popular destinations has adversely affected local communities. It has strained local infrastructures, mainly public transportation. Buses and trains have become overcrowded, making daily commuting difficult for residents. In a news report, a 24-year-old antique store worker in Kyoto described the challenging daily commute: "The lines are super long, and I often can't sit. Such a huge number of visitors causes trouble for the citizens, so I can't say that tourism is definitely a good thing." In Kamakura, a city councillor said that public buses are so jam-packed that elderly residents who have hospital appointments could not get on. Other daily disruptions caused by excessive tourism include inconsiderate, inappropriate and even dangerous behaviours like blocking pavements and stopping in the middle of the road for photographs, littering, noise, and defacing and damaging properties such as shrines, temples and other cultural sites. "Many (tourists) were stepping out onto the middle of the road and snapping tons of photos. I had to honk the (car) horn just to get them to move," recounted one Kamakura resident. In Fujikawaguchiko, a town in Yamanashi Prefecture, a photograph of a convenience store with Mount Fuji in the background went viral on social media in 2024. Since then, foreign tourists have flooded the convenience store branch at Kawaguchiko Station, with many visitors blocking roads and trespassing on private properties to pose for and take photographs.¹⁵

Japanese society puts great emphasis on etiquette, manners, social norms and tacit conventions. While locals internalise these, foreign visitors may not be aware that they are breaching unwritten rules. Examples include talking on the phone in a public space, eating while walking and wheeling luggage. "A Japanese person would understand that you shouldn't wheel your luggage in any indoor space because that's like walking with your shoes (indoors). Every Japanese person knows this, and every international tourist doesn't," explained Chris McMorran, professor of Japanese studies at the National University of Singapore.¹⁶

¹³ JNTO, "Japan Tourism Statistics"; total exceeds 100% because tourists often travel to more than one prefecture on the same trip; As of 20 January 2026, 2024 is the latest year with full-year, disaggregated data available from the JNTO website.

¹⁴ JNTO, "Japan Tourism Statistics"; Leong and Tan, "Suffering from its own success."

¹⁵ Leong and Tan, "Suffering from its own success"; Bloomberg, "Record Tourist Numbers Are Clogging Up Kyoto's Public Transport," April 25, 2024, [bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-24/japan-record-tourist-numbers-are-clogging-up-kyoto-s-public-transport](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-24/japan-record-tourist-numbers-are-clogging-up-kyoto-s-public-transport)

¹⁶ Leong and Tan, "Suffering from its own success."

Inbound tourism has fuelled a rise in cost of living. The influx of foreign tourists coupled with a weak yen has pushed up inflation, making essential goods and services more costly for residents. Further, the rising demand for accommodation among overseas travellers has led to surges in rental and housing prices. This pushed some residents out of high-demand areas or enticed homeowners to turn their homes into short-term rentals, further increasing rents for long-term tenants. Some residents who could not keep up with rising housing costs ended up being homeless. Osaka has the largest unhoused population in Japan, followed by Tokyo.¹⁷

Overcrowding and congestion also dampen tourists' experience. In a survey among foreign tourists in 2024 conducted by the Japan Travel Bureau Foundation and the Development Bank of Japan, around 30% of participants said they experienced overcrowding in tourist destinations, 13% witnessed inappropriate behaviours by fellow tourists, while 11% faced accommodation-related problems. Most survey participants (63%) were willing to pay more at tourism spots to help preserve tourism resources and facilities, and address congestion and other negative effects of overtourism.¹⁸

Inbound Tourism and Japan's Economy

Tourism is a major contributor to Japan's economy. The World Travel and Tourism Council estimated the tourism sector's economic contribution at 44.6 trillion yen (US\$290.6 billion),¹⁹ accounting for 7.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2024, valued at 609.3 trillion yen (US\$3.9 trillion). This calculation was based on inbound and domestic tourism spending, government expenditures on travel services, capital investments, and travel supply chain purchases of goods and services. The tourism industry supports a wide array of local businesses – from restaurants to small retailers. More than six million workers are employed in the sector.²⁰

While both domestic and inbound tourism are crucial, inbound tourism has played a more vital role in Japan's post-pandemic recovery. Half of the 1.5% GDP growth in 2023 was ascribed to international visitor spending. In 2024, robust inbound tourism helped Japan avoid economic contraction (ie negative GDP growth rate). The record number of foreign tourists that year spent an all-time high of 8.14 trillion yen (US\$53 billion), surpassing 2019 and 2023 levels by 60.7% and 48.8%, correspondingly. Expenditures on food, accommodation, entertainment and transport were 42.1% higher compared to 2023. Of all spending categories, shopping had the most significant increase – 65% higher than in 2023. Spending by international visitors has outpaced the steel and semiconductor industries in recent years, with a new all-time high of 9.5 trillion yen (US\$61.9 billion) recorded in 2025. This has positioned the inbound tourism sector as the country's second-largest export category behind only the automobile industry. The sector also has a substantial multiplier effect: every 100 yen (US\$0.65) spent by foreign tourists spurs an additional 80 yen (US\$0.52) in economic activity.²¹

Despite the inimical effects of excessive tourism, the sector undeniably serves as an economic lifeline for Japan. "One of the problems with (Japan's) declining population is that there'll be less labour. Another is that there'll be fewer consumers. The role of inbound tourists...is to help make up for lost spending as the number of Japanese visitors declines," explained Professor Kazuki Fukui of Ryutsu Keizai University. Riding on the momentum of record-high tourist arrivals, the Japanese government has set an ambitious target of attracting 60 million foreign visitors by 2030, with a projected annual spending of 15 trillion yen (US\$97.7 billion). If attained, inbound tourism will rise to become Japan's largest export alongside the automobile sector.²²

¹⁷ Cassie Burtis and Nicholas Wise, "The overtourism strain on Kyoto: Economic policies and community impacts," *Local Economy* 39, no. 5-6 (2025): 283–288; Lily Noda, "The Hidden Costs of Japan's Tourism Surge," *Princeton Political Review*, May 22, 2025.

¹⁸ Travel Voice, "30% of foreign visitors to Japan have experienced over-tourism in traveling," November 22, 2024, <https://www.travelvoice.jp/english/30-of-foreign-visitors-to-japan-have-experienced-over-tourism-in-traveling/print>

¹⁹ Conversion based on Oanda exchange rate in November 2025 (100 yen=US\$0.65).

²⁰ Gary Bowerman, "How Valuable is Tourism for Japan's Economy?" Asia Media Centre, August 6, 2025, <https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/how-valuable-is-tourism-for-japan-s-economy>

²¹ Tomotaka Hirabayashi, "Tourism as a catalyst for Japan's economic growth and the impact of overtourism," EY, March 4, 2025, https://www.ey.com/en_jp/insights/consulting/tourism-as-a-catalyst-for-japans-economic-growth-and-the-impact-of-overtourism; Mastercard Economics Institute, "Did you know?"; Kyodo News, "Japan 2025 foreign visitors at record 42.7 million."

²² Leong and Tan, "Suffering from its own success"; Hirabayashi, "Tourism as a catalyst for Japan's economic growth."

Japan's Policy Responses

The Japanese government addresses overtourism and promotes sustainable tourism mostly through market-based instruments – supported by regulatory measures and complemented by public awareness campaigns.

Market-based Instruments

Market-based instruments adopted to mitigate overtourism in Japan include imposing taxes and fees, allowing tiered or dual pricing schemes, providing grants, and promoting alternative tourist destinations.

Imposing Taxes and Fees

Accommodation taxes have been levied in major tourist destinations in Japan since the early 2000s. It was first introduced in Tokyo in 2002. Osaka and Kyoto followed suit in 2017 and 2018, correspondingly. In response to the influx of tourists since 2023, Osaka and Kyoto are set to increase their accommodation taxes, while other cities and prefectures have started imposing the tax in 2025.²³ In Osaka Prefecture, only tourists staying in accommodations priced at least 7,000 yen (US\$45.6) a night were previously subject to the lodging tax. But starting September 2025, the targeted accommodation price was lowered to 5,000 yen (US\$32.6). Tax rates were doubled for those staying at accommodations priced at 5,000-15,000 yen (US\$32.6-97.7) a night, and 15,000-20,000 yen (US\$97.7-130.3) per night: from 100 yen (US\$0.65) to 200 yen (US\$1.3), and from 200 yen (US\$1.3) to 400 yen (US\$2.6) per person per night, respectively. For those in 20,000 yen (US\$130.3) or higher/night accommodations, lodging tax was increased from 300 yen (US\$2) to 500 yen (US\$3.3).²⁴

While the lodging tax increase in Osaka Prefecture was relatively modest, the tax hike in Kyoto will be enormous and is set to be the highest in Japan. From a previous high of 1,000 yen (US\$6.5) per person per night, the accommodation tax in Kyoto will rise steeply by 900% – up to 10,000 yen (US\$65.2) starting in March 2026. For accommodations under 6,000 yen (US\$39.1)/night, the tax rate per person per night will remain unchanged at 200 yen (US\$1.3). For accommodations priced between 6,000 (US\$39.1) and below 20,000 yen (US\$130.3)/night, the tax will double from 200 yen (US\$1.3) to 400 yen (US\$2.6). For stays costing between 20,000 (US\$130.3) and under 50,000 (US\$325.8) yen/night, the rate will also double – from 500 yen (US\$3.3) to 1,000 yen (US\$6.5). For stays priced between 50,000 (US\$325.8) and below 100,000 yen (US\$651.6)/night, the tax will quadruple from 1,000 yen (US\$6.5) to 4,000 yen (US\$26.1). For accommodations costing 100,000 yen (US\$651.6) or more, the tax will be 10 times higher from 1,000 yen (US\$6.5) to 10,000 yen (US\$65.2).²⁵ After the revision, Kyoto's lodging tax revenue is projected to increase to around 12.6 billion yen (US\$82.1 million) in fiscal year 2026 – almost triple the 5.2 billion yen (US\$33.9 million) collected in fiscal year 2023.²⁶

In March 2025, the Japanese government approved proposals to levy accommodation tax in 11 more prefectures and cities, namely, Miyagi and Hiroshima prefectures, two cities in Gifu Prefecture, five cities in Hokkaido, and one city each in Miyagi and Shimane prefectures. This increases the total locations imposing such a tax to 24. The tax rates range from 100 yen (US\$0.65) to 500 yen (US\$3.3) per person per night.²⁷ Meanwhile, the tax-free shopping system for foreign visitors will shift to a refund-based system in November 2026. Instead of getting an immediate exemption from the 10% consumption tax at designated stores, international visitors will have to pay the full price upfront and claim tax refund later before departure. The

²³ Travel and Tour World, "New Accommodation Tax Expands to More Cities Across Japan in 2025," November 10, 2025, <https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/new-accommodation-tax-expands-to-more-cities-across-japan-in-2025-what-every-traveler-needs-to-know-about-this-hidden-hotel-fee/>

²⁴ Osaka Convention and Tourism Bureau, "Accommodation tax," 2025, en.osaka-info.jp/information/to-tourist/news-lodging-tax/

²⁵ The Asahi Shimbun, "Kyoto to slap tourists with levy of up to 10,000 yen per night," October 4, 2025, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/16071465>

²⁶ SCMP, "Japan's Kyoto approves higher lodging tax from March 2026 to curb overtourism," March 26, 2025, scmp.com/week-asia/lifestyle-culture/article/3303995/japans-kyoto-approves-higher-lodging-tax-march-2026-curb-overtourism

²⁷ SCMP, "Japan's Kyoto approves higher lodging tax."

Japanese government stated that this policy change addresses the illicit resale of duty-free goods bought in Japan “without denting the country’s status as a tourism-oriented nation.”²⁸

Starting July 2026, Japan’s departure tax, which applies to anyone leaving the country, will increase to 3,000 yen (US\$19.5) from 1,000 yen (US\$6.5) per person. To offset the increase for citizens, the passport application fee will be lowered to 9,000 yen (US\$58.6) from 16,000 yen (US\$104.3). Visa fees will also go up, with the cost of a single-entry visa rising fivefold – from around 3,000 yen (US\$19.5) to about 15,000 yen (US\$97.7). Meanwhile, the Japan Electronic System for Travel Authorisation will roll out in 2028. Fees for this pre-screening system for citizens of visa-waiver countries are expected to be between 2,000 yen (US\$13) and 3,000 yen (US\$19.5).²⁹

Box 1: Departure Tax

A departure tax is a fee paid by a person who leaves a country’s borders. It is typically imposed by countries on departing passengers of international flights, though may also be levied on people leaving by sea or land. Nationality and residency matter depending on a country’s policy.

In Japan, departure tax applies to all passengers aged two and above departing by ship or aircraft, regardless of nationality and residency status. Transit passengers (departing within 24 hours of entering Japan) and crew members of ships and aircrafts are exempted. Introduced in January 2019, people departing from Japan automatically pay for the tax as it is included in the ticket price.³⁰

Other countries that have departure tax include the following:

- Australia: regulations on imposition of departure tax similar with Japan, but applicable only to passengers aged 12 and above.³¹
- Belize: for departure by land and sea, tax applies only to non-citizens and non-residents (paid in cash at immigration/border posts upon exit). For departure by air, citizens and residents pay lower departure tax, compared to foreign visitors (usually included in air ticket price; if not, paid in cash at airport’s designated collection counters).³²
- Malaysia: tax applies to all international flight passengers, irrespective of citizenship and residency status (also included in air ticket price); no departure tax for people leaving via maritime and terrestrial borders.³³
- The Philippines: tax applies only to departure by air. Filipino citizens and permanent residents, as well as foreigners who have resided in the country for over a year are obliged to pay; international tourists, short-term foreign visitors (stayed less than a year) and migrant Filipino workers are exempted. Not included in airline ticket price, but passenger has option to pre-pay upon online booking of flight. Payment methods: online payment (through government tourism agency website or via airline-affiliated portals), pre-payment at government service centres and other accredited payment centres, and via travel agencies before flight date; cash payment at airport travel tax desks before boarding flight.³⁴

²⁸ Burtis and Wise, “The overtourism strain on Kyoto”; The Mainichi, “Japan gov’t eyes refund method to tackle abuse of duty-free system (Pt. 3),” September 20, 2024, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20240919/p2a/00m/0na/021000c>

²⁹ Sneha Chakraborty, “Leaving Japan Will Soon Cost More: Departure Tax To Triple By July 2026,” Travel+Leisure Asia, January 6, 2026, <https://www.travelandleisureasia.com/sg/news/japan-departure-tax-to-triple-by-july-2026/>

³⁰ Japan National Tax Agency, “International Tourist Tax,” accessed January 14, 2026, <https://www.nta.go.jp/publication/pamph/kansetsu/kanko/index.htm>

³¹ Australian Border Force, “Passenger Movement Charge (PMC),” October 8, 2025, [https://www.abf.gov.au/entering-and-leaving-australia/crossing-the-border/passenger-movement/passenger-movement-charge-\(pmc\)](https://www.abf.gov.au/entering-and-leaving-australia/crossing-the-border/passenger-movement/passenger-movement-charge-(pmc))

³² Ventura Yacht Agency, “Departure Tax,” 2020, <https://belizemegayacht.com/departure-tax/>

³³ Royal Malaysian Customs Department, “Departure Levy General Guide,” August 20, 2019, https://mydlv.customs.gov.my/www/admin/files/JKDM/resources/assets/pdf/General_Guide_of_Departure_Levy.pdf

³⁴ Ayman Falak Medina, “Travel Tax in the Philippines: A Guide for Foreigners,” ASEAN Briefing, March 18, 2025, <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/travel-tax-in-the-philippines-a-guide-for-foreigners/>

Authorities said the revenues derived from increased fees and taxes will be used to improve tourism facilities and infrastructure (eg improve airports and expand transportation facilities), supplement the maintenance costs of heritage sites and fund local projects on curbing overtourism. For example, the increased revenues from the lodging tax hike in Kyoto was meant to help fund the city's countermeasures against overtourism, including the repair of cultural sites, improving infrastructure and initiatives to ease congestion. Meanwhile, the additional revenues from the proposed increases in departure tax and visa fees are not just earmarked for overtourism measures (eg expanding transportation facilities, improving airport infrastructure and strengthening security screening), but also envisioned to fund national programmes like the tuition-free initiative for high school students.³⁵

Several major tourist destinations and attractions in Japan have increased entrance fees, while some plan to introduce higher entry fees specifically for foreign visitors, using tiered or dual pricing mechanisms. In 2024, the Yamanashi Prefecture imposed an entry fee of 2,000 yen (US\$13) to climb Mount Fuji via the Yoshida trail – the most popular hiking route in the country's highest mountain. This was doubled to 4,000 yen (US\$26) for 2025's July–September climbing season. The other three trails (ie Fujinomiya, Gotemba and Subashiri trails), under the purview of neighbouring Shizuoka Prefecture, were previously free. However, in March 2025, the Shizuoka Prefecture decided to also charge all climbers an admission fee of 4,000 yen (US\$26).³⁶

Visitors to Japan's various castles have faced nationwide admission price hikes since 2024. In Shiga Prefecture's Hikone Castle, adult entrance fee increased from 800 yen (US\$5.2) to 1,000 yen (US\$6.5) in October 2024. In Osaka Castle and Matsumoto Castle (Nagano Prefecture), adult tickets were raised from 600 yen (US\$3.9) to 1,200 yen (US\$7.8), and from 700 yen (US\$4.6) to 1,200 yen (US\$7.8) (digital ticket) and 1,300 yen (US\$8.5) (physical ticket) in April 2025, respectively. In Himeji Castle (Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture), a dual-rate admission policy will be implemented by March 2026. Himeji City residents will continue to pay 1,000 yen (US\$6.5), while out-of-towners and overseas visitors will be charged between 2,000 yen (US\$13) and 3,000 yen (US\$19.5).³⁷

Known for its 41-metre-long reclining Buddha statue, the Nanzoin temple in Fukuoka Prefecture has been charging foreign visitors an admission fee of 300 yen (US\$2) since May 2025. Japanese citizens and foreign residents are exempted. Other shrines and temples are set to follow suit. The dual-pricing system is expected to be rolled out in other popular sites, including Nara's Todaiji Temple and Kyoto's Fushimi Inari Shrine and Kiyomizu Temple. While prices will vary among shrines and temples, foreign tourists are projected to pay around 1,000 yen (US\$6.5), while residents are expected to pay 500 yen (US\$3.3).³⁸

The revenues generated from raising entry fees in major tourist destinations are expected to be reinvested in preserving historical and cultural sites, maintaining cleanliness, improving safety, and addressing environmental degradation. For instance, proceeds from the new and increased entry fees in Mount Fuji's trails help finance site maintenance, staffing, improving hikers' safety, cleaning and managing wastes, and other environmental preservation efforts. In Matsumoto Castle, ticket revenues will be spent on maintenance and restoration works, as well as measures to prepare for natural disasters. Meanwhile, the head monk of Nanzoin Temple said that the fees they charge foreign visitors help to cover extra cleaning and security costs linked to increased littering and fireworks.³⁹

³⁵ Asahi Shimbun, "Kyoto to slap tourists with levy"; SCMP, "Japan's Kyoto approves higher lodging tax".

³⁶ The Straits Times, "Mount Fuji hikers to be charged \$36 on all trails," March 17, 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/mount-fuji-hikers-to-be-charged-35-on-all-trails>

³⁷ The Straits Times, "Japan castles face nationwide admission price hike," August 30, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/wave-of-admission-price-hikes-could-hit-castles-around-japan>; Melissa Woodley, "Big changes are coming for Aussie travellers headed to Japan from mid-2025, and they'll cost you" *Time Out*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.timeout.com/australia/news/big-changes-are-coming-for-aussie-travellers-headed-to-japan-from-mid-2025-and-theyll-cost-you-051325>

³⁸ Woodley, "Big changes are coming"; The Straits Times, "Japan temple's foreigner-only entrance fees spark debate, criticism," July 18, 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japan-temples-foreigner-only-entrance-fees-spark-debate-criticism>

³⁹ Straits Times, "Japan castles"; Straits Times, Japan temple's foreigner-only entrance fees; Leong and Tan, "Suffering from its own success"; Burtis and Wise, "The overtourism strain on Kyoto."

Some resorts and amusement parks have also adopted two-tier pricing. For example, since July 2025, Niseko Ski Resorts in Hokkaido has been charging tourists and locals 6,500 yen (US\$42.4) and 5,000 yen (US\$32.6) per day, respectively. In Junglia Okinawa, a nature-themed amusement park which opened in July 2025, a one-day pass costs 8,800 yen (US\$57.3) for overseas tourists and 6,930 yen (US\$45.2) for Japanese residents. Enterprises in the food and beverage sector have also started to charge local and foreign customers differently. For instance, Tamatebako, a seafood buffet restaurant in Shibuya, charges foreign tourists 1,100 yen (US\$7.2) more than residents, verifying residency status by checking if customers speak Japanese or if they have a residence card. In Asakusa, a tonkatsu restaurant announced plans to implement a 10% service charge for foreign tourists. Tabelog, Japan's largest restaurant review and reservation platform, charges a booking fee of 440 yen (US\$2.9) per person for users of the English, Chinese and Korean versions. Users of the domestic site can book for free.⁴⁰

Providing Grants

Implemented by the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA), the "Sustainable Tourism Promotion Project through Preventing and Mitigating Overtourism" supports measures and plans borne out of community consultations among local stakeholders, including local governments, retailers, accommodation facilities, travel agencies and transport representatives. Eligible projects are community-driven initiatives that alleviate overtourism in their respective localities, such as visualisation of congestion levels, collection and analysis of crowd data, as well as public transport enhancements. In 2025, selected entries, which include a system to draw foreign visitors to lesser-known tourist spots within Kumamoto Prefecture, received grants of up to 80 million yen (US\$521,292).⁴¹

Promoting Alternative Tourist Destinations

In line with the Inbound Marketing Strategy 2023–2025, the Japanese government has been ramping up efforts to attract overseas visitors to explore the lesser-known areas of the country. The aim is to divert tourist traffic away from popular destinations such as Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, while supporting regional and rural revitalisation. The alternative destination marketing initiatives are spearheaded by the JTA and the JNTO, in partnership with the private sector.⁴²

The key initiatives to promote regional tourism fall under "cross-market strategy" and "strategy by market." Cross-marketing strategies include strengthening initiatives to entice high value-added foreign travellers (ie those with total consumption per trip of over 1 million yen (US\$6,516) per person) and to promote adventure travel (ie travel consisting of two or more of the following: activity, nature and cultural experience). Under the strategy by market, dedicated marketing campaigns were curated for 22 target markets.⁴³ Residents from these markets have been to Japan multiple times and have indicated interest in exploring the country's rural areas through a JNTO survey. In some of these markets, repeat visitors tend to stay longer in Japan, spend significantly more (eg tourists from Australia, Europe, Middle East and the US) and are more interested in sustainable tourism (eg those from Canada and Europe).⁴⁴

Some examples of the JNTO-led marketing promotions for the target markets include the "Japan: Endless Discovery" and the "Beyond the Cities, Into the Heart of Japan" campaigns. The "Japan: Endless Discovery"

⁴⁰ Woodley, "Big changes are coming"; Wakaba Oto, "Two-Tier Pricing in Japan: Why Tourists Are Paying More," *Tokyo Weekender*, August 19, 2025, <https://www.tokyoweekender.com/japan-life/news-and-opinion/two-tier-pricing-in-japan/>

⁴¹ World Economic Forum (WEF), "How Japan is redesigning tourism to benefit local communities," May 13, 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/05/how-japan-is-redesigning-tourism-to-benefit-local-communities/>

⁴² Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), "Attractive Sectors: Tourism and Hospitality," April 2024, https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext_images/en/invest/img/attractive_sectors/form/AS_tourism_en.pdf

⁴³ Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, India, South Korea, the Middle East, Australia, Canada, the US, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Nordic region.

⁴⁴ JETRO, "Attractive Sectors: Tourism and Hospitality."

initiative is an integrated media campaign that taps on social media content and collaborations with influencers, advertising through other media, and an Arabic-language website. It aims to encourage high value-added repeat travellers from the Middle East to visit less popular destinations in Japan. It offers adventure travel marked by nature-driven luxury, immersive cultural experiences and deeper exploration of Japan's regions. The campaign benefits from a change in travel behaviour in the Middle East in the last few years. Preferences of travellers from countries like the United Arab Emirates have been shifting "from luxury shopping sprees and traditional vacation destinations to more meaningful, experience-driven travel...shaped by...growing desire for authenticity, cultural immersion and personal growth." Meanwhile, the JNTO partnered with All Nippon Airways (ANA) for the "Beyond the Cities, Into the Heart of Japan" campaign, which aims to entice travellers from Singapore to go beyond the major tourist locations and explore unheralded destinations in Japan by giving out free business class and economy class return tickets through a lucky draw.⁴⁵

Japan's two major, full-service airlines, ANA and Japan Airlines (JAL), offer free domestic flights (eg Tokyo to Miyazaki) to international travellers from the target markets who arrive on overseas flights (eg Singapore to Tokyo). JAL's promotional deal, which started in September 2024, is currently available to visitors from 12 out of the 22 priority markets: Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, India, China, Mexico, the US, Australia and Canada. JAL is planning to extend the deal to travellers from the other priority markets soon.⁴⁶ ANA introduced the offer two months earlier, in July 2024, with limited eligible flights (eg those arriving from Taiwan, South Korea and Australia), before expanding to flights from the US, China and other locations. By January 2025, the promotion covered all but two of the 22 target markets.⁴⁷

Aside from diverting international tourists from the megacities to the regional areas of Japan, the airfare deal also aims to ease land transport congestion and keep the local air travel sector afloat amidst the country's steep population decline. ANA President Koji Shibata noted: "40% of inbound tourists who land in Narita and Haneda [which service Tokyo] and Kansai International Airport in Osaka prefecture head to regional areas, but only 10% of these use airlines to get there." He reiterated the need to promote the use of domestic flights among international visitors who tend to use trains and buses to reach regional and rural destinations. JAL Executive Officer Yuji Koyama added: "We need to increase the domestic flight use rate by inbound tourists from the current 4% to 8% to keep domestic flights profitable."⁴⁸

JAL and ANA also partner with private enterprises within and outside Japan to promote regional tourism. For instance, JAL collaborated with Hoshino Resorts, one of Japan's leading luxury hospitality groups, while ANA partnered with Rizal Commercial Banking Corporation (RCBC), a major bank in the Philippines. The JAL-Hoshino Resorts collaboration, which commenced in October 2024, targets the high-value segment of inbound tourists, offering travel packages that combine flight tickets and deluxe accommodations in "hidden gem" destinations located outside of metropolitan areas. On the other hand, through the ANA-RCBC partnership in 2024, travellers from the Philippines who used their RCBC credit cards to book their Manila-Tokyo flights via ANA were able to secure up to two local flights in Japan for free.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Muzaffar Rizvi, "It's Time to Explore the Land of Rising Sun," *Khaleej Times*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/supplements/its-time-to-explore-the-land-of-rising-sun>; Justin Varghese, "From Tokyo to Tbilisi: Why more UAE travellers ditch malls for meaningful trips," *Gulf News*, November 12, 2025, <https://gulfnews.com/business/tourism/from-tokyo-to-tbilisi-why-more-uae-travellers-ditch-malls-for-meaningful-trips-1.500342416>; Russell Ang, "Japan tourism letting S'poreans win ANA air tickets to encourage visiting other parts of Japan," *Mothership*, August 06, 2025, <https://mothership.sg/2025/08/jnto-free-business-class-ticket/>

⁴⁶ Keyla Supharta, "Japan Airlines offering free domestic flights to international tourists," *Mothership*, July 12, 2025, <https://mothership.sg/2025/07/japan-airlines-free-domestic-flights/>

⁴⁷ Keiichi Furukawa, "ANA offers free domestic flights for passengers connecting from China," *Nikkei Asia*, January 22, 2025, <https://asia.nikkei.com/business/travel-leisure/ana-offers-free-domestic-flights-for-passengers-connecting-from-china>

⁴⁸ Furukawa, "ANA offers free domestic flights."

⁴⁹ Furukawa, "ANA offers free domestic flights"; Rizal Commercial Banking Corporation, "Special ANA fares to Japan + FREE Domestic flights," accessed November 24, 2025, <https://rcbccredit.com/promos/special-ana-fares-to-japan-free-domestic-flights-2424>

As the government's regional tourism initiative continues, more tour operators are marketing Japan's less explored regions – helping visitors go off the beaten track. For example, Oku Japan and Walk Japan both offer tour packages that focus on getting away from the crowd and venturing deep into Japan's society and culture. These tours include the Nakasendo Trail, Kumano Kodo Pilgrimage, Michinoku Coastal Trail, and Shikoku Temples and Trails.⁵⁰ Inside Japan, which has been in operation for almost three decades, pivoted to new priority destinations in 2025 to encourage travel to lesser-known parts of Japan. The company now focuses on bringing guests to the under-visited prefectures of Aomori, Nagasaki, Toyama and Yamaguchi.⁵¹

Regulatory Measures

Regulatory measures employed by the Japanese government include area-specific restrictions and fines, visitor caps and timed entry reservations, leveraging technology, and creating an administrative body to address overtourism. In Gion, Kyoto's geisha district, foreign tourists often crowd narrow alleyways and some even harass geishas and maikos (apprentice geishas) for photographs – shouting for their attention, blocking their path and touching them. In 2024, the city government permitted tourists to access Gion's main Hanamikoji Street only, banning them from venturing down private lanes and taking photographs of geishas and maikos without their consent. Violators face fines of up to 10,000 yen (US\$65.2). In 2023, the Okinawa prefectural government started to restrict visitors to the Iriomote Island to 1,200 persons a day. The island is home to the Iriomote wildcat, a nationally protected endangered species in Japan.⁵²

Since 2024, an online reservation system for climbing Mount Fuji has been in place. This is where hikers book slots, register their details and pay the entry fee. An entry time restriction is observed between 2pm and 3am: only those with mountain hut reservations may enter. In the Yoshida trail, the busiest path to the summit, a maximum of 4,000 hikers is allowed per day. There is no limit on the number of climbers on the other trails.⁵³ More recently, Ginzan Onsen, a hot spring town located in the mountains of the northern Yamagata prefecture, limited day trip entry during the peak winter season (January–March 2025). From 5pm to 8pm, only 100 day-trippers with confirmed reservations were allowed in the town. After 8pm, only tourists staying in local hotels could enter. The town is widely considered to have been the inspiration for the setting of the Oscar-winning animation *Spirited Away*.⁵⁴

Using advanced technology, efforts are underway to predict, visualise and track congestion levels at tourist destinations. In Okinawa, the *Okimeguri* tourism optimisation app leverages artificial intelligence to forecast crowd levels at major attractions based on crowd data and weather information from previous years. Users can choose specific dates, times, weather scenarios and locations to view estimated congestion levels and details about scheduled events. In January 2025, the city government of Hakodate in Hokkaido rolled out a congestion visualisation system to address overcrowding at Mount Hakodate, known for its panoramic views. A digital signage was installed at Hakodate railway station which allows real-time tracking of congestion levels at eight key locations, including the ropeway station leading to the summit and the summit observation deck.⁵⁵

In July 2025, the Japanese government established a new administrative body to mitigate the impacts of overtourism across the country. Designed as a cross-agency “control tower,” the body will coordinate responses to issues such as excessive tourism and crimes involving foreign visitors. Its creation follows a

⁵⁰ Oku Japan, “Our Destinations,” accessed November 24, 2025, <https://www.okujapan.com/region/>; Walk Japan, “All Scheduled Tours,” accessed November 24, 2025, <https://walkjapan.com/our-tours/all-tours>

⁵¹ Juliet Dennis, “InsideJapan promotes country's lesser-visited regions as part of overtourism strategy,” *Aspire*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.aspiretravelclub.co.uk/news/insidejapan-promotes-countrys-lesser-visited-regions-as-part-of-overtourism-strategy>

⁵² Yogerst, “Bad behavior, overcrowded streets”; Emiko Jozuka and Lilit Marcus, “Japanese island to impose tourism cap to protect native wild cat,” *CNN*, April 4, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/iriomote-okinawa-japan-overtourism-intl-hnk>

⁵³ Council for the Promotion of the Proper Use of Mt. Fuji, “For all Mt. Fuji climbers (2025 summer),” September 11, 2025, <https://www.fuji-san-climb.jp/en/for-every-climber.html>

⁵⁴ Shahana Yasmin, “Iconic Japanese hot springs town limits visitors to curb overtourism,” *The Independent*, January 2, 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/japan-ginzan-onsen-overtourism-winter-rules-b2672733.html>

⁵⁵ WEF, “How Japan is redesigning tourism.”

proposal in June by lawmakers from the Liberal Democratic Party, who called for policies promoting an orderly and harmonious coexistence with foreign nationals – in response to concerns raised by residents over the sharp increase in the number of foreigners in recent years.⁵⁶

Public Awareness Campaigns

The JTA supports the production and dissemination of printed and digital materials that promote sustainable tourism, manners awareness and travel etiquette for tourists. To help address issues associated with the surge of travellers visiting Japan's tourist attractions, the JTA rolled out two new initiatives in December 2024: "Travel Etiquette for the Future" and "Tourism Pictograms." These public awareness campaigns aim to ease congestion, promote an understanding of local culture and customs, encourage the courteous and considerate behaviour expected of all travellers in Japan, and make the overall tourism experience more pleasant for both tourists and residents.⁵⁷

The "Travel Etiquette for the Future" campaign consists of a poster and a guidebook featuring the proper conduct and polite behaviour expected among tourists: know the destination and mind manners while there; avoid the crowds; travel smart and travel light; respect cultural assets; dispose of trash responsibly; buy local; and do not be in a hurry. Meanwhile, the "Tourism Pictograms" illustrate prohibited and recommended actions to keep in mind when travelling (Figure 2). Both are informed by inputs from experts, local governments, local communities, businesses and other stakeholders. Available in multiple languages, the two public awareness campaigns appear on social media platforms, on booking websites and at tourist destinations. A dedicated website was also launched to periodically update the contents of both initiatives.⁵⁸

Figure 2: Tourism Pictograms: Prohibited and recommended actions for tourists in Japan⁵⁹



⁵⁶ Satoshi Sugiyama, "Japan launches government body to address over-tourism and unruly foreigners," *The Independent*, July 16, 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/japan-tokyo-tourists-over-tourism-ishiba-ldf-b2789792.html>

⁵⁷ Foreign Press Center Japan, "Japan Tourism Agency Introduces "Travel Etiquette for the Future" and "Tourism Pictograms" to advance sustainable tourism in Japan," December 19, 2024, <https://fpcj.jp/en/prlisting/japan-tourism-agency-202412/>; Japan Tourism Agency (JTA), "Promoting sustainable tourism," 2024, <https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/responsible-traveler/en.html>

⁵⁸ Foreign Press Center Japan, "Japan Tourism Agency"; JTA, "Promoting sustainable tourism."

⁵⁹ JTA, as cited in Euro News, "Lower your voice and don't eat while walking: Top etiquette tips for tourists to Japan," December 2, 2024, www.euronews.com/travel/2024/11/29/lower-your-voice-and-dont-eat-while-walking-top-etiquette-tips-for-tourists-to-japan

Policy Responses in Other Countries

While Japan has already implemented a range of measures, gaps remain. The limitations of Japan's policy responses may be addressed by initiatives implemented in other countries, including bans and closures, rewards for good behaviour, and pursuing a "high value, low volume" tourism policy.

Bans and Closures

To address the adverse effects of cruise tourism, particularly, overcrowding, congestion and pollution, cities around the world have enforced several restrictions, including a total ban on cruise ships. For instance, in Venice (Italy) and Nice (France), ships weighing beyond 25,000 tonnes and those carrying more than 900 passengers, respectively, are banned from docking. Amsterdam (The Netherlands) follows a phased approach: capping cruise ship visits at 100 annually starting 2026, before completely barring cruise ships when a new cruise terminal opens outside the city in 2035.⁶⁰

Boracay Island (the Philippines) and Maya Bay (Thailand) were previously closed for comprehensive environmental rehabilitation – six months for the former (ie April–October 2018), and four years for the latter (ie 2018–2022). To ensure that the gains from the massive rejuvenation initiative will continue beyond the four-year closure, the Thai government has imposed an annual two-month closure (ie August to September) for Maya Bay since its reopening in 2022. This allows the marine and shoreline ecosystems to recover from the strains of tourism activities.⁶¹

Rewards for Good Behaviour

In 2020, Hawai'i launched the *Mālama Hawai'i* campaign, which encourages tourists to *mālama* – to respect the islands and give back to the local community. Partnering with over 30 community organisations, volunteer groups and private enterprises, the initiative offers travellers complementary hotel stays and special discounts to local attractions when they participate in sustainable tourism activities such as tree planting, beach cleanups or Hawaiian quilting sessions. For instance, picking up litter on any Maui beach could earn tourists a free daily breakfast and complimentary fourth night stay at Hana-Maui Resort.⁶²

In 2024, Copenhagen (Denmark) introduced the CopenPay programme which aims to nudge tourists to make environmentally friendly choices and observe eco-friendly practices in exchange for complimentary or discounted meals and drinks, and admission to the city's top attractions and local experiences. Visitors who explore the city on foot or by bike and other public transport, help pick up trash, volunteer at community gardens and urban farms, and participate in harbour and beach cleanups may enjoy the CopenPay perks, including a 70-minute free canal tour, one-hour complimentary boat or kayak ride, free entry to a concert at Urban 13 (a cultural centre), free entry to Kronborg Castle, complimentary admission to the Rudersdal Museum in Mothsgården and a free cup of local walnut schnapps, and free meals and drinks at various establishments (eg Marriot Hotel, Bella Sky Hotel and Kayak Bar). With almost 100 participating partners, the initiative supports Copenhagen's goal of becoming one of the first carbon-neutral capitals in the world.⁶³

⁶⁰ Sara Macefield, "The destinations trying to ban cruise ships and their 'low-cost clientele'," *The Telegraph*, February 20, 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/cruises/the-destinations-fighting-to-keep-cruise-ships-away/>

⁶¹ Yogerst, "Bad behavior, overcrowded streets"; Karla Cripps, "Tourism killed Thailand's most famous bay. Here's how it was brought back to life," *CNN*, August 1, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/maya-bay-thailand-recovery-c2e-spc-intl>

⁶² Leila Najafi, "In Copenhagen, travelers can score free perks—just for being responsible," *National Geographic*, June 23, 2025, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/copenpay-program-copenhagen>

⁶³ Najafi, "In Copenhagen"; Visit Copenhagen, "CopenPay," 2025, <https://www.visitcopenhagen.com/copenpay>

Quality over Quantity

Bhutan imposes a relatively high tourist tax, known formally as the sustainable development fee (SDF). This is consistent with the country's "high value, low volume" tourism policy. The "high value" aspect relates to the goal of achieving high revenue per visitor, targeting responsible and mindful tourists who are sensitive to Bhutan's environment, culture and aspirations. The "low volume" component seeks to ensure that the number of travellers is compatible with the carrying capacity of the tourism infrastructure and natural environment. Except for tourists from India, all visitors of Bhutan are required to pay an SDF of US\$100 per person per day. The fee used to be US\$65, before increasing to US\$200 when the country reopened its borders in September 2022 following the COVID-19 pandemic. In September 2023, the SDF was halved to US\$100 to entice tourists to stay longer. While the 50% SDF reduction is in place until August 2027, the fee may be raised before then. "We're going to have a quota of 300,000 tourists (annually). If the demand to come into Bhutan to visit far outstrips our capacity to welcome them, we might...increase sustainable fees (before August 2027)," explained Bhutan's Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay. The revenues collected from the SDF help fund social, cultural, environmental and infrastructure programmes.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Tourism is worth almost US\$300 billion a year to the Japanese economy. It supports a wide range of local businesses, employing more than six million workers. With a declining population, the sector, specifically inbound tourism, serves as a critical economic lifeline. Yet rapid tourism growth, evident since the country reopened its borders in 2022, has come with a hefty price: overtourism. As the number of tourists exceeded carrying capacities, issues arose. The overconcentration of international visitors in popular tourist spots in Japan has led to strains on public infrastructures (mainly transport networks), rising living costs and environmental degradation. Besides overcrowding and congestion, other daily disruptions that local communities have had to deal with include noise pollution, trespassing, violation of privacy, social and cultural norm breaches, and inconsiderate, inappropriate and even dangerous behaviours among some foreign tourists. The quality of tourism experience has also deteriorated in the process.

The Japanese government has relied primarily on market-based instruments to address overtourism: increasing taxes and fees (eg 900% lodging tax hike in Kyoto), imposing new ones (eg Shizuoka Prefecture charging entry fee at the Mt Fuji trails that were previously free), and revising current systems (eg tax-free shopping system for foreign visitors shifting to a refund-based system); allowing tourist attractions and food and beverage enterprises to charge foreign visitors higher prices; providing grants for community-driven initiatives geared towards mitigating overtourism and promoting sustainable tourism; and promoting off-the-beaten-track destinations in rural and regional areas of the country through private sector partnerships (eg collaborating with airlines, hotels and banks, and engaging social media influencers). Aside from these strategies, several regulatory measures and public awareness campaigns have also been implemented.

As Japan continues to balance the economic benefits of inbound tourism with sustainability concerns, it may need to boost its overtourism mitigation strategy by considering measures that have succeeded in other countries, such as the CopenPay programme in Denmark, total ban on cruise ships in cities in Italy and France, and Bhutan's "high value, low volume" tourism policy. Ultimately, the excessive tourism quandary in Japan and other countries will only be resolved through a comprehensive assessment of the different facets of overtourism (ie physical, environmental, psychological, sociocultural, economic and political), concerted efforts involving all stakeholders and strong political will.

⁶⁴ Nader Tavassoli, "Pricing solutions to Bhutan's sustainable tourism policy," London Business School, December 11, 2023, <https://www.london.edu/think/pricing-solutions-to-bhutans-sustainable-tourism-policy>; Monica Pitrelli, "Think Bhutan's \$100 daily tourism fee is pricey? It could go even higher, says prime minister," *CNBC*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/05/21/bhutan-may-revise-its-sustainable-development-fee-if-travel-picks-up.html>

Discussion Questions

1. How do market-based instruments like accommodation taxes and tiered pricing address the negative externalities of overtourism? What are the potential trade-offs in using such tools?
2. The Japanese government is promoting tourism to lesser-known regions as part of its strategy to mitigate overtourism. What are the potential economic and social benefits of this policy? What challenges might arise in its implementation, and how could these be addressed?
3. In what ways do regulatory measures differ from market-based instruments in tackling overtourism? In what ways are they the same? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?
4. In what ways can local communities actively influence and co-create sustainable tourism policies?
5. What lessons can Japan learn from other countries' approaches to overtourism? What are the possible issues and concerns that the Japanese government may face in implementing these policies?