

japan network

President Ryuko Hira seeks 'the joy of traveling' for all ages, backgrounds

As HMI expands, sights set on drawing Indian visitors

Name: Ryuko Hira

Title: Representative Director of Hotel Management International Co. (since June 2010)

URL: www.hmi-hotel.co.jp

DOB: May 30, 1948

Hometown: Jaipur, India

Years in Japan: 52

The Big Questions

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When 24 million people visited Japan in 2016, it marked the first time the number surpassed 20 million, a figure that the government had hoped to meet by 2020.

With such accelerated growth in visitor numbers — only 10 million visited in 2013 and 5 million in 2003 — the government has set a new goal of 40 million visitors by 2020 and 60 million by 2030, both double the previous targets.

An estimated 28 million people visited last year as the upward trend continues, seemingly unabated. Getting to 60 million, however, a stratosphere breached only by France (82 million in 2016), the United States and Spain (75 million each), will require several developments, including the provision of more hotel rooms.

Another key will be whether Japan can attract visitors from previously untapped sources, such as the world's second-most populous country, India. While China led the way with an estimated 7 million people visiting Japan last year, only 130,000 people from India came to Japan.

There seems to be no better person to help Japan with the hotel situation and inbound tourism from India than Ryuko Hira, a Japanese citizen of Indian descent who is the president of Hotel Management International Co. (HMI).

Hira believes Japan has the characteristics to be a major tourist destination.

"There are a limited number of countries that excel in all of the four fundamental pillars required for a strong tourist industry — a diverse natural environment, a rich history and culture, seasonal diversity and world-class cuisine," Hira said during an interview with The Japan Times at HMI headquarters in Tokyo.

The Japanese government's tourism industry reforms such as visa relaxations have helped draw tourists, but more needs to be done to improve the industry's international competitiveness and productivity, he said.

"At the same time, there is the need to create the infrastructure to allow every traveler, including the elderly and people with disabilities, to experience 'the joy of traveling,'" Hira said.

His HMI Hotel Group has been expanding its portfolio, developing and acquiring hotels and other tourism-related infrastructure across the country, with an aim to contribute to regional economies. The Ginza Creston in Tokyo, Tsumagoi Resort Sai no Sato in Shizuoka Prefecture and Rizzan Sea-Park Hotel Tancha-Bay in Okinawa Prefecture are part of the group.

According to a Nov. 8, 2017, Nikkei MJ article, HMI ranked 11th in sales among all hotel groups in Japan. HMI's sales figure for its fiscal year ending in September was ¥48 billion, an 18.8 percent rise from the year ear-

lier. Overall, sales at Japanese hotels rose 3.6 percent.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that Hira is a senior advisor to the prime minister's working group at the Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Ministry. For the annual meetings between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Indian counterpart Narendra Modi, Hira is deeply involved on the tourism side to find ways to draw Indians to Japan.

Hira knows his task isn't easy as many challenges remain.

"Well, very frankly speaking, between the two countries, Japan was having a very long engagement with Western countries. On the relations with Eastern countries, though the relations are very old, the active part is very young. So the greatest challenge is that more and more interaction is required at all levels," Hira said.

Though India has been independent for 70 years, the real exchanges between Japan and India started in 2000, he added.

"A lot remains to be done in a short period of time."

Born Kamlesh Panjabi soon after India's independence, Hira moved in December 1966 at age 18 to Japan, where his family had a business.

The family business started in Yokohama in 1921 as a silk exporter to India and eventually led to the foundation of HMI.

Yet life wasn't so easy for Hira at first.

"I wanted to run away from Japan. The rice was too sticky!" he said with a hearty laugh.

"There was not enough bread available, only Yamazaki bread, so it was very difficult to adapt. To find bread we had to go one hour's distance to a big hotel or someplace. But now, Japan has the best bread in the



PHOTO BY SATOKO KAWASAKI

HMI head facilitates Japan-India relations

Ryuko Hira was born in Jaipur, northwestern India, and attended a Cambridge school in Mumbai. He is the fourth president of Hotel Management International Co. The HMI Hotel Group operates the brands Hotel Crown Palais, Resort Ryokan, Sea-Park Hotel and Green-Park Hotel, Hotel Pearl City, Creston Hotel and Hotel Wellness, as well as the sports and cultural center brand Top Wellness. HMI has hosted three generations of the Imperial family at its group hotels and resorts. Hira is also the executive chairman of the Ora Group of Companies in Japan and chairman of The Indian Commerce and Industry Association Japan (ICIJ), a public interest incorporated association based in Yokohama. The ICIJ was established in 1921 and works mainly to increase economic and cultural relations between India and Japan. In his efforts to further Japan-India ties, Hira is involved in several foundations and associations.

He also had to choose a name written in kanji. "Hira" stands for the Hira Mountains in Shiga Prefecture, the place where a Japanese priest gave him his kanji name. *Ryu* (dragon) and *ko* (tiger) also stand for Japan and India.

"I happened to be, at that time, the first Indian to become a Japanese," he said.

Today, he is the largest single Indian investor in Japan with \$2.5 billion in investments, Hira shared, but he also gives some advice: "Do one's best without expecting any return. In this sense, heart is much more important than head."

He added, "I believe the golden age will gradually arrive when competition will be replaced with cooperation and understanding with each other, and the evaluation of each company will be assessed not only by profit, infrastructure, the numbers and size, but also by excellence of character of the corporation as a whole."

The Big Questions is a Monday interview series showcasing prominent figures who have a strong connection to Japan.

whole world," he said.

In those days, he would lose his way because there were no signs in English, Hira said, so he took a one-year course in Japanese at Sophia University.

Less than a decade later in 1976, Hira became a naturalized Japanese citizen.

"I chose to take Japanese nationality," he said. "Passport documentation doesn't change your heart."