

PHOTO CONTEST

Kamakura wedding, monk on cell phone win top prizes

Contest captures scenes of Japan through foreigners' eyes, contrasting the traditional with the modern

By AKEMI NAKAMURA
Staff writer

Ranjith Pallegama of Sri Lanka and Steven Dietz of Australia won the top prize of The Japan Times 2nd Photo Contest for non-Japanese, whose theme was "My Discoveries."

The annual contest asked foreigners around the world to submit photographs taken in the Kanto region or other parts of Japan.

This year's entries captured a variety of impressive images, ranging from terraced rice paddies and cherry blossoms to lively children at traditional festivals and spectacular night views of Tokyo.

"There were many pictures skillfully capturing the contrast of traditional and contemporary aspects of Japan," said Hiroshi Ueki, director of the Pola Museum of Art in Hakone, Kanagawa Prefecture, who headed the five-member judging committee. "Looking at these photos, I was amazed at how successfully foreigners took scenes that Japanese people would miss."

The contest was organized by the Kanto District Transport Bureau of the Land, Infrastructure and Transport Ministry and The Japan Times as part of the government's Visit Japan campaign.

Thirty photos were awarded prizes.

In the Kanto category, Pallegama won the Gold Prize with a photo taken in Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture, of a bride and groom, both wearing kimono for a traditional wedding ceremony. The judges said his picture conveys amusement by capturing a moment when the bride had her back turned to board a rickshaw.

In the outside-Kanto category, Dietz won the top prize for his picture of a Buddhist monk talking on a mobile phone behind a huge red pillar at a Koyasan temple in Wakayama Prefecture. The judges noted that the photo contrasts traditional and contemporary aspects of Japan.

The Japan Times received 2,031 photographs — 798 for the Kanto category and 1,214 for the outside-Kanto category. There were 19 photos whose locations could not be identified.

Approximately 446 people representing 50 nationalities submitted photos through the mail or the Internet between Sept. 1 and Oct. 31. About 45 percent of the applicants sent their pictures from overseas.

Among the entries, 100 photographs were selected by the Kanto District Transport Bureau and The Japan Times on Nov. 19.



The second screening was conducted by readers of The Japan Times via the Internet between Dec. 10 and 24. All 100 photos went to the final screening, due to the even distribution of votes.

At the final screening on Jan. 26, Gold, Silver and Bronze prizewinning photos in each category were selected by five judges — Ueki of the Pola museum; Ayako Hirota, a freelance announcer; Johnny Hymas, a British nature photographer and writer; Yasuhiro Yamashita, director general of the Kanto District Transport Bureau; and Yutaka Mataebara, editor in chief of The Japan Times.

Ueki, Hirota and Hymas also selected one photo each for the final screening for the Judges' Special Prize the same day.

Ueki awarded his prize to a picture of "jizo" stone figures

at Daienji Temple in Tokyo's Meguro Ward. The picture, taken by Martin Pfirrmann of Germany, offered a unique composition of the figures, he said.

Hirota's prize went to a photo taken by Frank Viermann of Germany of a non-Japanese boy surprised at the sight of a large fish head at the Tsukiji Market in Tokyo's Chuo Ward. "This picture makes me feel alive. I can tell the boy enjoys life in Japan by looking at his face," Hirota said.

Hymas selected a picture by Chris Fawcett of Canada that depicts a geisha looking at foliage at Tofukuji Temple in Kyoto. "I made a (photo collection) book called 'Niwa no Kokoro' ('The Living Gardens')." When I went to Kyoto for two years (to take photos for the book), I went to this temple, Tofukuji, many times through the seasons,"

Hymas recalled. "When I see the geisha (in the picture), it makes (it) more attractive."

Kodak Japan Ltd. Chief Operating Officer Paul Kosieracki chose six photographs — one for the Kodak Family Prize and five for the Kodak Professional Prize. "I looked closely at not only the images of people and things in Japan but also the photographic contrast and colors," he said, adding it was very hard to choose.

Kodak Japan supported the contest by printing out pictures for the screening and providing 100 rolls of film or a Kodak digital camera with a printer for the Kodak prize winners.

Among all the photos submitted, except the 100 in the final screening, 15 were chosen for the Family Prize by the Kanto District Transport Bureau and The Japan Times.

Hotel New Grand in Yokohama, Royal Park Hotel in Tokyo and Hotel Highland Resort in Fujiyoshida, Yamanashi Prefecture, offered luxury accommodation coupons for winners of the Judges' Special Prize.

For the Family Prize winners, Tobu Railway Co. gave away a pair of Nikko Kinugawa rail passes and a pair of tickets to the Tobu World Square theme park of miniature replicas of famous structures. Fuji Kyuko Co. offered a pair of passes to the Fujikyū Highland amusement park.

The Visit Japan campaign was launched by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in 2003 to attract more foreign visitors by providing more tourism information.

The campaign, of which the transport ministry is taking the initiative, has yielded fruit steadily toward its goal

of 10 million foreign tourists annually by 2010. Last year, a record 6.14 million foreigners traveled to Japan, up 17.9 percent from the previous year.

"I was impressed with so many other good photographs, which were not selected for the final screening stage," said Yamashita of the Kanto District Transport Bureau. "We hope that more and more foreigners will discover the beautiful landscapes, culture and traditions of Japan through this photo contest and feel like they want to actually visit this country."

All 30 prizewinning photographs will be exhibited between March 9 and 15 at the Kodak Photo Salon's Gallery 2 in the Ginza district in Tokyo's Chuo Ward. Admission is free. The salon is open between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. through the period, except March 15, when it closes at 3 p.m. For information, call the salon at (03) 3572-4411.

Pricing structure, lack of English information hurt tourism: survey

By TAKASHI KITAZUME
Staff writer

While Kyoto and Nikko remain widely popular travel destinations with foreign visitors, interest is growing in the more everyday aspects of traditional Japanese rural life.

There is also strong foreign demand for English-language information that can help tourists visit Japan in more economical ways.

Those were among the observations made by 689 non-Japanese who responded to a recent survey carried out by The Japan Times and the Land, Infrastructure and Transport Ministry's Kanto District Transport Bureau.

The survey, held in conjunction with The Japan Times Photo Contest, sought foreigners' views about Japan's travel environment.

Asked about places in Japan they would visit again and would recommend to other foreign tourists, many cited the ancient temples and shrines in Kyoto, Nara, Nikko and Miyajima, Hiroshima Prefecture, as well as some of the well-known "onsen" spa resorts where visitors can soak in outdoors hot springs amid natural scenic beauty.

A Canadian visitor recalled how he enjoyed a community festival in a Tokyo suburb during the cherry blossom season, strolling through streets and shops and tasting the local fare.

A British tourist cited Nagato on the Sea of Japan coast in Yamaguchi Prefecture as one of his favorites.

"This area manages better than most to retain both its sense of community and its natural beauty. . . . The street outside has changed little, with the old buildings clustering together," he wrote. "People make a place, and the ones we met in Nagato made our visit special."

The same respondent added: "I would strongly recommend keeping your eyes open and noticing things. Many of the treasures of Japan are hidden away — ancient temples, traditional gardens, architectural treasures — among the urban jungle, and many are simply overlooked."

Another Canadian said he found rural regions of Japan more interesting because they tend to retain more of the traditional culture. But he also observed that quality is disappearing rapidly due to the chronic problems of depopulation and unemployment.

Some rural communities try to have everything — high technology, a "furusato" hometown atmosphere and internationalization programs — with the end result being a chaotic mess of disappointing projects, he said.

"They should specialize in their traditions when marketing themselves and make them easily accessible to foreigners who want to learn about them," he said. His favorite examples of places "where traditional culture has been well-preserved" were Takayama and Shirakawa in Gifu Prefecture, and Okayama.

A respondent from Australia suggested that home-stay accommodations would be a good way for foreign tourists to learn more about the country.

"Because Japan is so different to any Western culture, I think the best way for tourists to be able to experience Japanese culture, customs and behaviors would be to stay with a Japanese family," she wrote.

While some of the respondents cited Japan's high travel, accommodation and dining expenses as problems with the travel environment, many others pointed to the insufficient availability of information in English.

A lack of detailed information in foreign languages on train, bus and flight timetables tends to prompt many non-Japanese to join sightseeing tours — one of the reasons behind the complaint that traveling in Japan is expensive, they said. Some said they want that information put on the Internet.

Respondents also pointed out that tourist information centers in major cities are often set up in inconvenient locations, closed in the evenings and devoid of English-speaking staff.

In addition, many said that inexpensive accommodations and discount travel tickets are less available in Japan than, for example, in many European countries, and that information on such services is often not well-publicized to foreign visitors.

"Visitors on small budgets need more information about cheaper ways of getting around in Japan and less expensive accommodation options," one respondent said.

JUDGMENT DAY



MEMBERS OF the judging committee select winners for The Japan Times 2nd Photo Contest for non-Japanese on Jan. 26 at Hotel New Grand in Yokohama.

TOSHIKI SAWAGUCHI PHOTOS

List of judges

Hiroshi Ueki
Head of the judging committee
Director, the Pola Museum of Art in HakoneAyako Hirota
Freelance announcerYasuhiro Yamashita
Director general
of the Kanto District Transport BureauJohnny Hymas
Nature photographer, writerYutaka Mataebara
Editor-in-chief, executive managing editor
The Japan TimesPaul Kosieracki
Chief Operating Officer
Kodak Japan Ltd.