

# Entrepreneur Selling a Taste of Traditional Japan



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FEATURED BUSINESS



## Rediscover Travel Inc. - Profile -



**Jeff Aasgaard is President and Guest Relations Manager at Rediscover Travel Inc.**

**Nationality:** American  
**Time in Japan:** 13 years  
**Industry:** Travel  
**Location:** Kawanishi (near Kobe and Osaka)  
**Date Established:** 2000  
**Company Type:** privately-held  
**Staff:** 10  
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*Ever wondered how to build a successful business from the ground up? A foreign entrepreneur making waves in Japan's travel industry offers some hot tips.....*

*By Jonathon Walsh*

**For** the millions of foreigners who come to these shores each year wishing to experience the real Japan, visiting Akihabara, Ginza and Tokyo Tower often just does not satisfy tourists' needs to discover the Land of the Rising Sun.

Furthermore, when English-speaking foreigners venture into the Japanese countryside where foreign languages are rarely spoken, the situation is unlikely to improve. The language barrier can simply become too much and cut tourists right off from experiencing beauty spots, tour businesses and accommodation that is absolutely Japanese.

So, how can foreigners soak up real Japanese culture without knowing Japanese? And in particular, how can they find somewhere to drop their bags, relax, and enjoy traditional Japanese hospitality?

*The answer is only a mouse click away.*

**Rediscover Travel Inc.**, established in 2000 by American entrepreneur **Jeff Aasgaard** and his partners, helps tourists by making reservations at *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inns) throughout Japan.

Working out of Kawanishi, this Web-based enterprise was launched after Aasgaard realized that Japan had a lot to offer foreign travelers but no one to really help them discover Japanese culture.

**Business reporter Jonathon Walsh interviewed Aasgaard to discover how Rediscover is tapping into a growing niche market, and provides valuable tips for entrepreneurs to help them grow their businesses.**

Since their launch, Rediscover has taken on 10 staff, their website ([www.japaneseguesthouses.com](http://www.japaneseguesthouses.com)) has been ranked #7 of the 50 best travel websites by *The Independent* (UK), and business has been brisk, clocking up a consistent annual growth rate of 60%. Rediscover is a Certified Travel Agent and now represents more than 500 ryokan throughout Japan.

### ③ **Why did you start your own company in Japan?**

Japan has so much to offer foreign travelers. People who only stay at Western style hotels sleep in a room that looks like the ones back home and are offered the same services offered back home. They only see the sights and do not experience or feel Japan. They cannot experience Japanese hospitality. We decided that someone must help so we started our business.

### ③ **What are your company's primary products/services?**

Rediscover makes reservations for English speaking guests at ryokan throughout Japan. We also have a few cultural tours in Tokyo and Kyoto.

### ③ **Who are you marketing to?**

Our target is travelers who want to do more than just sightsee. They want to experience something that they cannot do at home. Western style hotels are the same all over the world but a ryokan is something truly Japanese.

### ③ **What kind of business do you have?**

Strange as it sounds, we have been told that it is still cheaper, tax wise and the like, to remain non-corporate. We have no debt so becoming a Yugen or Kabushiki Kaisha would have no advantage. This situation will probably change early next year but until then I would prefer not to pay all of the "corporate taxes" and "establishing fees." Our customers are from overseas and they do not care if we are a YK or KK.

### ③ **What did you need to start a business in Japan?**

Rediscover just started as an idea and all we had to do was make it come to life so we worked hard, built a website, and established relationships with ryokan all over Japan. It is a service so we did not have a lot of capital investment.

### ③ **What are Rediscover's main points of difference?**

We are not a computer program like most reservation services. We are people and individually answer all e-mails. This is critical because many visitors to Japan have questions that a computer cannot answer. The answers that we send are from a foreign point of view so we are better able to explain Japanese culture in a way that our guests can understand.

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Also, there are a few other services that help guests make reservations at ryokan but these are usually run by Japanese or the government. We only use native English speakers to communicate with our guests and only native Japanese speakers to communicate with our ryokan.

③ **What are the main methods you are using to market your products and/or services?**

There have been many articles about Rediscover in *Wall Street Journal*, *Time - Asia Edition*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Yomiuri*, *The Times*, the *Guardian*, *The Independent*, *CNN Traveler*, *Kansai Time Out*, *Metropolis*, *Hiragana Times* and many other publications in English, Chinese, and German. These articles have driven a lot of traffic to our site. We are also ranked highly in Google and Yahoo. We also recently started to advertise in Google and *Kayak* magazine and have been very happy with the results. It is a great and inexpensive way to promote your company.

③ **What is the most valuable marketing method you have used and why has it been effective?**

Word of mouth is always the most valuable marketing tool for any business. We keep very careful track of guest comments and make adjustments to our service to correct any complaints or suggestions. Over the years this has led to better service and better word of mouth promotion. Articles and the Web are also a big help.

③ **How is business going?**

Business is going well and we are growing almost too fast. In February we had to move to a new office because our staff grew and we could not fit any more people into the old office. We now have a large enough office for a few years of growth.

③ **Why do you think you are succeeding where others have failed?**

We keep things simple and personal. We want the guests to be happy because a happy guest is easy to serve for the ryokan and returns home with great stories. This then makes others want to visit Japan and stay at a ryokan.

Also, what we are doing is not hard but we have focus, which many entrepreneurs do not. They try to do everything and go after every opportunity, which means they are constantly chasing instead of just doing it. We only work with ryokan, not hotels, although we have had people ask us to help them make a hotel reservation. Due to our focus we have to tell them 'no' and instead introduce a different company that may be able to help.

Business is basically simple. There is usually one area that if you do well, everything else will follow.

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### ③ What were some of the difficulties and frustrations you encountered working in Japan and how did you overcome them?

It is not cheap to do business in Japan once you reach a certain point. You need office space, phone lines and so on. None of this is cheap but you get used to it and move on.

### ③ What one thing would you never do again in business?

Try to do all the accounting on our own. It is so much easier to just hire someone to come in and do the books and taxes than to do it yourself unless you are a CPA.

### ③ How did you find your existing staff?

We found a number of our staff through a government service called Hello Work ([www.tfemploy.go.jp/en/coun/cont\\_1.html](http://www.tfemploy.go.jp/en/coun/cont_1.html)). It is free and we have had great luck with it.

### ③ What key attributes do you believe an entrepreneur must have to succeed?

**Do not be afraid of failure, and just keep trying.** Most people have good ideas and do nothing about it because they are afraid of failure or they try but give up after a few months.

Starting a company from nothing takes a long time and you must invest your time and money into the company. You should be prepared to give it four or five years. Some people start and invest in things that really do not help the company grow. They move into a nice office and get themselves a nice desk and a fast PC. They have everything they need except customers and a proven business system.

In the beginning, **keep it simple.** Use the corner of your house for an office (if possible), use your current PC or buy a used one. Of course where you should spend your money will depend on the type of business you are in but in general keep it simple and spend your money in places that will help the business grow and put your ego on hold.

It is also important to **make sure your company is scalable** and can grow without the owner having to do everything all the time. Hire people to help the company grow and do not be a one person show.

### ③ What secret tips do you have to operate your company?

Business is basically simple. There is usually one area that if you do well everything else will follow. We want to make our guests happy and so that is what we work for. We do not try to “over sell” a stay at a ryokan or push guests into making a decision.

## *Rediscover Travel Inc.*

*Rediscover Travel Inc. is a reservation service designed to assist English-speaking travelers to make reservations at ryokans throughout Japan.*

*This is a free service to Customers.*

Rediscover has a new "sister site" – *Japan Roads* – for people who are interested in doing a tour of Japan. [www.japanroads.com](http://www.japanroads.com)

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