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Thoughts on Sakura

Steve Gillick

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14 MAR 2011: Steve Gillick, president of the Canadian Institute of Travel Counsellors (CITC), and a regular columnist for this publication, has close ties to Japan and the current events in that country led him to reflect on the spirit and strength of the country:



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Sakura is the Japanese cherry blossom, and the annual blossom festivals are just about three weeks away. In city parks throughout Japan, the cherry blossoms will resemble forests of pink clouds, and this visual treasure has inspired poets and artists to regard the sakura as an omen of good fortune, an emblem of love and a metaphor for the fleeting nature of life.

In fact, the Japanese expression “mono no a-ware” includes the concept of ‘empathy toward things’ as well as ‘the impermanence of things’, both associated with the Sakura.

This year’s cherry blossom festival will include much ambivalence for the Japanese people, as well as many travellers who have explored the country and fallen in love with the people, the history, culture, the food and everything else that ‘is Japan’.

For some, the delicate beauty and bouquet of the blossoms will elicit feelings of strength and hope, that despite the terrible catastrophes that the

country is enduring, the cherry blossoms will have bloomed and brought joy and a sense of “things will get better as time goes on.”

For others, reflecting on the poetic impermanence of the cherry blossoms, the feeling may be more empathetic; that good times, reflected in the blooming of the Sakura, and bad times, symbolized by the fact the sakura will eventually fall to the ground or be dispersed in the wind and die, are part of the cycle of life.

There is no negativity or regret in these feelings, it is more a positive projection that next spring, once again, the sakura will appear and put smiles on people’s faces and reaffirm that life goes on.

The sakura has been a favourite topic for Haiku poets over the years, and as in the past, schools will hold Sakura Haiku competitions in 2011. The inspiration for this falls to the famous Japanese poet, Kobayashi Issa who wrote in the early 19th Century,

*when cherry blossoms
scatter...
no regrets*

From many other Issa poems, and of course personal one-on-one involvement in appreciating the sakura, we can all take comfort in the fact that Japan will recover with our help and support.

The travel industry is ideally suited to contribute to the recovery by suggesting that travellers contact one of the many charitable organizations collecting money for shelter, medical supplies, clean water, food and clothing.

These include www.humanitariancoalition.com (founded by Care, Oxfam and Save the Children) or the Canadian Red Cross (www.redcross.ca), World Vision (www.worldvision.ca), Doctors without Borders (www.msf.ca), among others.

In addition, travel counselors and travellers may wish to contact the Japanese Cultural Centre in the city nearest to you to see what else you and your agency and clients may be able to do to assist. Travel counsellors can be proactive with their clients. Compassion and care for the planet - which is the product that you sell, goes a long way in establishing and maintaining relationships with your current and future client base. We are all in this together

In the spirit of Mono no a-ware, the impermanence of life to which the expression alludes is not restricted to the short life of the sakura - the cherry blossom. It can be also seen as a hopeful expression that tragedy and catastrophe are also impermanent

Reflect on the sakura and see the strength and beauty of the blossom. They will bloom in full force in the weeks ahead.





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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Jen Savedra EDITOR
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