

## Iwate Prefecture introduces quirky signs and other initiatives to lure foreign visitors

Struggling to attract foreign visitors, Iwate Prefecture has embarked on a charm offensive using quirky signs and other techniques to endear tourists to the far-flung region.

The campaign, titled [“Ten ways to make travelers happy.”](#) features an illustration of a samurai warrior with a traditional topknot hairstyle, who informs tourists of Japanese etiquette and ways to enjoy local culture.

“We wanted to start with something simple to use,” something unique and fun that would spark interest, Takefumi Shimomukai, director of the Iwate Prefectural Government’s Morioka Regional Development Bureau said.

One example depicts the dos and don’ts of enjoying hot springs with short messages in English that read: “Wash first, then into tub” and “Don’t run, swim & dive.” These graphics can be downloaded from a website run by the city of Morioka.

The symbols are currently used mainly at hot springs, hotels and inns in Morioka and are well received by overseas travelers, Shimomukai said.

The campaign was launched last April by the Morioka Municipal Government with advice from Ryusuke Murao, a well-known brand strategy consultant and author. However, the initiative garnered more recognition last month when students of Murao designed new symbols that inform travelers of food options that were aimed at reaching a larger number of visitors.

One recently added icon features a piglet leaning on the edge of a bowl that is meant as a friendly warning for vegetarians and other diners who eschew pork.

“Many foreign tourists visit Hokkaido, Tokyo and Kyoto but only about 500,000 visit the Tohoku region yearly,” Shimomukai said. “But I believe that we can show off our hospitality and convince tourists that Morioka or Iwate are good places (to visit).”

With the city of Kamaishi, also in Iwate, due to host matches during the 2019 Rugby World Cup, local attitudes are shifting, said Shimomukai.

“Even taxi drivers — initially reluctant to serve foreign visitors for fear of communication troubles — noticed there are more and more overseas visitors coming in the spring to enjoy the cherry blossoms,” he said. “It’s better to be prepared in advance.”

Read, Share and Discuss

“Until recently some owners believed their profits from serving only locals were sufficient, and due to the language barrier, they may have left foreign visitors with a feeling that they were not welcome,” Shimomukai added.

Those behind the campaign hold lectures around the city to encourage locals to offer help and interact with tourists — “even in broken English,” they say.

Business owners have also been urged to display signs saying “we welcome tourists.”

The Morioka Municipal Government has requested taxi operators to hang foreigner-friendly symbols in their cars, which number about 800 in the city, Shimomukai said.

Murao’s concept developed following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that devastated the Tohoku region. He has since campaigned for strengthening bonds with foreign nations, also to show gratitude to supporters following the disaster.



