

Preface

Seasons change, people change, and tourism changes

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The global COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, had a tremendous impact on the international community. The spread of the disease forced people around the world to change various aspects of their lives, including their lifestyles. Many companies were also required to adapt to this new way of life. For example, restaurants not only thoroughly implemented infection prevention measures but also introduced initiatives that transcended the traditional boundaries of their business, such as takeout and food delivery services. In addition, many companies shifted to remote work instead of requiring employees to come into the office.

The tourism sector was also forced to adapt to these new lifestyles. The number of foreign visitors to Japan, which had reached approximately 31.9 million in 2019, decreased by more than 99% compared to the same month of the previous year from April 2020 onward. The annual number of domestic guests, including Japanese travelers, staying at hotels and inns in 2020 also decreased by 48.9 % compared to the previous year. In May 2020, the Japan Association of Travel Agents (JATA) formulated guidelines for dealing with COVID-19 in the travel industry. The Japan Hotel Association established similar guidelines during the same month. Under these circumstances, JTB, a major Japanese travel agency, attempted to promote virtual and online tours.

However, tourism eventually returned to pre-COVID-19 levels. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), the number of foreign visitors to Japan, which had once fallen to 245,862 in 2021, reached a record high of 42.68 million in 2025. Meanwhile, the number of Japanese overseas travelers also recovered from 512,244 in 2021 to 14.73 million in 2025. As travel demand steadily recovered, people appeared to lose interest in virtual tourism and online tours, both of which had attracted considerable attention during the pandemic. According to keyword search trend data provided by Google, terms such as “virtual tour” and “online tour” are no longer searched as frequently as they were during the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, online tours are live-streamed experiences guided in real time, whereas virtual tours consist of pre-recorded content

that can be enjoyed at any time.

Although the search volume of these terms on Google Trends has fluctuated continuously from December 2019 to April 2026, the long-term trend has been downward. This decline suggests that people may have gradually lost interest in virtual and online tours in recent years.

Recently, several famous tourist destinations, such as Kyoto, have suffered from so-called “over-tourism,” whereas many other regions still have the capacity to accommodate far more visitors. Therefore, attracting tourists to less popular destinations could create a win-win situation. Green tourism may serve as an alternative, especially for rural areas that lack well-known tourism resources.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) defines green tourism as “a leisure activity through which visitors enjoy nature, culture, and interpersonal exchanges while staying in rural areas,” including activities such as farming experiences. Although the concept resembles eco-tourism in that it involves enjoying nature, green tourism is not necessarily intended to promote learning about the natural environment or ecosystems.

Originally, green tourism was positioned as one form of “new tourism,” which received financial support from the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA). New tourism refers to a type of travel that is experience-oriented and purpose-driven, differing from traditional forms of tourism. It includes not only green tourism but also industrial tourism, eco-tourism, health tourism, cultural tourism, and long-stay tourism. This concept was expected to contribute to the revitalization of local economies in Japan.

Nevertheless, the circumstances surrounding green tourism are not necessarily favorable, despite the government support mentioned above. Organizers and practitioners of green tourism continue to face several challenges. Like virtual tourism and online tours, public interest in green tourism also appears to be declining. According to Google Trends, the search volume of the term “green tourism” has shown a downward trend since January 2004.

Ultimately, nothing lasts forever. The COVID-19 pandemic is

gradually subsiding. Seasons change, and so do people, societies, and businesses. Only time will tell what succeeds and what does not. Tourism and tourism studies must also continue adapting to this new era. Although it cannot necessarily be said that only the best will survive, it may be said that those who survive are, in some sense, the most adaptable.

About the author


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