BOOKING A TRIP TO JAPAN?

Check Both the Travel Agency and the Transport Operator

By Joni Firdaus Harmaini | Owner, Rantau Tokyo Tours

Booking a trip to Japan has become increasingly convenient. Social media and messaging apps offer easy access to tour packages, private vehicles and services in familiar languages. Before booking, however, travellers should ask three questions: who is selling the package, who will operate the vehicle, and who will take responsibility if something goes wrong?

Attractive vehicle photographs, large follower counts and personal recommendations can build confidence. Travellers should also check the provider’s registration and authorisation for the services offered.

Travel registration and transport authorisation are different

In Japan, travel agency registration and passenger transport authorisation serve different purposes. Incorporating a company or using the word “travel” in its name does not establish that every service it offers meets the relevant requirements.

For packages or arrangements that fall within regulated travel business activities, check the travel provider’s registration and permitted scope. For transport with a driver, check the company authorised to operate the passenger transport service.

The term “land tour” is not proof of registration. Japan also has a separate registration system for land operators that arrange specified services on behalf of travel businesses. This differs from travel agency registration for selling packages directly to travellers.

A travel agency and a transport operator may legitimately be different companies. What matters is that their roles are clear, the operator confirms the booking, and responsibility for the service is established.

Lessons from Osaka and Tokyo

For conventional taxi and chauffeur-driven hire services, green number plates are an indicator of commercial vehicle registration. However, a vehicle with legitimately issued plates can still be used in an unlawful operation.

One concern is meigi-gashi, or name-lending, in which an authorised company allows another party to conduct transport business under its name.

In Osaka, Nikkei reported suspected misuse of company names to obtain green number plates and carry overseas visitors as though the vehicles were operating as legitimate taxis. The suspected name-lending scheme involved approximately 100 vehicles.

In Tokyo, a Kyodo report published by Chiba Nippo on 22 July 2026 described the arrest of a 41-year-old hire company operator residing in Nakano. He was suspected of lending vehicles registered under his company’s name for use in unauthorised passenger transport.

At a press conference on 26 August 2025, Japan’s Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) explained that authorised transport operators must conduct their business under their own management. Allowing another party to operate a transport business using their name is prohibited.

Travellers therefore need to establish who actually manages the journey, rather than relying solely on the colour of the number plate.

Paying on arrival does not establish legality

An offer to pay on arrival or book without a deposit may feel reassuring because no money has changed hands. However, payment terms do not establish whether a business is properly authorised. Legitimate providers may also offer bookings without a deposit.

The risks extend beyond losing money before departure. Unclear operating arrangements can make it harder to resolve service disruptions or establish responsibility after an accident.

MLIT warns that insurance may not apply when passengers use illegal transport services, and adequate compensation may not be available. Travellers should request information about insurance covering the paid service they are booking. The scope of cover must be checked against the policy terms and the circumstances of the journey.

Popularity does not replace verification

Instagram, TikTok and Threads are publicity platforms, not business licensing authorities. Follower numbers, prominent customers and endorsements do not replace registration checks.

People recommending services should also take care. A pleasant personal experience is not sufficient grounds to describe a provider as “officially licensed” or “guaranteed safe”. An unchecked recommendation may give prospective customers confidence before they understand the provider’s legal status and responsibilities.

If registration and authorisation have not been checked, that limitation should be stated openly.

Request the details and match the company name

Before booking, travellers should request:

• The legal company name and travel registration number appropriate to the activities offered.

• The transport operator’s identity and authorisation details.

• Confirmation from the operator of the booking, vehicle and assigned driver.

• Information about insurance, cancellation terms and assistance if problems arise.

Match registration details to the company name through the issuing authority. A photograph of a licence alone does not establish that the named company actually manages the journey.

For transparency, the author’s business, Rantau Tokyo Tours, operates under Rantau Tokyo Co., Ltd. Its travel registration is Tokyo Governor Registration No. 3-7753. Registration enquiries can be directed to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s travel business registration section on +81-3-5320-4769.

The company’s hire business documents include approval for the transfer of a passenger transport business to Rantau Tokyo Co., Ltd., numbered 899 (Kan-Ji-Ryo-Ni), dated 25 July 2024. Enquiries regarding the authorisation can be directed to the Tokyo Transport Branch Office’s transport authorisation section on +81-3-3458-9231, option 1.

The same checks should apply to every provider, including the author’s company. Keep written booking records and reconfirm with the operator if the vehicle or driver changes. Price, language convenience and flexible payment terms should be considered alongside documented authorisation and clear accountability.

Sources and editorial notes

Source list reproduced from the original article draft (18 October 2026). The Osaka article’s full publication details were not independently checked in that draft. These references are provided for readers to consult directly.

1. Nikkei — Osaka case

2. Chiba Nippo / Kyodo — Tokyo case, 22 July 2026

3. Japan Tourism Agency — Travel Business Act overview

4. MLIT — Ministerial press conference, 26 August 2025

5. MLIT Hokkaido Transport Bureau — Insurance warning

6. Tokyo Metropolitan Government — Travel business registration

7. Tokyo Metropolitan Government — Registered travel businesses (2025)

8. Tokyo Transport Branch Office — Contact information

Company document: Business transfer approval No. 899 (Kan-Ji-Ryo-Ni), issued by the Kanto District Transport Bureau on 25 July 2024. The original draft states that the document was visually checked; that is not independent confirmation of current operating status.

Educational information only. This article is not legal advice.

Additional guidance: Personal Guide & Land Arrangement Services

Foreign nationals providing personal guiding, sightseeing assistance, interpretation, itinerary planning, or land arrangement services in Japan must have a status of residence that permits the specific activities they undertake.

Depending on their status of residence and the nature of the work, permission to engage in activities outside their authorised status (shikakugai katsudo kyoka) may be necessary. Some residence statuses permit work without occupation-specific restrictions, while others limit paid activities. A visa or residence card alone does not establish permission for every kind of work.

Separately, certain land arrangement services conducted on behalf of travel businesses may require registration as a Travel Service Arrangement Business (ryoko sabisu tehai-gyo) under Japanese law. The applicable requirement depends on the actual services provided and business model.

Permission to work as a personal guide does not automatically authorise the person to sell regulated travel packages or provide paid passenger transportation. Commercial transport requires its own applicable authorisation and must be operated within its permitted scope.

Travellers and business partners should confirm who is arranging the services, who is operating transportation, and whether the relevant business registrations and work permissions apply.

This section is general educational information, not immigration, transport or legal advice. Requirements depend on the individual circumstances and current Japanese regulations.