

Lifestyle

Donations commodified

'Rent-a-monk' biz thrives as Japan loses temple ties

FUNABASHI, Japan, Feb 1, (AFP): In a quiet room thick with the smell of incense, Buddhist monk Kaichi Watanabe chants sutras to commemorate the one-year anniversary of a woman's death.

The 41-year-old may look like a traditional holy man in Japan — but he wasn't dispatched by a temple. Instead, the family ordered him through a fast-growing rent-a-monk business that has angered traditionalists who warn it is commercialising the religion.

Watanabe's employer, Tokyo-based firm Minrevi, said demand for its monk delivery service has spiked since it started in May 2013, as more and more Japanese lose their ties to local temples — and lose faith in an opaque donation system.

The monk later rings a small traditional bell and bows to relatives as the 30-minute ceremony winds down at the grieving family's home near Tokyo.

"There are many temples in the neighbourhood, but I didn't know where to call," said the deceased woman's middle-aged son, who asked not to be named.

"Also, I have no idea how much I should donate. But this has a clear pricing system." At the click of a mouse, customers can hire a monk from Minrevi from 35,000 yen (\$300) depending on the ceremony.

Retailing giant Aeon sent shockwaves through Buddhist circles in 2010 when it started a service that had a price list for



This picture taken on Nov 10, 2016 shows Buddhist monk Kaichi Watanabe (right), speaking to relatives during the one-year anniversary of a woman's death at her home in Funabashi, Chiba prefecture, a suburb of Tokyo. (AFP)

introducing customers to temples for funeral services.

The open pricing flew in the face of longstanding system in which monks collect donations, known as ofuse, in return for performing ceremonies.

But there has been growing unease about

the murky system which leaves the amount up to families, who have to make several more donations after a funeral for more than a decade.

Japan's Buddhist temples count on donations to do renovations, which can cost several million dollars, but there has been

criticism that they're more interested in raising revenue than offering spiritual guidance.

Chiko Iwagami, an executive member of the Japan Buddhist Federation, acknowledged that some monks have improperly demanded specific amounts of money at memorial services, hurting public trust.

Duties

"That ignores the spirit of donations," Iwagami said, noting that monks are not supposed to expect financial rewards for performing their duties.

Aeon's fledgling operation outraged the federation, which demanded it take down the price list. The company complied but still runs its service.

Earlier this year, the federation also blasted online retailer Amazon for listing Minrevi's monk-renting service.

"They have commodified donations. This is extremely unfortunate," Iwagami said.

But Minrevi's vice-president Masashi Akita brushed off the criticism, saying the company is just offering a "platform" to connect customers with monks.

The firm has a roster of about 700 monks nationwide with business on track to grow by 20 percent this year, he added.

Akita, who grew up in rural community where his neighbours regularly visited a temple, said the business is just a sign of the times.

"I was shocked when I first learned that

some people didn't know how to contact a monk," he said.

"So I wanted to be that bridge."

The Japanese government does not keep track of the religious identification of citizens, but participation in rituals related to both Buddhism as well as native Shintoism — the two major religions in the country — is common across the nation.

Some firms also offer Shinto priests' services. But attachment to religion has fallen into decline.

As the population rapidly ages and small rural communities shrink, some 30 percent of Japan's 75,000 Buddhist temples are at risk of closing by 2040, said Kenji Ishii, a professor of religion at Kokugakuin University in Tokyo.

"Japanese have maintained ties with temples because of funerals and other types of community-related events, not for religious reasons," he added.

"Buddhist leaders now have to think how they're going to run their sects with shrinking revenues. But it seems like they don't want to look at the reality."

Watanabe, who conducted the service near Tokyo, doesn't see a clash between the business and spiritual aspects of his job.

"I want to spread the teachings of Buddhism," he said.

"This service gives us more opportunity to visit homes. I think it's meaningless if we cannot be there to help."

Travel

Indian Embassy Notice



This June 26, 2014 file photo shows a cruise ship docked in Juneau, Alaska, while a paraglider soars above. (AP)

A boom in Alaska trips

Cruises offer more in-depth experiences

By Beth J. Harpaz

A demand for more in-depth experiences — from learning how to scuba dive to dining in a private home in port — are shaping what's new in the cruise industry this year. Other cruise news: a boom in Alaska trips, a few precious sailings to Cuba and potentially game-changing new technology.

High seas, high tech
Princess Cruises will debut a coin-sized medallion in November aboard the Regal Princess that could dramatically change guest experiences. Passengers will carry or wear the medallion, which will direct them to their cabins, unlock their doors as they approach and alert crew members to their schedules and preferences, whether it's a class they've signed up for or a favorite cocktail. It will also streamline getting on and off the ship.

Alaska
Alaska expects 1.06 million cruise passengers this year, likely breaking its 2008 record of 1.03 million visits. The Alaska Travel Industry Association says larger ships are bringing more visitors, and destinations like Sitka, Juneau and Icy Strait Point have built out piers to accommodate bigger vessels. Smaller ships are simultaneously expanding service, specializing in more remote destinations the bigger ships can't reach.

Holland America Line marks its 70th year of exploring Alaska with the redeployment of its Oosterdam ship from Europe to Alaska. Seabourn, a small-ship line, returns to Alaska in June for the first time in 15 years. Lindblad launches a new ship, National Geographic Quest, whose itineraries will include Alaska.

Carnival Miracle will do a 14-day round-trip to Alaska from Long Beach, California, that will include Carnival Cruise Line's first-ever call at Icy Strait Point. Crystal Cruises, which last summer sailed the largest luxury passenger vessel ever through the Northwest Passage, offers a repeat trip from Anchorage on Aug 15.

In 2018, Norwegian Cruise Line will launch Norwegian Bliss, a ship custom-built for Alaska trips.

Cuba
Long-term prospects for travel from the US to Cuba remain uncertain under the new presidential administration. But for now, a number of cruises are scheduled through spring. Havana is on the itinerary for sailings from Florida in April and May aboard Royal Caribbean's Empress of the Seas, and in May on Norwegian Cruise Line's Norwegian Sky. The Fathom brand continues seven-night sailings to Cuba every other week through May.

New experiences onboard and onshore
Royal Caribbean is the only cruise line offering scuba-diving certification through the Professional Association of Diving Instructors. Passengers begin the course at home online, continue lessons in a ship pool and finish with four mandatory open-water dives in ports of call.

Carnival Cruise Line is offering longer sailings of nine to 15 days with options for more immersive and adventurous experiences beyond beaches and bars. Passengers might visit a school in Mexico or get a home-cooked meal at a private house in Jamaica. "People are looking for meaningful experiences," said Carnival spokeswoman Jennifer

De La Cruz.

MSC Cruises launches a wellness experience in April with personalized health assessments and fitness programs, along with a Weight Watchers cruise from Miami to the Caribbean in May.

Princess is expanding Discovery at Sea offerings for kids with new programming such as MythBusters science activities and destination-themed programs on culture and nature. Princess is also featuring a new show, "Born to Dance," produced with famed composer Stephen Schwartz, paying tribute to Broadway's greatest choreographers and dancers.

Holland America Line's new programs include cooking shows and workshops in partnership with "America's Test Kitchen," plus Rijksmuseum at Sea, with interactive displays about the famed Amsterdam museum as a tie-in to the cruise line's Dutch heritage. HAL has also just rolled out a partnership with BBC Earth, with games, activities and live concerts during screenings showing wildlife and wilderness.

Norwegian Cruise Line has opened a new private destination in southern Belize called Harvest Caye with a beach, villas for daily rental, a lagoon for canoeing and kayaking, and "Flighthouse" with a zip line, ropes course and more. The port also makes it easy for guests to explore Belize on shore excursions.

Cunard's Queen Mary 2 this year offers trans-Atlantic cruises themed on space exploration and fashion.

Disney Cruise Line will offer Marvel Day at Sea programs featuring Marvel Comics

characters in activities, shows, parties and films on seven sailings on Disney Magic from New York City this fall.

New ships

In November, Royal Caribbean debuted the world's largest cruise ship, Harmony of the Seas, with a 5,479-passenger capacity, two 10-story enclosed dry slides and an escape game room.

This year Viking Cruises adds two more ocean-going ships, Viking Sky and Viking Sun, with the Sun embarking on Viking's first-ever world cruise, 141 days long, in December. Viking is also adding two new river ships, Viking Herja and Viking Hild.

Crystal Cruises not only launches two new river ships this summer, Crystal Bach and Crystal Mahler, but the cruise line is debuting AirCruises on a private Boeing jet that will take guests around the world, starting with a 27-day, \$159,000 trip. "The world is getting wealthier and the wealthy want to travel," said Crystal CEO Edie Rodriguez.

Silversea Cruises launches Silver Muse in April with eight dining venues including a jazz club and Hot Rocks, where guests can cook their own meat, fish and vegetables tableside. Silversea's refurbishment of Silver Cloud as an ice-class expedition ship will be done in November, in time for 11 Antarctic and eight Arctic trips in 2018.

In July, American Queen Steamboat launches American Duchess, the first contemporary boutique paddle-wheeler vessel built for Mississippi River cruises. The company already operates American Queen on the Mississippi and American Empress in the Pacific Northwest. (AP)

INDIA has further liberalized grant of visas to nationals of USA, Canada and Japan. Fee structure is as below:

1. Visa fee for USA nationals:
(a) Tourist visa: Multiple Entry of ten years duration — KD 36; (b) Business visa: Multiple Entry of one year duration — KD 51; (c) Business visa: Multiple Entry of ten years duration — KD 76.

2. Visa fee for Canadian and Japanese nationals:

(a) Tourist visa: Multiple Entry of six months duration — KD 14; (b) Tourist visa: Multiple Entry of one year duration — KD 22; (c) Tourist visa: Multiple Entry of ten years duration — KD 42; (d) Business visa: Multiple Entry of one year duration — KD 39; (e) Business visa: Multiple Entry of ten years duration — KD 64.

3. Visa fee for Kuwaiti nationals:
(a) Tourist visa: Multiple Entry of six months duration — KD 14; (b) Business visa: Multiple Entry of One year duration — KD 39; (c) Business visa: Multiple Entry of Five years duration — KD 64.

All applicants may visit Passport and Visa Centres of CKGS at (a) 17 Floor, Behbehani Building, Sharq, Kuwait : Tel. No. 22440392 (e-mail: indiavisa.kuwait@ckgs.com) or ; (b) Complex Kais Alghanim, 4 Floor, Mecca Street, in front of Annod Complex, Fahaheel, Kuwait: Tel. No. 22909229 (e-mail: indiavisa.kuwait@ckgs.com). (c) Jleeb Al Shuyoukh (Abbasiya) 2nd Floor, Jleeb Al Shuyoukh Block 1, Street 1, Xcite Building, Kuwait Tel. No. 24342428 (e-mail: indiavisa.kuwait@ckgs.com). CKGS's website is <http://www.kw.ckgs.in>.

In emergency cases, Indian Embassy accepts visa applications directly at its Visa Wing from applicants.

click

Alcoholics Anonymous: If you know someone who can't stop drinking and would like to help them please check us out and we promise to try to help at www.aarabia.org There are no fees. This is a genuine public service.

Drinking problem?: Friends of Bill W. are available to help. Totally confidential. Email: rohsecretary@gmail.com

Narcotics Anonymous: NA can help with addiction problems. Totally confidential: 94087800 English/Arabic.

Cancer online support group: If you are Cancer patient or family member fighting with this deadly disease, come join our online support group. Best way of dealing with this disease is providing support and share our experience with each other. There are lot of things which even doctors can't tell so be member of this website and start sharing your experiences which may help others. October is recognized as National Breast Cancer Awareness Month (NBCAM). The primary purpose is to promote self examination and screening mammography as the most effective way to save lives by detecting breast cancer at early stage. For more information visit: <http://fightingwithcancer.webs.com/>

Latest

Invitation to Grand Mosque: The Visits Department is pleased to invite you to visit the Grand Mosque, which is one of Kuwait's most treasured religious and cultural landmarks to discover the beauty of Islamic arts and architecture. Free guided tours are available all year round on official working days between (9-11 am) and (5-7 pm), within a special tour program designed to cater to the needs of different age groups. The program is as follows:
Reception; Auditorium show; (according to age group); Touring the Mosque; Q & A; Art workshops; (according to age group — between 5 and 18 years old); Snack break; Distribution of the Grand Mosque publications and souvenirs; End of tour.

Continued on Page 23