

LEISURE

A trend toward increased free time

The Rise and Diversity of Vacations

There are certain times in Japan when holidays appear one after another, one example being Golden Week, which runs from the end of April to the beginning of May. Other full-scale holiday periods are at the end of the year (New Year's) and the middle of August (Bon festival).

Vacations are concentrated during these three periods. As a result, three times a year the throngs of people on transportation facilities and roads unflinchingly become an issue. Travel abroad during these periods reaches a peak at international airports such as New Tokyo International Airport (Narita), which is invariably congested with people.

There are businesses adopting flexible holidays to avoid the crowd. Taking annual vacations has become an accepted company policy, even taking days off has now become easier. An amendment to the Labor Standard Law, carried out in April 1997, implemented a 40-hour week.

There is a tendency for holidays to be dispersed, due in part to travel savvy Japanese who wish to avoid the high-priced holiday season.

Based on the activities and polled opinions of those 15 years and older, the shorter the holiday, the more one indulges in pastimes like gambling. When the holiday is two to three days long, gambling decreases and activities such as driving, enjoying the outdoors, and outdoor sports increase. When the holiday stretches to three or more days, domestic and international travel show a sharp increase, as do self-enrichment activities such as family communication, reading, and studying.



Overseas travel
(Photo courtesy of Getty Images)

Groups from the labor, tourist, and transportation sectors are trying to rally support for legislation of three-day holidays. Of the 14 national yearly holidays, there are 4 (Coming-of-Age Day, Marine Day, Respect-for-the-Aged Day, and Sports Day) whose dates could be changed so that they fall on a Monday, resulting in a three-day holiday.

Shogi
Often known in the West as “Japanese chess.” (Photo courtesy of Getty Images)



Traditional Leisure

Horse racing has become a popular gambling pastime. The betting tickets sold by the Japan Racing Association (JRA), a special body under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, have been generating profits yearly. The only year of decline was 1995, the year of the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake in Kobe, but it rebounded the following year to achieve positive growth of 3.98 trillion yen (US \$36.6 billion).

A single horse racing event by the JRA runs for about 8 days at 10 racing tracks throughout Japan, for a total of 36 times for 288 days. In addition, local horse racing carried out by various local municipalities is held at 19 regional racing tracks throughout Japan.

Go and *shogi* are representative of Japanese traditional indoor games. *Go* is played by two players. Black and white stones are alternately placed on a board with the objective of capturing the opponent's stones and covering the board with one's own.

Shogi is somewhat similar to chess. The pieces are moved alternately, the objective being to capture the opponent's king. *Shogi* originated in India and made its way to China. The difference in the Japanese version is that a captured piece can be used as one's own. With the diversity of TV games, amusement, and leisure, the number of those who play *go* and *shogi* in Japan has decreased to less than 10%.

Although many Japanese enjoy traveling overseas, going to *karaoke*, and playing *pachinko* (a kind of pinball) in their free time, they also enjoy traditional pastimes. Cherry blossom flower viewing is an all-time favorite event in the spring, as the blossoms unfold from south to north. Many also pursue the scarlet-tinged leaves in the autumn.



Horse racing
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)