

Theme Parks: Out-of-the-Ordinary Worlds

What Is a “Theme Park”?

Do you like amusement parks? In Japan there are a total of 233 amusement parks, large and small. The most popular is Tokyo Disney Resort. The “theme” of Tokyo Disney Resort is Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, and other Walt Disney world characters. Theme parks like Tokyo Disney Resort are leisure facilities with entertainment attractions and spaces organized around a particular theme.

Among Japan’s amusement parks are 52 theme parks. Theme park attendance in 2004 totaled approximately 58.92 million with sales of 438.2 billion yen, figures far larger than those for other amusement parks, zoos, aquariums, and other leisure facilities. Theme parks are a favorite destination for family trips. According to the JTB travel agency’s *Ryokosha doko* [Tourist Trends], “theme parks” rank first as the domestic site families with children wanted most to visit in 2004. For many Japanese, who find it difficult to take long vacations even if they want to take a break from their regular routines, theme parks are an ideal place to experience the atmosphere of earlier eras, relax in natural surroundings, get a taste of the culture of a foreign country, or meet Mickey Mouse or other dream-inspiring characters. There, they can relax in an out-of-the-ordinary world without traveling great distances.

Major Leisure Facility Use

	No. of facilities	Attendance	Sale (¥)
Theme parks	52	58.92 million	438.2 billion
Amusement parks	115	28.92 million	122.0 billion
Zoos	27	11.62 million	15.2 billion
Aquariums	9	2.45 million	9.8 billion

Source: *Heisei 16-nen tokutei sabisu sangyo jittai chosa hokokusho: Yuenchi, tema-paku hen* [Report on Fact-finding Surveys of Selected Service Industries in 2004: Amusement Parks and Theme Parks], Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2005.

some reduction in working hours, allowing people more leisure time; enactment of the “Resort Law” (Law for Development of Comprehensive Resort Areas), encouraging the construction of resort facilities providing overnight lodgings; and increase in disposable income at the time of the bubble economic boom. Also, as theme parks were expected to provide job opportunities and stimulate the economy of local areas, many prefectural governments opened them as a means of promoting local development. Since the collapse of the bubble economy at the beginning of the 1990s, however, a large number of theme parks have been forced to close due to poor business.

Despite the ups and downs of the economy, Tokyo Disney Resort has made huge additional investments and its business has been supported by many repeat visitors. It now counts more than 25 million visitors annually. Other theme parks have made various innovations, such as adding a museum to their facilities and providing participatory entertainments so that visitors can enjoy themselves in various ways. Some attract more visitors by making entrance charges free or very low. Others encourage visitors to spend more time in the park with various rides and attractions and seek to increase the sales ratio of food and drink, character goods, and the like.

Visitor Figures for Top Ten Theme Parks (FY 2004)

1	Tokyo Disney Resort (Tokyo Disneyland and Tokyo DisneySea)	25,021,000
2	Universal Studios Japan	8,100,000
3	Kobe Sweets Harbor (food theme park)	3,000,000
4	Namco Namja Town (including the Ikebukuro Gyoza Stadium that houses <i>gyoza</i> shops from across Japan and China)	2,512,833
5	Huis Ten Bosch	2,020,000
6	Parque España	1,804,000
7	Space World	1,650,000
8	New Reoma World (including Toy Kingdom)	1,600,000
9	Yokohama Curry Museum	1,520,000
10	Spa Resort Hawaiians	1,457,630

Source: Data compiled from *Rejarando & rekupaku soran 2006* [A Complete Guide to Leisure Lands & Recreation Parks, 2006], Sogo-Unicom, 2005.

History

The Museum Meiji-mura in Aichi prefecture (opened in 1965) and Kyoto Studio Park (1975) are said to be the theme park pioneers of Japan. The English term “theme park” did not become widely known, however, until Tokyo Disneyland was opened in Urayasu, Chiba prefecture in 1983. The success of Tokyo Disneyland led immediately to the building of a succession of theme parks of various kinds throughout the country. The main factors sustaining this phenomenon include:

Major Theme Parks

Period Themes

Period theme parks include those featuring the Edo (1603-1867), Meiji (1868-1912), Taisho (1912-1926), or Showa (1926-1989) historical eras. Preserving or reconstructing historically valuable artifacts, structures, and even townscapes, these parks not only transmit the wisdom and culture of earlier eras with museum-like exhibits but incorporate various innovative facilities for enjoying the “good old days” atmosphere of bygone times.

Nikko Edo Village

Nikko Edo Village is a theme park opened in Tochigi prefecture in 1986 that offers a comprehensive experience of Edo-period culture and lifestyles. A townscape from the mid-Edo period is reconstructed within the park, and among the attractions are live *ninja* performances and Edo festival parades. Recently, some TV commercials have featured the village’s trademark character Nyan-mage (a cat with a samurai-style topknot).



©Nikko Edomura

Countries and Cultures of the World

The theme parks featuring specific countries and cultures include those introducing the Netherlands and Spain—shown here—as well as Denmark and New Zealand. There is also a medieval European port town, a U.S. town of the pioneer-era West, and so on. Most of them take up countries that have images in Japan of attractive or lively scenery and relaxed atmosphere, making the parks places where visitors can get away from the stress and bustle of daily life and find enjoyment and refreshment of the spirit. Another characteristic of these parks is their selection of a country and culture that has some connection to or affinity with the local landscape and heritage.

Huis Ten Bosch

Located in Nagasaki prefecture, this theme park is a 152-hectare resort equipped with overnight lodgings. It is modeled on a townscape in the Netherlands, a country with which Nagasaki had close relations during the early modern era when Japan isolated itself from relations with most other countries. “Huis Ten Bosch” means “houses of the forest” in Dutch. The park is so named because it includes a reproduc-

tion of the Huis Ten Bosch palace, the official residence of Netherlands’s Queen Beatrix. Today, the park features attractions not only related to the Netherlands but other parts of Europe as well.

Taking as its inspiration the wisdom of the Dutch accumulated over 400 years of coexistence and harmony with nature through reclamation and water-control works, the motto of the Huis Ten Bosch theme park is “Coexistence of Humanity and Nature.” In building the theme park, careful consideration was given to the environment: improving the soil of land reclaimed some twenty years previously for use as an industrial park and construction of embankments using natural stones and earth to better protect the local ecosystem.

The park is home to 400,000 trees and 300,000 flowering plants. Since autumn 2005 aiming to become the “world’s top flower resort,” it has opened a large flower piazza called “Art Garden” and held a variety of annual flower-related events. By developing landscaping in the tradition treasured in Europe, it seeks to be a leader of flower culture and business with tulip-, rose- and dahlia-growing as its base.



©HUIS TEN BOSCH

Parque España

This theme park forms the core of the Shima Spain Village resort facility developed by the Kintetsu Corporation

railway company with the cooperation of the Mie prefectural and Shima city governments. The village was opened in 1994 at a time when society was making a shift from the overheated “economy first” era to a time stressing leisure and relaxation after the bursting of the bubble. With its catchphrase, “Rediscover relaxation and fun,” the park was designed to envelope visitors in the relaxing Spanish-style milieu—dazzling sun, deep blue seas, fertile land, etc. Its location is in the Ise-Shima district of Mie prefecture, where pilgrims from all over the country come to visit Ise Shrine.* Northern Spain, too, has a well-known pilgrimage site called Santiago de Compostela, and this similarity—that both are age-old pilgrimage centers—is cited as one of the reasons Spain was chosen for the theme park.

Parque España, which literally means “Spanish park,” consists of four areas, including townscapes modeled after architecture of various parts of Spain, as well as attractions such as bullfighting and performances of flamenco. There also are shows and parades given by Spanish performers.

* Ise Shrine: A major Shinto shrine situated in the city of Ise, Mie prefecture. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was a place people longed to visit at least once in their lifetime, and pilgrimages to the shrine were organized throughout the country.

Motion Pictures

There also are parks with motion pictures as their theme. The major ones are Kyoto Studio Park and Universal Studios Japan. Though the former is managed by a Japanese company and the latter by an American company affiliate, they both provide facilities that allow visitors to experience the excitement of the world of the cinema.

Universal Studios Japan

Located in Osaka, this park features Hollywood films. One of the two largest theme parks in Japan, along with Tokyo Disney Resort, it is the third theme park operated by Universal Studios (after Universal Studios Hollywood and Universal Studios Florida) and the first outside the United States.

Initially the park was to have been named “Universal Studios Osaka,” but this name was not adopted, because its abbreviation USO would have been pronounced like the Japanese word *uso*, which means “lie,” hence the present name, Universal Studios Japan.

The park offers attractions on the theme of motion pictures, with rides such as Sesame Street, Shrek, E.T., Terminator, Spider-Man, Back to the Future, Jurassic Park, etc.

Kyoto Studio Park

This facility is a kind of theme park created by opening part of the Toei Co. Ltd film studios in the Uzumasa area of Kyoto. In the latter half of the 1960s, the popularity of motion pictures, especially *jidai-geki* (samurai movie or costume play set in feudal times), declined sharply, and in order to maintain its open sets at the Kyoto studios, Toei made a section of the studios into a cinema village and opened it to the public in 1975. There you can see sets that were used for certain motion pictures and TV *jidai-geki*, as well as sword fight scenes played by Toei actors. At the “Costume House,” you can have professional makeup artists and costume specialists turn you into your favorite samurai-movie star.



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Characters

Among theme parks that feature children’s popular fantasy characters are Tokyo Disney Resort and Sanrio Puroland (Tama, Tokyo), widely known for its character Hello Kitty, as well as some “toy kingdoms” (*omocha okoku*). Unlike other

theme parks, sales of unique character goods is the major source of these parks’ earnings.

Tokyo Disney Resort

Opened in the city of Urayasu, Chiba prefecture in 1983 as the first Disneyland outside of the United States, Tokyo Disneyland is situated on 600,000 square meters of reclaimed land.

In 2001, Tokyo DisneySea was opened, located next to Tokyo Disneyland, with the seas as its theme. It consists of seven areas, including Mediterranean harbor and American waterfront. This park, Tokyo Disneyland, and neighboring hotels and shopping facilities together make up the Tokyo Disney Resort, which brings in more than 25 million visitors annually.

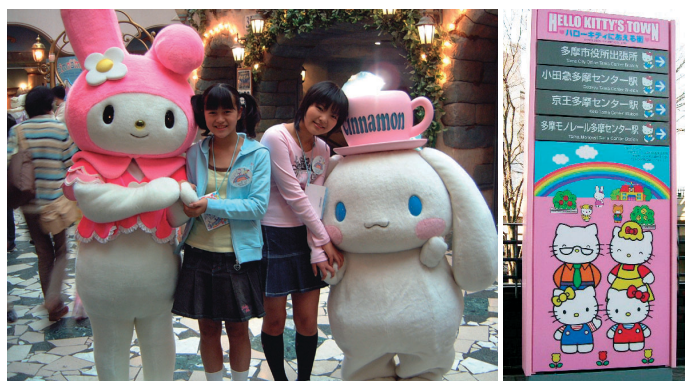
In addition to its location near Tokyo and other major cities with huge populations and easy access to the New Tokyo International Airport in the city of Narita, Chiba prefecture, Tokyo Disney Resort’s great success is also attributable to the fact that—under the well-known motto “Disneyland will never be completed” (Walt Disney)—new attractions have been opened one after another, thus winning the support of many repeat visitors.

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Sanrio Puroland

This park, which in 2004 celebrated the 30th anniversary of Hello Kitty’s birthday, features mainly the attractions that include shows starring Kitty, Cinnamon, My Melody, and other characters. The nearby Tama Center railway stations have Sanrio characters on their information boards outside the stations under the slogan “This Is the Town Where You Can Meet Hello Kitty,” promoting the idea of a town where “dreams come true.”



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Food

Food theme parks are indoor facilities gathering together from around the country well-known shops serving some particular kind of food. Consisting not only of specialty shops, they also offer a townscape with a story, or with some sort of distinctive food-related image, such as “port town” or “the fourth-decade Showa era” (mid-1950s to mid-1960s). Visitors enjoy menus of noted shops or restaurants in an out-of-the-ordinary atmosphere. The Yokohama Curry Museum, for example, recreates a “port town” where the story goes: “This is a town that thrived as a trading port during the Taisho era, where many people from other countries come and go, and where hotels and restaurants offer curry and rice they prepare with unique recipes.” Many food theme parks have a museum showing the history and culture of the featured foods. They also offer various entertainments, such as playing games and ranking shops according to visitors’ preferences.

The New Yokohama Ramen Museum, opened in 1994, was the first food theme park in Japan. Food theme parks have steadily increased in number throughout the country since 2000, and foods, too, have diversified, including ramen, *gyoza*, curry, sushi, ice cream, sweets, bread, etc. What is common among these parks is that their menus are popular among people regardless of gender and age.

Ikebukuro Gyoza Stadium

A food theme park established in 2002 within the amusement facility, Namja Town, this one is operated by Namco, a video game development company. Selected *gyoza* shops from across the country gather here in a site reminiscent of an old shopping arcade of the Showa era in its fourth decade

(mid-1950s to mid-1960s). What attracts visitors is the nostalgia-evoking atmosphere and the fact that they can eat various types of *gyoza* all in one place. Namja Town has other theme parks as well, including those specializing in ice cream, cream puffs, and relaxation (e.g., massage) therapies. Namco also operates the Kobe Sweets Harbor, the Yokohama Curry Museum, and many other food theme parks all over the country.



Other Theme Parks

Among notable parks on other themes are Space Camp (an educational space experience facility in Kitakyushu, including a special training program similar to that offered by NASA), Lagunasia (a marine theme park in Gamagori, Aichi prefecture, based on the images of ocean adventure and the Age of Discovery), and Ashikaga Flower Park in Tochigi prefecture.

Bathing facilities with a particular theme

“Spa resorts” (*supa rizoto*) are large-scale tourist facilities where you can enjoy not only Jacuzzi, sauna, and open-air baths, but also restaurants, beauty care salons, sports gyms, and so on. From the 1980s on, entertainment-oriented spa resorts, which are different from conventional public baths and hot spring inns, have been attracting more and more customers.

Spa Resort Hawaiians

Spa Resort Hawaiians, a large leisure spot in Fukushima prefecture, consists of five theme parks, a hotel, a golf course, and other facilities. Its predecessor was the Joban Hawaiian Center; by adding “spa” to the original theme of “Hawaii” or “southern land” it was renewed and opened in 1990 under the present name. In the Spring Park are a Southern European-style indoor spa with bathing-suit bathing and a huge traditional style bath. There you can enjoy a variety of baths—open-air baths, *hinoki* cypress-tub bath, *utaseyu* waterfall bath, Jacuzzi, cold water, etc.

Great Edo Spa Town

A bathing facility visitors can enjoy without staying overnight. Located on Tokyo Bay, its baths are fed by natural hot-springs. Reproducing an Edo-period townscape, it was opened in 2001 and offers an open-air bath, a footbath (see photo), low temperature sauna with rock beds, sand baths, etc. There are also a restaurant, beauty care salon, and other amenities.

