

Is Southeast Asia the Key to Success? Expo 2025 is Finally Here -The Shared Future of Asia and Japan-



The Malaysia Pavilion (center) and the Ireland Pavilion to the right, being prepared to be exhibited at Expo 2025

(March 6, 2025, in Konohana, Osaka City) [Photographed using a drone]. (c) Jiji Press.

Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan will finally open on April 13 on the artificial island Yumeshima in Osaka Bay. With “Designing Future Society for Our Lives” as the theme, it will run for 184 days until October 13 and is expected to bring in 28.2 million visitors. The main attraction will undoubtedly be the pavilions of the participating nations and companies, each built to highlight their uniqueness. The pavilions have been constructed inside and outside the Grand Ring, which was recognized as the world’s largest wooden architectural structure. While the Czechia Pavilion, with its spiraling structure and facade adorned in the country’s famous Bohemian Crystal, and the UK Pavilion, featuring its national flag, the Union Jack, will surely draw a crowd, an equal interest will likely be directed at the Southeast Asian pavilions.

Highly Anticipated Pavilions

Forty-seven of the participating countries built their own pavilions. Singapore was the first among them to start construction, and its pavilion stands out as a massive 17-meter-high red sphere designed after the country's nickname "Little Red Dot" (how Singapore is represented on the world map). The sphere was made using 17,000 sheets of recycled aluminum, and inside, visitors can enjoy an immersive art installation created by Singaporean artists. The pavilion's mascot character, Merli, is based on the nation's symbol, the Merlion, and will surely be much loved in Japan, where mascot characters are hugely popular.

The Thailand Pavilion is characterized by a steeply curved roof that looks like a ski jumping platform. Under the theme of "immunity," it will showcase Thailand's traditional medical care, herbs and foods for good health, Thai massage, and modern medicine. In Japan, where the population is aging, "good health" and "food" are topics of the utmost interest.

The Malaysia Pavilion, which was designed by Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, uses over 5,000 Japanese and Malaysian bamboos for its exterior and interior. The bamboos are arranged to look like Malaysia's traditional textile called *songket*, creating a silhouette evocative of handwoven designs. "Malaysia is rich in forests," Kuma explained, "and like Japan, they use bamboo. So I proposed making it the theme."

Indonesia, a maritime nation, built a pavilion designed after a ship. The Philippines Pavilion is a portrayal of its traditional textile. Each pavilion is highly unique and sure to attract many visitors.

Truth be told, there is not yet much excitement about Expo 2025 in Japan. This may be due to several factors, such as the difficulties involved in purchasing tickets and the lack of a popular key exhibit like the Moon rock, which drew huge crowds during the Japan World Exposition 1970. Nevertheless, the advantage of World Expos is that they are held over an extended period, typically around half a year. Expo 2025 is no different. If visitors have good things to say, it will encourage more people to visit, and hopefully, the Southeast Asian pavilions will also contribute to this end.

Inbound Tourism

Expo 2025 is expected to draw international tourists from Southeast Asia too.

According to the Japan National Tourism Organization, the number of visitors to Japan from Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam in 2024 all rose from the previous year. In particular, visitors from the Philippines rose 31.5% year on year and reached a record of 818,600 people. Japan was the second most popular overseas destination for Philippine travelers after Hong Kong, which does not require a visa. While visitors from China, South Korea, and Taiwan still make up the overwhelming majority, there is significant potential for growth in tourists from Southeast Asia.

According to the Japan Tourism Agency, the average spending per foreign visitor to Japan in 2024 was 291,572 yen among Singaporeans, which surpassed the 277,747 yen of Chinese visitors. Spending among visitors from Vietnam (219,903 yen), Malaysia (215,410 yen), Indonesia (213,063 yen), and Thailand (197,383 yen) all surpassed that of visitors from Taiwan (188,193 yen), and visitors from the Philippines (184,711 yen) spent more than visitors from South Korea (109,441 yen).

Southeast Asian tourists often spend more than 10 days in Japan. The Kansai Bureau of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI Kansai) of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry is putting effort into promoting sightseeing tours that include Expo 2025 and nearby areas to potential visitors from Southeast Asia. In December 2024, METI Kansai invited representatives from travel agencies in Thailand, which has a high rate of repeat visitors to Japan compared to other Southeast Asian countries. They traveled from the Expo venue to Kyoto Prefecture, where they visited Amanohashidate, a famous scenic destination, and toured a workshop that creates traditional dyed textiles called Tango Chirimen. Then they traveled to Fukui Prefecture, north of Kyoto, and took part in a class to make lacquered chopsticks. Speaking positively of the experience, one of the Thai participants said, "People in Thailand are excited for Expo 2025. I'm sure they would also be interested in visiting other places nearby."

Vendors in Expo 2025 are also planning to charm visitors with original food dishes.

Kura Sushi, Inc., a leading revolving sushi bar chain restaurant, will offer around 70 dishes from around the world. They include chili crab, a Singaporean dish of crab stir-fried in chili sauce; chicken adobo, a staple Filipino dish that strikes an exquisite balance of sourness and saltiness; kolak labu, an Indonesia dessert made from pumpkin and coconut cream; gai

yang, Thai grilled chicken; and Vietnamese fresh spring rolls of shrimp, meat, and fresh vegetables rolled in rice paper. Zojirushi Corp. will offer original rice balls inspired by dishes from various countries, such as rendang, an Indonesian dish of meat slow-cooked in coconut milk and spices; and nam prik ong, a Thai dish of ground meat slow-cooked with various seasonings. It will be a unique dining experience that blends traditional Japanese cuisine with the indigenous foods of various countries.

Business

World Expos, where each country showcases its newest technologies or unique culture, are also places of business. During Expo 2020 Dubai, which ran from 2021 to 2022, various participating nations held business meetings, which later enabled them to enter the Middle Eastern market. Expo 2025 will likewise create business opportunities for participating countries.

Tengku Zafrul Abdul Aziz, the Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry of Malaysia, said, “We will strive to attract investments and expand trade by using Expo 2025 as leverage.” He plans to send government and corporate representatives to the Expo to conduct business meetings. Malaysia-based Halal Development Corp. (HDC) is also encouraging the country’s over 2,000 halal businesses to participate in the Expo, aiming to expand the market for halal foods, which adhere to Islamic law. HDC’s Chairman, Khairul Azwan Harun, explained, “Demand for Malaysian halal foods is growing among both Muslim and non-Muslim consumers.” He believes Expo 2025 will be a crucial opportunity to increase Malaysia’s sales in the international halal market, which is valued at over 3 trillion US dollars. Other companies will likewise exhibit a broad range of products in an attempt to develop new markets. Among them are Malaysia’s chocolate manufacturer, Bennis Ethicoa Bean To Bar Chocolate Factory, and a company producing oil palm-based biomass fuel pellets.

The business community in Japan’s Kansai region is also eager to engage with Southeast Asian countries.

The Kansai Economic Federation will hold the 4th General Meeting of the Asian Business Creation Platform on April 20, soon after Expo 2025 opens, inviting representatives from economic organizations in seven countries, including the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Federation of Thai Industries. Seven working groups will report on their activities in fields such as human resources training, tourism, and the environment.

On April 21, the Osaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) will host a meeting of

representatives, inviting the heads of chambers of commerce from six countries, including Malaysia and the Philippines. The OCCI launched the ASEAN-Japan Business Platform and is working to forge deeper relations with each country. A joint communique will be presented at the meeting of representatives.

From fostering interpersonal relations to promoting business, Expo 2025 will become a major hub connecting Japan and Southeast Asia.

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Press

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Expo 2025 / Grand Ring recognized by Guinness.

Secretary General Hiroyuki Ishige (center) from the Japan Association for the 2025 World Exposition and architect and Design Producer Sou Fujimoto (right) photographed with the Guinness World Record certificate (morning of March 4, 2025, in Konohana, Osaka City). (c) Jiji Press.

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Expo 2025 / Grand Ring completed.

The symbol of Expo 2025, the Grand Ring, was completed and handed over to the Japan Association for the 2025 World Exposition by the construction contractors (February 28, 2025, in Konohana, Osaka City). (c) Jiji Press.

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(c) The Singapore Pavilion, Expo 2025.

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The Thailand Pavilion being prepared to be exhibited at Expo 2025 (March 6, 2025, in Konohana, Osaka City)
[Photographed using a drone] . (c) Jiji Press.

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The Philippines Pavilion being prepared to be exhibited at Expo 2025 (March 6, 2025, in Konohana, Osaka City)
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