



Homey Experience Gone? Companies Take Over Japan's 'Minpaku' Market

A year since the ban on minpaku (lodging at a private residence) under the Private Lodging Business Act was lifted, changes in the way services are offered are causing concerns that minpaku's appeal as a homey experience of the Japanese way of life is fading.

The "at-home" feeling that homeowners provide guests by personally looking after them has earned a favorable reputation.

However, the number of properties managed by business corporations and similar entities have increased, and now accounts for approximately half of all minpaku accommodations. This business-like approach, which misses the personal touch of private homes, is strengthening.

Experience with Personal Connections

"I want to make staying at my residence a story worth telling," said Masatada Suemitsu, 73. He started minpaku at his home in western Tokyo in 2018, following the lifting of the ban on June 15, and values the cultural exchange with his guests.

He has delighted guests with his kindness, introduced them to tourist attractions, and allowed them to experience firsthand the Japanese tea ceremony and other cultural practices free of charge. Over 700 people total have stayed with him in the last 13 months.

Speaking from his experience meeting guests from China, Taiwan, South Korea, and other countries, he said: "A lot of people want to stay in a Japanese home, not a hotel or a ryokan (traditional Japanese inn). From now on, I want to try decorating the rooms in accordance with the seasons and holidays like Tanabata and the Hinamatsuri doll's festival."

Despite the attraction of staying in an ordinary resident's home and coming into contact with daily life in the area, the number of homes managed by companies is increasing.

Focus on Regions with Many Tourists

According to surveys of the Japan Tourism Agency, the percentage of properties managed by corporate bodies rose from 27% in July 2018 to 48% in May 2019. Moreover, properties where the homeowner does not live with the guests expanded from 55% in July 2018 to 74% in May 2019.

"There is particular focus on regions with many tourists and high profitability," according to the Japan Association of Vacation Rentals, which is made up of booking agents. A good example is Tokyo's Shinjuku ward, where corporations manage about 1,100 homes ? or 80% to 90% of the total available homes ? according to the ward.

In Kanazawa City, whose charming townscape makes it bustles with tourists from in and outside of Japan, only one house sent in an application for minpaku licensing during the first four months after the ban lifted. However, the number had increased to 41 applications by May 15, 2019, many of which are managed by businesses, such as real estate agencies.

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Returning to Standard Lodging Status

Masashi Ishii, chief of general affairs of Cellto Nakamori Co. Ltd in Kanazawa, was one of the applicants. He explained, "We applied last November to make use of vacant rooms in the apartments we own."

The company has several short-stay rooms in an apartment complex near Kanazawa Castle Park. The rooms are for two to three guests and include beds, televisions, and other hotel amenities, as well as a functioning kitchen.

However, Ishii said that by the end of 2019, they would convert all the rooms to ordinary public lodgings: "You can expect profits from minpaku, but with the potential for year-round sales, standard public lodgings are better because they have a higher profitability."

Assessing Issues Around the Minpaku Law

The evaluations from experts are varied.

"There is a limit on the kinds of individuals who can run minpaku for cultural exchange or as a hobby," said Takayuki Miyajima, chief economist at Mizuho Research Institute, Ltd.

There are a variety of legal rules and restrictions that apply to minpaku, and these vary among local governments. For example, some limit the number of business days a minpaku can operate and require reporting of the business records of lodgings every two months. There are additional hurdles, including variations in the process for submitting supplementary documents and inspections of properties before the businesses are allowed to open.

Looking forward, Miyajima also called for the authorization of minpaku to be made simpler. He warned, "If the reception of visitors to rural areas in Japan, for example, is not speeded up little by little, then after 10 years the accumulation of know-how will be completely different."

Policy Driven by Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games

Professor Toru Azuma of Rikkyo University's Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, had a different take. He emphasized that "the main point of allowing minpaku" is to respond to the situation where the needs of visitors to Japan exceed the available inns and hotels.

The country is hurrying to promote minpaku ahead of the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020, but professor Azuma insisted, "The time is coming to reconsider how minpaku should be run rather than increasing the number of lodgings."

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民泊、ビジネス色強く 解禁1年、文化交流はどこへ

民泊を解禁した住宅宿泊事業法の施行から1年が過ぎた。家主自ら接客に当たるアットホームな物件が好評な一方で、企業などの法人が運営する物件がほぼ半数まで増加し、ビジネス色が強まっている。日本の生活体験や文化交流といった意義が薄れる懸念もある。

「物語のある民泊にしたい」。昨年6月15日の解禁に合わせ、東京都西東京市の自宅で民泊を始めた末光正忠さん（73）は、宿泊客との交流を大切にしている。観光名所や茶道体験などを無料で紹介する親切さが喜ばれ、これまでに延べ700人以上が泊まった。

中国や台湾、韓国などからの客と接した経験から「ホテルや旅館でなく、日本の家庭に泊まりたいという人が多い」と話す。今後は七夕やひな祭りなど季節に応じた部屋の飾り付けにも挑戦したいという。

一般の民家に泊まりながら、その土地の日常に触れられるのが民泊の魅力とされる。一方、昨年7月と今年5月を比べた観光庁の調査では、法人が営業主体となっている物件の割合が27%から48%に増加。家主が同居しない物件は、55%から74%にまで拡大した。

予約仲介業者でつくる住宅宿泊協会は「観光客が多く、収益性の高い地域に特に集中している」と指摘。代表的なのが東京都新宿区で、区によると約1100件のうち8～9割が法人運営だという。

風情ある街並みが人気で、国内外からの観光客でにぎわう金沢市。解禁から4カ月余りは届け出が1件にとどまっていたが、その後、41件（5月15日時点）に伸びた。営業主体の多くは不動産業者などの企業だ。

その一つ、セルトナカモリ（金沢市）の石井昌志総務部長は「保有するマンションの空き部屋を有効活用するため、昨年11月に届け出た」と説明する。金沢城公園近くに立つマンションの数室。2～3人の客向けの一室は、ベッドやテレビといったホテル並みの調度品に加え、キッチンや食器類も備える充実ぶりだ。

しかし、いずれの部屋も年内には簡易宿所としての営業に切り替えるという。石井部長は「民泊でも収益は見込めるが、通年営業が可能で、より採算性の高い簡易宿所の方がいい」とビジネスの視点を強調する。

識者の評価はさまざまだ。みずほ総合研究所の宮嶋貴之主任エコノミストは「文化交流や趣味の延長線上で、個人が経営するには限界がある」と現状に理解を示す。

営業日数制限や2カ月ごとの宿泊実績報告といった法定ルールに加え、追加書類の提出や開業前の物件調査といった手続きを定めている自治体が多いためだ。

だが、今後に向けては「地方でも少しずつ訪日客の受け入れを進めないと、10年後にはノウハウの蓄積が全く違ってくる」と警鐘を鳴らし、民泊をより活用しやすくするよう呼び掛ける。

一方、立教大観光学部の東徹教授は、既存のホテルや旅館で受け止めきれない訪日客のニーズに応えるのが「民泊の本筋」だと強調。国は来年の東京五輪・パラリンピックに向けて普及を急ぐが「数を増やすより、在り方を見直す時期が来ている」と訴える。