



TAZAWA Marika runs Kurabito Stay. She hopes that her work as an independent female entrepreneur will inspire other women in outlying parts of Japan.

EXPERIENCE SAKE BREWING AT THE WORLD'S FIRST SAKE-BREWERY HOTEL

Japan's border control measures against COVID-19 have ended. As inbound tourism recovers, a sake-brewery hotel in the city of Saku in Nagano Prefecture is garnering attention. We delve into a new kind of tourism that emphasizes firsthand experiences and interaction with local residents.

In Japan, visitors can enjoy the country's unique culture and abundant natural surroundings without worrying about public safety or access to transport. Japan was ranked number one out of 117 countries by the World Economic Forum for the first time in the 2021 Travel & Tourism Development

Index, and on April 29 of this year, ended its border control measures against COVID-19.

If you're planning a trip to Japan, you should definitely visit the outlying regions; there are alluring places throughout the country featuring beautiful nature, rich history, and unique cultural

heritage. One such place is Saku, a city in Nagano Prefecture that is home to Kurabito Stay, the world's first sake-brewery hotel where guests—who come from all over the world—can try their hand at making sake while staying at a traditional brewing facility.

TAZAWA Marika, who was born in the prefecture, runs Kurabito Stay. After working for a travel agency and a wine trading company elsewhere, she returned to her home prefecture



Guests spending the night at Kurabito Stay are able to enjoy Saku sake whenever they want. The brewery also holds a sake-tasting seminar.

to work in local government as a quasi-civil servant for the national government's local vitalization cooperative program. Meanwhile, she studied tourism management at a destination marketing organization (DMO) leadership school sponsored by the prefectural government.

Tazawa had first learned about the problems of mass tourism when working as a company employee. The competition to sell travel packages at low prices was putting financial and other strains on certain destinations, resulting in lower tourist satisfaction. Wanting to put an end to that vicious cycle, Tazawa looked to the European towns she had traveled to so many times since her student days. She said, "People in Europe's regional cities are proud of their hometowns and their history. That's why they're very lively and



Left: Guests can mingle around the large round table on the first floor of Kurabito Stay. Guestrooms are on the second floor. Right: Formerly serving as brewers' accommodation attached to a venerable sake brewery that remained in business for more than 330 years, Kurabito Stay has been renovated into a hotel.

not selling themselves short."

Inspired by wine tourism, a thriving business in Europe, she envisioned creating a tourist area based on sake. "Sake is unique to our country. After visiting over 1,000 tourist destinations in 50 countries around the world, I was sure that making sake in a historic brewery would be a one-of-a-kind experience that would inspire the rest of the world," she said. There are 13 sake breweries in Saku, all with a long history. Tazawa took over an old building attached to one such brewery that had formerly served as sleeping quarters for brewers, and converted it into a hotel, launching operations in March 2020.

Hotel guests at Kurabito Stay can enter the operating brewery and join in the actual process of making sake for sale. Priced at 55,000 yen for one night, it's not on the cheap side, but many people come for the unique experience. Among them are numerous repeat customers. Simultaneous interpretation in English is available—the hotel thus has a good reputation among international travelers, with 70% of the guests currently coming from abroad.

"We focus on attracting one



A brewer offers instruction to a guest in making sake using methods handed down from the Edo Period (early 17th century to mid-19th century). Depending on the season, activities include such processes as washing rice, making the yeast mash, and so on.

person who will stay for 100 hours, rather than 100 people who will stay for an hour each," said Tazawa. The hotel serves breakfast (and dinner is included in some plans), but for other meals, guests receive a map of the neighborhood so they can visit nearby establishments on their own, thus helping the entire community. "It makes me happy to hear a guest say that this is a nice town."

In the future, she plans to offer cycling tours to allow visitors to enjoy even more of Saku's scenery, as well as an academic course to teach them about sake brewing in depth. Indicating her desire to expand the business, she said, "There are other sake-producing regions in Japan with long histories like Saku's. I'd like to be involved in regional revitalization centered on breweries in other communities."

When you come to Japan, why not spend more time in one place to experience a facet of the culture that has been nurtured and passed down over generations? ●