TOKYO JOURNAL; It's Official! Vacations Really Aren't Un-Japanese
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TOKYO, Aug. 5 -- It is hard work getting Japanese to relax. But the summer holidays are looming, and the Labor Ministry is gearing up for a tough campaign.

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Officials have embarked on a 47-city lecture tour, joining company managers to deliver pep talks like "How to Work and Rest in a Relaxed Society" and "Our Company's Restful Week."

Posters are going up across the nation showing two Japanese in safari suits lolling on the ground next to a reclining leopard. Each poster bears this summer's slogan: "Hotto Week," a pun on the English word "hot" and a Japanese word for relaxation.

But the objective still seems remote. Last year, the number of hours Japanese actually worked rose, despite a new law aimed at gradually reducing the nation's 48-hour workweek to 40 hours. And Labor Ministry statistics show that Japanese workers take only half the 15 paid holiday days that most companies, on average, offer them a year. Too Many Maddening Crowds

Japanese dedication to work is legendary, but that is only part of the reason for the reluctance to take vacations. In crowded, expensive Japan, sometimes vacations just aren't that much fun.

Most Japanese feel free to take time off only when everyone else does - the three yearly national holidays of New Year's, the spring break known as Golden Week and the summer holidays that coincide with O-Bon, a festival commemorating the dead. Companies usually shut down for at least part of these holidays, which can total three weeks.

A result is huge traffic jams, packed trains and planes, and peak-season prices at hotels across the country. Woe to the tourist who does not make reservations well in advance.

Masahiro Fujiwara, a Honda executive, says he is one of the lucky ones. He owns a small summer cottage in the mountains of Nagano Prefecture, so he saves on hotel costs for his family. But to avoid traffic jams, he has learned to leave at midnight and return a day before he anticipates the rush will begin.

"Wherever you go, it's bumper to bumper," Mr. Fujiwara said. "At midnight, it's still crowded, but it's a little better. The trip normally takes about two and a half hours, but during holidays it can take five hours. The highway becomes a parking lot." Cheaper to Travel Abroad

It is not only tiring to take vacations with the crowds; it is expensive. According to travel agency estimates, the cost of an overseas vacation is about one-third that of traveling within Japan, where the cost of train tickets and highway tolls is high, gasoline is about $4 a gallon and a night at a hotel or inn costs at least $62 for each person.

"I take vacations, but we cannot afford to go away for a long time," said Tetsuo Matsufuji, director of the Ministry of Trade and Industry's Leisure Development Center, yet another Government effort to promote relaxation.

"When I was stationed in West Germany, we traveled for a month by car and it was incredibly cheap. As my example shows, Japanese do not hate leisure activities because we enjoy them when we are overseas." Staggered Vacations

One ideal solution, of course, would be to have Japanese stagger their vacations, as Americans tend to do. "We are studying ways to scatter holidays to relieve this concentration," Mr. Matsufuji said. "But among Japanese people there is a feeling that unless the whole office is closed, you feel uneasy if you take holidays while everyone else is working."

Indeed, although Mr. Fujiwara has accumulated 40 days of paid holiday in addition to the three weeks of national holidays when Honda shuts down, he said he only took five of the days owed to him last year. Honda does not allow him to cash in unused days or carry over more than 20 of them to the next year. But like many other Japanese, he said he felt uncomfortable leaving his colleagues to shoulder his work by taking a vacation when the company is open.

There may be a glimmer of hope among younger Japanese. Masako Horinoue, a younger colleague of Mr. Fujiwara at
Honda, said she takes most of her vacation time. "I think time for myself is more important," she said. "I figure things will work out on the job even if I'm gone."

The Labor Ministry's campaign is aimed at encouraging workers to view vacations as a right. As one step, the ministry has been actively promoting the idea of limiting the workweek to five days. Beginning next year, Government offices will close two Saturdays a month, and financial institutions such as banks and post offices will be shut every Saturday.

Although improving workers' health and welfare is officially behind the drive for a shorter workweek, overseas trade friction has also played a role. The United States wants Japan to reduce productivity and increase domestic consumer spending; both goals would be served if Japanese workers spent less time on the job. Business as Usual on Saturday.

As of last year, just 6.2 percent of Japanese companies actually declared Saturdays to be holidays, although 50.9 percent were moving toward a five-day week by allowing employees to take some Saturdays off.

To help get employees in the right mood, a Labor Ministry official even wrote an official five-day workweek song. The lyrics encourage workers to dance a samba to the music of the waves and to frolic like Bambi in the woodlands.

While some Japanese worry that cutting back work hours and promoting longer vacations will sap the commitment to work that built the Japanese miracle, the Labor Ministry is confident the result will help Japan.

"This does not mean that we're going to create Japanese who will only play around," said Yasushi Fukushima, who organized the campaigns promoting shorter working hours. "Up until now our target was to catch up with Europe and the United States. We weren't required to have so much creativity and flexibility. But from now on, we need to know about things outside our jobs. That kind of attitude will be good for Japan."

The Labor Ministry is setting a national goal - asking companies to offer workers a full week off. The summer holiday campaign is in its third year, and last year the ministry's slogan read, "To Take a Vacation Is Proof of Your Competence." 'Vacation Is Not a Bad Thing'

But the ministry cannot force companies to offer longer vacations -Fujitsu recently announced, for example, that it would cut summer holidays at four semiconductor plants by a few days to keep up with the demand for semiconductors.

"The only thing we can do is to let people know that taking a vacation is not a bad thing," Mr. Fukushima said.

His work is cut out for him. A Leisure Development Center survey released this spring disclosed that one out of three workers never takes a vacation longer than three consecutive days.

The Asahi Shimbun recently polled presidents of major companies who were not planning to take long summer vacations. Eighteen executives said they felt doing so would be unfair to their colleagues, 16 said they were too busy and six said they would not know how to enjoy the time off.

Some companies are resorting to paid incentives. A Tokyo real estate company called Starts now pays workers the equivalent of $7.70 for each day of paid vacation they actually take. Daiei, a small Osaka medical equipment maker, requires that all its managers take 10 consecutive days of vacation sometime during the year, and gives them $770 to spend during that time.

Some companies, however, seem to have missed the point. In 1986, the department store chain Takashimaya started a new system requiring employees to take longer summer holidays. But the president of Takashimaya told the Yomiuri Shimbun that the company expected its workers to think about the company's management policy while on vacation.

Photo of Japanese Labor Ministry poster encouraging vacations (Asahi Shimbun)

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