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As an element in its international tourism promotion, Shizuoka Prefectural Government, Tourism Promotion Office invited members of the Tokyo American Club Women’s Group Tour Committee on a three-day (September 2 to 4, 2009) study tour of Shizuoka, to introduce them to the unknown attractions and delightful experiences the prefecture has to offer. The participating committee members, Ms. Sandra Isaka and Ms. Rebecca Evans, described the diverse attractions of Shizuoka from various perspectives and at the same time their frank and informative suggestions were shared on how Shizuoka could attract more people from other countries.

Q: First, please tell us a little about yourselves.

Sandra Isaka: My name is Sandra Isaka, and I moved here about 15 years ago from Atlanta, Georgia. At the Tokyo American Club, I am a member of the Women’s Group Tour Committee and the Culture Committee. My hobbies are exploring Japan and leading tours, so I was very interested in having this opportunity.

Rebecca Evans: My name is Rebecca Evens and I moved here from San Francisco about three years ago. I’m on the Tour Committee as well, and I have been co-chair for about a year and a half. I have three children and we love to explore Japan. But, with kids I need to know where I’m going first, so this was a good opportunity for me to see different tourist sites in order to pick the ones I wanted to go back to with my family. Which ones are the easiest? I think a lot of families focus on that question, especially those with small children.



Rebecca & Sandra

Q: What is your impression of Shizuoka as a whole?

Rebecca Evans : It's really beautiful. There are so many things to do that I would never have been able to find without going there first on this tour. I don't just go out and explore by myself. All of the places that I visit are places that someone has taken me first. I try to go to places by myself, but I get lost as I can't read the signs. I don't read kanji, so it is really frustrating when I get lost, especially with my kids in the car.

Sandra Isaka: I actually lived in Kanagawa, near Odawara, for 10 years, so I know Izu and the Fuji-go-ko area very well. But, I've never been to the rest of Shizuoka, so this trip was very eye opening. I plan to take my husband back to visit many of the places that we saw last week.

Q: Did you have any Japanese cultural experiences during your trip to Shizuoka?

Rebecca Evans: Zazen at the Buddhist temple was my favorite highlight of the trip.

Sandra Isaka: That was my favorite too. It was a very unique opportunity.

Rebecca Evans: I've never experienced Zen food and culture. At the temple, the monks were really friendly and they had a good sense of humor. I've been to a lot of temples and shrines, but never on a tour like that. It made a huge difference to know some history and to know what we're looking at. We also did meditation, ate a special lunch, and we spoke with the monks; so it was really nice.



Shojin Ryori(Kasuisai)

Q: What did you think of Shojin Ryori or Zen vegetarian cuisine as an experience of Japanese food? Did you enjoy it?

Sandra Isaka: It was really impressive. That was one of the best meals I've ever had in Japan.

Rebecca Evans: Me too. Everything was delicious, and the flavors were so delicate. It was also so beautifully presented.

Sandra Isaka: Having a priest tell us how it was made was also very impressive; especially that they use mostly locally grown vegetables in their meals.

Q: Please tell us a little bit about hotel accommodations.

Sandra Isaka: The Tsumagoi Resort had a little bit of a dated feeling, but it was perfectly clean and the staff was excellent.

Rebecca Evans: Also, it is a great family resort with wonderful facilities. As the rooms are so large, an entire family can stay in one room..

Sandra Isaka: I agree. I was very impressed with the resort. I would strongly recommend it to everyone, especially families. You can race go-carts, play golf or tennis, swim, etc. The list goes on and on.

Rebecca Evans: I'd recommend that the resort also promote the kiwi farm nearby. It's right down the street. If the hotel had information about it, or if it could be a stop along their bus route, it would be a really great additional activity for families.

Q: Are you comfortable with staying at Japanese-style inn or ryokan, serving a big meal for dinner as a package, for instance?

Rebecca Evans: I'm comfortable if it's only my husband and myself, but with the kids I'm not so comfortable because they won't eat their money's worth. My son would eat a bowl of rice; my daughter might eat a little bit of meat, but only if she liked it. They would probably eat a quarter or less of the total meal. It would be nice to have an option of a smaller, or completely different, menu for kids.

Sandra Isaka: I've have been in Japan for a long time now, so I've got used to Japanese food and I love it. But, if I go to a seaside resort in Japan, my husband and I often have to say that I have a seafood allergy because I still can't eat exotic seafood. If a ryokan is in the mountains, I can usually eat everything; but if it's on the coast, we try very hard to find a place where dinner is not included. Most Americans would probably be the same. Europeans are much more open-minded, but all foreigners find dinner to be too expensive.

One thing to keep in mind is that our concept of travel is different from that of most Japanese. This is especially true in regards to staying at a ryokan. When most foreigners go on vacation in Japan, it's more about what we do, than the food we eat. If I'm going out for a fancy dinner, I'll do that here in Tokyo when I can get dressed up and make a night of it. When I go on vacation, I don't need a fancy dinner. I've been running around all day sightseeing, I don't want to spend hours eating a huge meal afterwards.

Rebecca Evans: That's true. It is a different concept. For example, earlier this year I went to a ski resort in Minowa with four Japanese families, and I was shocked. The price was really good, the accommodations were perfect, but then we had dinner: There was a lady in a long gown playing music. Everybody was dressed up in heels, and my daughter said, "Mommy, you didn't bring my dress". I was thinking that after skiing all day we usually like to have beer and pizza. This was an entire eight course dinner. I didn't expect it at all, and it didn't fit with a family ski outing, so we didn't have the appropriate clothes,... After being out all day hiking or exploring, most foreigners just want to come back and experience something more casual.

Sandra Isaka: When we visit a ryokan, we just want an all-around Japanese experience. We are visiting the ryokan, but we are more interested in the town or area around it. I've noticed that when many Japanese arrive at a ryokan, they put their yukata on right away. Then, for hours, they wander around, go to the bath, take a long time to eat dinner, visit the bath again,... As soon as my husband and I arrive, we put our luggage in the room, look around the ryokan quickly, and then we go exploring outside. We return right before dinner, we eat, and then we often go back outside again for a little while. Afterwards, we take a bath and go to bed. I think the whole concept of going to a ryokan is completely different for Japanese and Westerners.

Rebecca Evans: We want to see what's on the outside, not stay on the inside to just relax.

Sandra Isaka: I think another important point is that many Japanese go to a fancy ryokan once or twice a year, whereas my husband and I travel out of Tokyo once or twice a month. We like to stay in nice accommodations, but we don't want a kaiseki-type dinner every other week.

Rebecca Evans: The per-person cost of a ryokan is the biggest problem. We would really love to stay in ryokan more often, and a simple dinner for "gaijin" could bring the price down. Make a dish that all foreigners can eat: perhaps chicken, a side vegetable, some pickles, and rice. If I am traveling with my children, that is all they are going to eat. So we don't want to pay for a huge meal that we can't appreciate the same way that the Japanese can.

Q: We understand that Mt. Fuji, green tea and Kunozan Toshogu Shrine were considered to be central attractions that the prefecture wanted to offer. How was Mt. Fuji?

Rebecca Evans: I think Mt. Fuji is an easy sell. It's relatively easy to get to, and everyone wants to go there. If you supply more English information about exactly how to get there, and how easy some of the hiking trails are, many more foreigners would

visit.

Sandra Isaka: I would highly recommend the tour guide and company "Whole Earth Nature School" that the Shizuoka Prefecture Tourism Office chose for us. The guide spoke lovely English, and the company she works for has a great English website. I'm definitely going to be sending them business. There's no doubt about it.

I was actually a little worried because we had been traveling all over Shizuoka Prefecture for 2 days and I thought, "I really don't want to hike on the 3rd day and then rush back to Tokyo in my hiking clothes". But, the hike was actually only a couple of kilometers. We never got tired or sweaty as our guide stopped constantly to point out plants, different types of sediment,... And, the terrain changed constantly, so we felt like we had traveled a long way. The most amazing part of the hike was the crater at the end. It was absolutely stunning.

Our hike was very short, but it could have been much longer and more difficult. There is something for everyone, from beginner to expert climber, which is really nice. The company even targets children's groups, which is fantastic.

Q: How was the green tea experience in Shizuoka?

Rebecca Evans: It was nice and kind of cute. The time spent picking and processing the tea wasn't too long or too short.

Sandra Isaka: I found the experience to be very interesting. I learned a lot about what is important when choosing a good tea leaf. We had a translator with us. If she had not been there to explain things in English, it wouldn't be quite as good of an experience. This also applies to the tea museum. It's a nice museum, and it was interesting when someone was explaining each exhibit. But everything's in Japanese, so if foreigners go there on their own, it's would be quite boring. The tea house and garden behind the museum were quite lovely, and the tea ceremony itself was fascinating. Luckily, not much English is necessary in order to enjoy them. But I recommend providing a tea ceremony instruction sheet so foreign guests will be more comfortable participating, and they will be able to understand more of the ceremony itself.



Tea experience (Ochano sato)

Q: May we understand that language is always a big problem?

Sandra Isaka: Yes, it is always a big problem. I really don't understand why most Japanese museums don't translate their exhibits explanations into English. Many exhibits never change, so the information only has to be translated one time and it is relevant forever. I often see articles in the news about Japan wanting to be more "international" in order to attract more tourists. But, for example, I recently visited the new Saitama Railway Museum, and there were almost no English translations. Considering the amount of money spent to build and promote the museum, I was surprised and disappointed. Translating is not very expensive; it can even be done for free. Ask a retired Japanese businessman from the local community to help with translation, or work with a high school and make it a project for English class. Almost every Japanese person has studied English for at least 6 years, those with a college education have studied for 10 years. Any museum, hotel, restaurant, or sightseeing spot has the capability to translate necessary information into English. But, very few people take the time to do it. It is a big weak point of Japan.

Rebecca Evans: What made the Zazen so special is that we had someone to explain everything. I've visited a lot of shrines and temples. I walk through them admiring the beauty, but they all seem the same because I don't know any background. That's what made our experience really special, we could understand. Lack of understanding is one of the biggest problems facing foreigners.

Q: How was the history or story of Ieyasu Tokugawa?

Rebecca Evans: I think it was great that we learned a little bit about him, but not too much. It is important to remember that most foreigners don't need a detailed explanation, especially children.

Sandra Isaka: At Kunouzan Shrine, the priest didn't use much English because we had an interpreter, but he did occasionally use some and it was evident that he has the ability to lead English tours of the temple on his own. He's a really cute character, and he obviously loves what he does. He made the shrine fascinating, and we think he is a star!

Rebecca Evans: I was so surprised by the humor that all of the priests had. I think of a priest as somebody so serious.

Sandy Isaka: I was incredibly impressed by the welcoming feeling we received at Kasuisai, Kuno-zan, and Fujisan Hongu Sengentaisha. The warmth we felt from the staff, and their desire to teach us about Japanese culture, was really fantastic.

Q: What would you recommend when your friends say they want to visit Shizuoka?

Rebecca Evans: I think that the steam locomotive ride was very impressive and the scenery was beautiful. If translation is available, I think the easiest sights that we could visit on our own are the music museum and the Zazen temple, as they are close to a train station. I doubt that I would recommend the sake brewery. I really didn't know how to get there.

Sandra Isaka: Regarding the brewery, unfortunately they don't speak any English, and there isn't any English information there. So, for a foreigner who doesn't speak Japanese, it is just a bar/café/store. If you really want foreigners to visit, I suggest that Hamamatsu City put together a "recommended course", written in Japanese and English, that gives specific instructions to the music museum, then, for example, "take bus number 7, three stops to the sake brewery; then take bus number 9 to the castle." Give tourists the necessary information and many people will follow the 'course'. Kamakura, in Kanagawa, has a variety of 'recommended courses' which are extremely popular among foreigners and Japanese alike.

Rebecca Evans: And Kamakura has all the information available just outside the train station, the information center is clearly marked and has extremely helpful staff.

Sandra Isaka: I think that recommended courses are crucial, and they are not that hard to create.

Rebecca Evans: Two or three sightseeing spots for the day are fine. Combine smaller attractions with larger ones. Most foreigners really want to get out and explore Japan, they just need a little bit of help doing it.



Steam locomotive (Oigawa Railway)

Q: When traveling, do you normally use public transportation system rather than driving a car yourself?

Rebecca Evans: I take public transportation or drive, it all depends on which is easiest. But, I'm not going if I don't have good directions on how to get there. Like I said before, I don't want to get lost with kids in tow.

Sandra Isaka: I believe that most foreign tourists go by public transportation, not by car. Many people are afraid of getting lost if they drive. And, many foreigners don't have access to a car. With my friends, I usually travel by train and bus. With my husband (who can speak and read Japanese), I travel by car. In most cases, it is all about awareness. We met two gentlemen from the Numazu tourist office who pointed out that the shinkansen from Tokyo only takes 37 minutes to Mishima (and Numazu is right next door). That is really quick! I'm going to do some exploring in Numazu now. It's not a place that I had ever even put on my list of places to go because it seemed to be far away.

Does JR have a Shizuoka 'Free Pass' which would allow travelers to get off and on at stations within Shizuoka? For example, I would love to take a shinkansen to Hamamatsu on a Friday, then travel by regular JR trains to a variety of destinations over the weekend before arriving in Mishima or Atami on Sunday night to take the shinkansen home. If it doesn't exist, this is something that I recommend the Shizuoka Tour Office work on.

Q : I understand you also made a similar trip to Gunma before. Did you find any big difference between Shizuoka and Gunma?

Sandra Isaka: They are completely different, but I think they both have exactly the same problem. Foreigners and Japanese people really don't know what sightseeing spots exist in either prefecture (with the exception of Izu). If you ask a foreigner about Shizuoka or Gunma they won't have any idea where it is. The name recognition is almost zero, so as far as they know, it could be in Kyushu!

Rebecca Evans: I couldn't even say 'Shizuoka' before this tour!

Sandra Isaka: Many foreigners I talk to believe that Mt. Fuji is in Hakone. I always have to straighten them out.



Fujisan Hongu Sengentaisha Shrine

Q: In order for Shizuoka to become a more attractive tour destination, what do you think they should do? You stated a while ago that the language barrier hampers foreign visitors to visit Shizuoka more.

Sandra Isaka: I think that's the biggest problem. It is crucial that Shizuoka provide more English information about what it has to offer. A good website is a wonderful and inexpensive way to promote just about anything. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be fancy. Take the instrument museum in Hamamatsu, for example. They have a nice English pamphlet, but there is nothing in English on their website. All they have to do is to put the information in the pamphlet on their website. At the very least, they can just scan it and add it as a link. That takes less than 10 minutes.

It is very important to remember that there are 3 ways that foreigners find out about places in Japan. The first place we go is the internet. We type in 'Mt. Fuji' and see what pops up. Then, we ask around for a personal recommendation from our friends. And, if we are in a specific location, the third is an English pamphlet or a brochure.

Rebecca Evans: I think recommendations from friends are most important because your friends tell you the truth, "don't go to 'A', it wasn't so good; or go to 'B', this is how you get there". They can write it down for you in your own language,... I think all of places I have gone to in Japan have been recommended to me by my friends. I would never have figured it out on my own.

Sandra Isaka: I write a blog on the internet, and my entries are reviews of places that I have visited. I don't advertize my blog, it is just for fun. But, because the internet is accessible to all, people from Europe, the USA, and even non-English-speaking Asian countries have e-mailed me to ask questions about what I've written. First, travelers find information on the internet, then they get an opinion, and then they go. The power of the internet is amazing.

Rebecca Evans: We depend on each other for information. Everybody talks about places they've been, where they have stayed,... It is that simple. We trust each other's opinions.

Q: When travelling, how would you like your travel schedule, one day or one night/two day course?

Rebecca Evans: Both! It all depends on how far away a sightseeing spot is. Numazu or Mt. Fuji can be done in a day from Tokyo, but Hamamatsu would probably be a two day course. By the way, when we were in Hamamatsu, I didn't have time to look at all the pamphlets. We went to the instrument museum and then the sake brewery. Between them, Hamamatsu is not very pretty. It is a flat, regular-looking city. I was

thinking, “Except to stop by the museum, I don’t think I want to come back to Hamamatsu.” Then I looked in a brochure and found out that there are a number of interesting sightseeing spots in the city, including a very beautiful castle. Someone at Hamamatsu Station should definitely give out a ‘recommended course’ brochure for the city.

Sandra Isaka: Look at Nikko, for example. They do a lot of marketing to foreigners and so everyone goes there. There are many English brochures and a number of websites, so traveling there is easy. Once visitors arrive at the Nikko train station, they take buses, which are all labeled in English, to Toshogu Shrine, Lake Chuzenji, Kegon Falls,.... They even have English guides available for hire at reasonable prices. Actually, this is an area they could improve. Foreigners visit Nikko to see a number of sights. They don’t want too much information. I highly recommend that sightseeing spots provide English-speaking guides. But, they don’t have to be professionals and they shouldn’t give information that is too detailed (unless requested).

Rebecca Evans: The best guide I ever had was a high school student. In Kamakura, they often volunteer as guides so they can practice their English. I was so impressed. Some students just walked up to us, they talked to our kids, and they talked to us. It didn’t matter that they were not professionals. At the Daibutsu, one young man told us a couple of sentences about the Buddha, including that we could go inside. We probably could have figured that out on our own, but it was special because it had a personal touch. The students were so cute and I was very impressed with their language ability.

Sandra Isaka: In Hakone, between Hakone-machi and Moto-Hakone, there’s an elementary school. Sometimes students from that elementary school come out onto the famous Cedar Avenue, and they hand out a little Hakone guide that they make themselves. I was given one many years ago, and I think I still have it. It was very special. Towns looking to promote tourism need to think out of the box. Some of my most memorable moments around Japan did not cost anything to the local government. The places I visited just had really unique ideas which took advantage of the local community. In Hakone, the students had a good experience trying out their English, they built confidence and realized English is a tool for communication. An English lesson for them was a Japanese cultural event for us. It was perfect combination, just like Rebecca’s experience with the high school guide. I hope to have the same type of experience in Shizuoka someday.

Itinerary 2/9/2009 - 4/9/2009

1st day

Tokyo Hamamatsu sta. Hamamatsu Museum of Musical Instruments
Sake Brewery" Tenjingura" Kasuisai Temple LaLaport Iwata
Kakegawa Kachoen Park The Tsumagoi Resort

2nd day

Ochano sato Oigawa Railway(Steam locomotive ride) Kunozan Toshogu Shrine
Awashima Hotel

3rd day

Fujisan Hongu Sengentaisha Shrine Mt.Fuji trekking Shin-Fuji sta Tokyo

(Website)

* English

Shizuoka Tourism Association

<http://shizuoka-guide.com/english/index.html>

Kakegawa Kachoen Park

<http://www.kamoltd.co.jp/kkee/>

Kunozan Toshogu Shrine

<http://www.toshogu.or.jp/>

Whole Earth Nature School

<http://wens.gr.jp/english/index.html>

* Japanese

Hamamatsu Museum of Musical Instruments

<http://www.gakkihaku.jp/>

Kasuisai Temple

<http://www.kasuisai.or.jp/>

LaLaport Iwata

<http://www.lalaport-iwata.com/>

The Tsumagoi Resort

<http://www.tsumagoinet/>

Ochano sato

<http://www.ochanosato.com/>

Oigawa Railway

<http://www.oigawa-railway.co.jp/>

Awashima Hotel

<http://www.awashima.com/>

Sengentaisha Shrine

<http://fuji-hongu.or.jp/sengen/>