

Israelis increasingly find their 'Moment of Zen' in Japan

With prices falling, the number of tourists flocking to the Land of the Rising Sun has soared over the past five years



FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD: A tranquil landscape in a Tokyo park, left, a Japanese temple and girls sporting avant-garde garb in Tokyo.

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Israelis' Facebook pages have been filled in recent months with photos of sushi at Tokyo restaurants, gardens and temples in Kyoto, religious processions in Nara and museums in Hiroshima. The "Land of the Rising Sun" has become a huge hit.

Formerly an exotic, unconventional destination that attracted a relatively small number of Israelis, Japan has suddenly become a major draw. Figures from the Japanese National Tourism Organization show that three times as many Israelis (nearly 22,000) visited Japan last year compared to 2011.

"Five years ago, not too many went to Japan as tourists. Now I'm constantly hearing from people who want to go back for a second, third or even fourth visit," says Prof. Jacob Raz of Tel Aviv University's East Asian studies department. He is one of Israel's leading experts on Japanese culture and the author of 10 books on the subject.

"These are independent travelers, who choose a whole range of destinations, not just Tokyo and Kyoto," he explains. "They're spending longer periods of time in the country, and going to places that are considered remote even by the standards of people who know Japan well. When I get people asking me about planning a trip in the footsteps of the [17th-century] poet Basho, it's obvious something has changed."

Why are Israelis so interested in traveling to Japan?

"Japanese culture is one of the most fascinating on Earth. It has a combination of a glorious tradition and a modern culture that represents the best and latest technology. It's no wonder it inspires so much curiosity.

"Japan is still one of the world's most exotic destinations. The world has shrunk, so it suddenly seems more accessible. As to why this is happening now, it's due to a confluence of circumstances. Let's start with the cost: Japan is cheaper today than Israel. The price levels are generally a little lower than Europe. It's also a very comfortable place for a foreign visitor. Over the last few years, signs in English have been installed at all the train stations. It's very easy to find your way around – and this is also becoming true for the smallest villages."

Raz: 'Japanese culture has a combination of a glorious tradition and a modern culture that represents the latest technology.'

Have the two cultures grown closer than they used to be?

"Yes. We have a better understanding of Japanese culture than we used to. Our way of looking at it has completely changed in the last decade. In the past, we went to Japan in search of the exotic in the most simple sense of the word – geishas and kimonos, etc.

"Just look at our East Asian studies department,"

he adds. "It's now the largest department in the Humanities faculty, with more than 700 students.

"When we founded it, it mostly attracted students who wanted to study philosophy and art. Now, many of our students go on to work in finance and high-tech.

"Another thing is that, in the past few years, many more books have been translated from Japanese into Hebrew – and not just the books of Haruki Murakami. Keter Books has published translations of six books by Banana Yoshimoto. These are writers who describe contemporary Japanese life. This also contributes to the feeling of closeness."

Not just minimalism

Dr. Ayelet Zohar is an artist and lecturer in the art history department at [Tel Aviv University](#). She has lived in Japan for extended periods and studies modern Japanese art. She points to three elements of Japan's appeal to Israelis: the chance to observe an exotic past; popular products in contemporary culture; and consumption of Japanese products such as

Mazda and Sony, which are very popular in Israel.

Is the current wave of Israeli visitors reducing the cultural distance?

"No. The distance is huge and, in many ways, very hard for Israeli visitors to understand. Japanese culture is very precise, refined, serious and meticulous. The simplest illustration of this is the Japanese train system, which is remarkably punctual and efficient. Israelis look at this with admiration and their immediate reaction is self-

denigration – we don't have anything that can compare.

"But we don't see the other, darker side. If you know Japanese culture well, you know that this vaunted meticulousness exacts a high personal price. The Japanese live in a constant state of striving. This arouses great anxiety, and they pay a personal price for the endless quest to excel. As Israelis, we often choose to relax and take it easy – in order not to pay that kind of price."

Is the desire to get a close-up view of Zen culture a key reason for the trips?

"Many Israelis cite their desire to learn about Zen culture as an incentive for traveling to Japan. Actually, I find that quite funny. In many ways, to the Japanese, Zen is a bit like Bratslav Hasidism is to Israelis. It exists, but it's not part of everyday life for most people.

"The concept of Zen has been blown out of proportion to its importance in Japan; Zen is certainly not predominant in Japan these days.

"And Zen is not the sole aesthetic to be found in Japan. Japanese culture is more complex than that. There are other types of aesthetics – such as the opposite of minimalism, an aesthetic of abundance with flowers and gold. And there are differences between the public and private space in Japan.

"This is a very fascinating aspect that many tourists are not aware of. Houses in Japan are generally very cramped. There is no highly developed culture of interior

design. The private space is quite neglected and, as a result, the Japanese don't invite guests to their homes. But one must also remember that family life is often very hard, too. The extended family has practically disappeared following the shift from the countryside to the cities. Some rural areas have been left **completely** deserted following the economic crisis. But this crisis has positive sides as well: the status of women has markedly improved as a result."

Yoav Reiss is a production manager at Am Oved publishers. A few weeks ago, he returned from a 16-day trip to Japan. His Facebook page is filled with photographs of Japanese design, clothing and food.

"I've been fascinated by Japanese culture for years," says Reiss. "The trip was a dream come true. I am especially drawn to the minimalism of Japanese aesthetics. Minimalism is part of the cultural language in Japan, and that's what I was looking for. And I really did find that.

"There's a sense of quiet being maintained – which is the total opposite of what we experience in Israel. There is huge respect for privacy. No one will chat on his cellphone on a train full of people. At the same time, you see they have places where they go to let loose – like the gambling halls, for instance."

Reiss adds that the cost of his trip was similar to going to Europe, and that the prices were less expensive than we've grown accustomed to thinking they might be.