

1,000 Associates Enthusiastically Inspect 28 Courses in 6 Tohoku Prefectures Aomori Prefectural Governor Met and Spoke to Participants in Person



Governor Mimura(second from left), Chairman Kikuma(second from right) and Dr. Bernhard Zimburg, the Austrian Ambassador to Japan with the participants in Aomori VIP course

On December 3 and 4, JATA held the “Tohoku (Northeastern region of Japan) Reconstruction Support 1,000 Project” in which it sent member agencies’ staff and others to the Tohoku region in northeastern Japan.

Approximately 1,000 associates traveled a total of 28 courses, including the four courses set up in each prefecture, the VIP course for ambassadors from various countries, and courses offered by invitation such as in Aizuwakamatsu City. Participants conducted an enthusiastic inspection, seeking opportunities for commercial realization of travel products.

At the start-off ceremony held on the Shinkansen B3 concourse at JR Ueno Station in Tokyo early in the morning of December 3, JATA Chairman Jungo Kikuma reaffirmed that “we planned this project with the mission of energizing the Tohoku region through tourism.” He called on participants, saying, “Two days is a short time, but I want you to look intently at the Tohoku region and, through the eyes of professionals, to discover new things from the local people and the scenery.”

Participants on the VIP course included ambassadors from Austria, Columbia, and Bangladesh, embassy staff from Angola, Australia, Poland, Madagascar, and Lithuania, and staff from various countries’ airline companies and tourist bureaus. The governor of Aomori Prefecture, Shingo Mimura, met the VIP course participants in front of the prefectural office building, shook each person’s hands, and led them into the building. The governor, using a photo display panel, gave a humorous presentation on the attractions of Aomori’s four seasons, mixing his smattering of English with hand gestures.

In response to the governor’s heartfelt description, JATA Chairman Kikuma rejoined, “I can feel his strong determination to attract foreign tourists and reinvigorate domestic travel, and I want us in the travel industry to settle in and engage in reinvigoration of two-way tourism, both inbound and outbound. Through this project, we will publicize the attractions of Aomori, with the hope that it will contribute in some way to the revitalization of tourism in Tohoku.

In JATA’s “Tohoku (Northeastern region of Japan) Reconstruction Support 1,000 Project,” efforts were made to communicate with local people by holding opinion exchanges and social gatherings along the inspection courses in each prefecture together with JATA member agencies’ staff and others. On the Miyagi Prefecture course in which JATA Vice Chairman Hiromi Tagawa participated, an opinion exchange was held on the evening of December 3 with related local persons from Osaki City, Naruko Spa Tourist Association, and the Miyagi Osaki Tourism Bureau.

Referring to statistical data showing that visitors to Tohoku have declined approximately 10% since the March 2011 earthquake, Vice Chairman Tagawa said, “I think the decrease



The start-off ceremony held at JR Ueno Station for the “Tohoku Reconstruction Support 1000 project”

may be slightly larger if you look at the leisure market alone. Considering the actual market size that Tohoku has, I think there is a decline of 20% to 30% compared to two years ago.”

In addition, Vice Chairman Tagawa pointed out, “JATA must, together with the entire travel industry, stimulate the leisure market.” He expressed his determination, saying, “This year during which we worked on reconstruction from the earthquake, and moving ahead, I would like for the planning staff who participated in this inspection to endeavor to discover new attractions and to proactively promote product creation for the fourth quarter of this year and next fiscal year.

Meanwhile, Hisako Yamada, section manager of Industry and Economic Department of Tourism Exchange Section of Osaki City, explained, “During the 2011 earthquake, the seismic intensity in this area was 6+ on the Japanese scale. In the city, houses near the coast collapsed and roads were fragmented, but at Naruko Spa, there was no major damage either to the hot spring itself or the facilities.” Looking back on the sequence of events following the earthquake, she recalled, “We reached out to those in the disaster-stricken area on the coast and made arrangements so they could use Naruko Spa as a secondary shelter. People were sheltered at Naruko Spa until September 2011 when temporary housing and permanent housing were acquired. Even now, they come to the spa to seek solace, so we still keep connected.”

She called on the travel industry, saying, “When the project participants visited, we introduced our sake and sake breweries which are top quality because Osaki is blessed with the finest rice and water for making sake. However, that is just one of the many treasures we have, and so we ask everyone in the travel industry to be sure to send us many visitors.”

Takenobu Kikuchi, chairman of the Naruko Spa Tourist Association, emphasized, “I think that now is time when our original customer base will begin to return. I think the bad rumors will die down, but we need to make an effort.” He said, “We repaired the walking trail called Oku no Hosomichi with signs in four languages. This trail follows the path taken by the poet Matsuo Basho in the late 17th century, which we established it 30 years ago. The famous historical figures Minamoto no Yoshitsune and Matsuo Basho both passed through Naruko Spa; we want people to know this interesting fact, so we would like to ask your cooperation.”

Kenichi Kanno, manager of Sendai Miyagi Tourist Campaign Council explained about the Destination Campaign which will start in April 2013, saying, “We want the entire country to know that we have recovered our vitality and sparkle, and our primary themes are repose of souls, renaissance, learning, flowers, and food.” Pointing out that revival of tourism is also included in the prefecture’s disaster reconstruction plan, he urged project participants to “create travel products in Sendai and the remainder of Miyagi and to send visitors.”