

ECONOMY

Japan's rural economies cash in on foreign tourists

Visitors spent over 1 trillion yen outside big cities in 2018, government says

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More foreign tourists to Japan are venturing farther away from Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka, and to places like Kanazawa, the capital of Ishikawa Prefecture, in central Japan. (Photo by Nobuyoshi Shioda)

TOKYO -- Foreign tourist spending in rural parts of Japan is surging faster than it is nationwide.

Consumption by overseas visitors in rural areas came to 1.036 trillion yen (about \$9.67 billion) in 2018, up 58% from 2015, according to the 2019 White Paper on Tourism, released on Friday by the government-affiliated Japan Tourism Agency.

Foreign tourist consumption in rural areas as a percentage of total tourist spending reached 28.5% last year, an improvement from 23.6% in 2015, as more travelers visited farming and fishing villages, went skiing and indulged in other winter sports, and took in nature and Japanese culture.

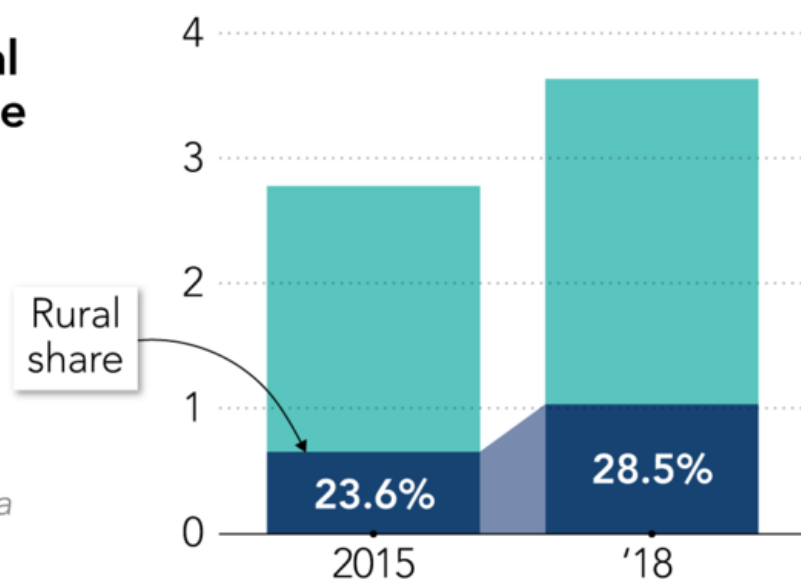
The white paper considers eight prefectures -- Tokyo, Kanagawa, Chiba, Saitama, Aichi, Osaka, Kyoto and Hyogo -- as metropolitan and the remaining 39 as rural.

Foreign tourist consumption in Japan -- including travel expenditures while in the country -- totaled 4.5 trillion yen in 2018, up about 30% from 2015. Consumption in rural areas soared at a much faster pace, nearly 60%, during the same period.

Foreign tourist spending in rural Japan on the rise (in trillions of yen)

- Rural areas
- Three biggest metropolitan areas*

*Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya
Source: 2019 White Paper on Tourism



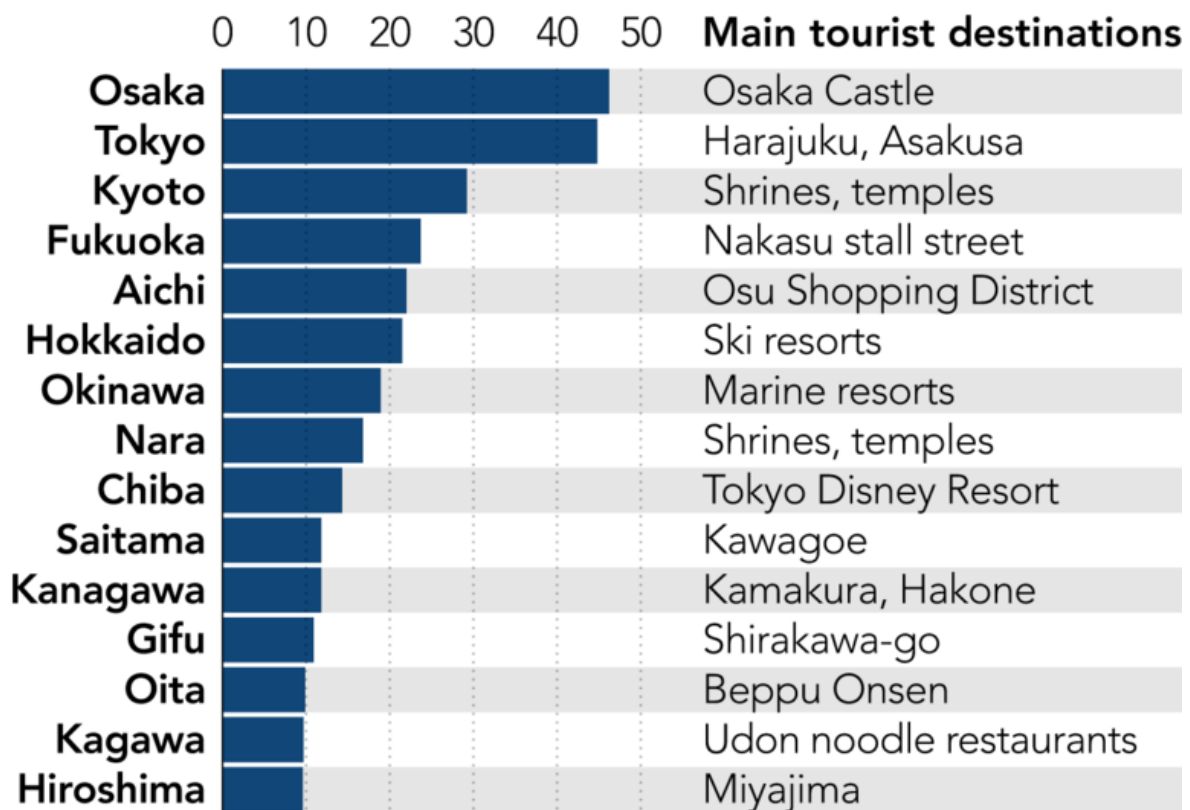
In Osaka and Tokyo, foreign tourist spending made up nearly half of total tourist spending. In Fukuoka, Hokkaido and Okinawa, all of which are blessed with a multitude of tourist attractions, the ratio was around 20%. In Nara, it was 17%. The figure for Gifu and Oita was 10%.

More foreign tourists are finding their way out of the Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka metropolitan areas. In 2018, 18 million foreign tourists trekked into rural areas, about 5 million more than those who simply enjoyed city indulgences. The gap is wider than it was in 2015, when 10.2 million foreign tourists ventured into the countryside and 9.5 million contented themselves in one of the big burgs.

A desire for experiences and an urge to mix with locals are pushing the trend, according to the white paper. In the first regard, skiing and snowboarding are particularly popular activities.

This is helping the Hokkaido town of Niseko cement its image as a world-class ski resort. It is also making Niseko one of Japan's hottest real estate markets as more condominiums pop up to accommodate foreign skiers.

Foreign tourist spending as a percent of all tourist spending in top 15 prefectures



Source: Tourism White Paper 2019

Winter sports were the biggest lure in bringing tourists away from the three metropolitan areas, but farming and fishing villages, springtime cherry blossoms, and fall colors also enticed large numbers of foreign tourists into rural Japan.

"Foreign visitors seem to prefer authentic experiences rather than artificial tourist spots," a Japan Tourism Agency official said.

But the visitors are also bringing congestion and poor manners with them, causing friction with locals at some tourist destinations.

As tourist numbers climb, Japan will have to adapt, come up with sustainability measures and upgrade its infrastructure.