

Associations meet Japan

THE Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) invited me to its five-day “Meet Japan” event, which was comprised of two parts: a study tour program and a convention trade mart session that introduced the country’s international convention cities to 11 participating international association executives from nine countries. I was the lone Philippine participant in my capacity as secretary-general of the Association of Development Financing Institutions in Asia and the Pacific (ADFIAP) whose permanent secretariat is based here in Manila.

JNTO is Japan’s tourism-promotion body that aims to encourage foreign tourists to visit Japan. Its broad range of activities include operating tourist information centers, administering guide-interpreter examinations, publishing tourism statistics and market reports, and providing support for international conventions and incentive events.

The JNTO and the Japanese government have been actively promoting the country as a destination for association meetings and conferences, among other tourism activities. They target about 40 million overseas visitors for the Tokyo Olympics in 2020. The Philippines is one of its growing tourism markets so the JNTO has decided to set up an office here.

For the study tour program, I and a Swedish participant were hosted by the Sendai Convention Bureau and showed us around to visit the city’s convention center, lodging hotels, including a *ryokan* (Japanese-style hotel with hot spring bath), restaurants, a greenhouse strawberry farm, an old castle site, a wood handicraft park, a battery-run eco-building, an international research institute on disaster science (IRIDeS), and the earthquake and tsunami-devastated area.

You may recall the 9-magnitude earthquake in northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011, which caused tremendous loss of lives and properties. Today, the signs of the devastation are still evident in markings and monuments, but the area we visited has been rehabilitated and continuously being rebuilt—proof of the Japanese people’s resolve and resilience.

For the convention trade mart session, I met with 12 representatives of the 20 participating convention cities that span the full geography of Japan, all featuring excellent facilities that meet government standards for suitability to host international meetings.

What is refreshing and comforting to learn is that all these convention and visitors bureaus are offering both financial support and technical assistance to associations that will bring their events to their areas.

This incentive mechanism would be a big boost to international associations holding their events in Japan. And, perhaps, this is something that other countries, including the Philippines, can also consider to further promote and increase their tourism intake, especially for meetings and conferences of international associations.