

Japan to reopen to independent travelers on Oct. 11

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Japan will allow visa-free, independent tourism and abolish its daily arrival cap as of Oct. 11, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Thursday, marking a major policy shift after nearly 2¾ years of strict COVID-19 restrictions.

The government will also launch a nationwide travel discount program, which had been shelved due to the spread of COVID-19 infections.

Kishida made the long-awaited announcement during his visit to New York for the U.N. General Assembly.

“I hope many people will utilize them,” Kishida said at a news conference. “I want to support the travel, entertainment and other industries that have been struggling during the coronavirus pandemic.”

The decision was hailed by the nation’s top two airlines.

“We are extremely happy to see the long-awaited easing of restrictions,” Shinichi Inoue, president of All Nippon Airways, the core unit of ANA Holdings, told reporters Friday. “We will increase flights from the end of October to welcome customers from abroad.”

“The economic impact of inbound travelers before the COVID-19 pandemic is said

to be roughly ¥5 trillion, and we are pinning great hopes that there will be economic effects of similar size,” Inoue said, adding that the yen’s sharp decline against the dollar “will definitely serve as an incentive” for foreign people to come to Japan. He said it will lead to stimulating regional economies as well, as there are many people who want to travel to different areas of Japan.

Japan Airlines also welcomed the move, saying in a statement that the company will fully prepare to welcome visitors and contribute to revitalizing the Japanese economy.

Japan has been allowing tourists since June, starting with people on guided tours. On Sept. 7, the government allowed those on nonguided tours who had booked their flights and hotels through registered travel agencies.

But those measures have been unpopular with many foreign tourists who want greater freedom during their trips.

Tourists will need to be vaccinated three times or submit a negative COVID-19 test result ahead of their trip, Kyodo News reported, citing government sources.

A nationwide domestic travel program offering discounts for travel, entry to theme parks, and for sporting events and concerts is also set to start on Oct. 11. People who have been vaccinated three times or submit a negative test result will be eligible for the discounts, according to the report.

The program offers financial assistance of up to ¥11,000 (\$77) per person for a one-night stay.

The moves will be welcomed by the nation’s tourism sector, which has been hit hard by the pandemic.

Travel agencies have been urging the government to waive the visa requirement for tourists, which has been a major hurdle for those wishing to come to Japan. In some cases, prospective tourists had to submit their visa application in person to the nearest embassy or consulate, while others did not get their visas in time for their travel plans.

In 2019, a record 31.88 million foreign travelers visited Japan, but the figure plummeted to about 250,000 in 2021 due to the closed borders.

The daily arrival cap has been raised gradually over the past six months, first to 5,000 on March 1 and eventually to the current 50,000.

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