

After two years of closed borders, Australia welcomes the world back

SYDNEY — Australia said on Monday it will reopen its borders to vaccinated travelers this month, ending two years of misery for the tourism sector, reviving migration and injecting billions of dollars into the world No. 13 economy. The move effectively calls time on the last main component of Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which it has attributed to relatively low death and infection rates. The other core strategy, stop-start lockdowns, was shelved for good in December. The country had taken steps in recent months to relax border controls, like allowing in skilled migrants and quarantine-free travel arrangements — "travel bubbles" — with select countries like New Zealand. But the reopening, which takes effect on Feb. 21, represents the first time since March 2020 that people can travel

to Australia from anywhere in the world as long as they are vaccinated. "If you're double-vaccinated, we look forward to welcoming you back to Australia," Prime Minister Scott Morrison said at a media briefing in Canberra. The tourism industry, which has relied on the domestic market that has itself been heavily impacted by movement restrictions, welcomed the decision which comes three months before Mr. Morrison is due to face an election. "Over the two years since the borders have been closed the industry has been on its knees," said Australian Tourism Export Council Managing Director Peter Shelley by phone. "Now we can turn our collective efforts towards rebuilding an industry that is in disrepair," he added. International and domestic tourism losses since the start of the pandemic

totaled A\$101.7 billion (\$72 billion), according to government body Tourism Research Australia (TRA). International travel spending in Australia plunged from A\$44.6 billion in the 2018-19 financial year to A\$1.3 billion in 2020-21, TRA said. Shares of tourism-related stocks soared as investors cheered the prospect of a return to profit growth. Shares of the country's main airline Qantas Airways Ltd. jumped 5% while shares of travel agent Flight Centre Travel Group Ltd. surged 8%. Qantas CEO Alan Joyce said in a statement the company was looking at flight schedules to determine ways to restart flights from international locations soon. As elsewhere in the world, Australian COVID cases have soared in recent weeks due to the Omicron variant which medical experts say may be more transmissible but less virulent than previous strains.

But with more than nine in 10 Australians aged over 16 fully vaccinated, new cases and hospitalizations appear to have slowed, the authorities say. The country reported just over 23,000 new infections on Monday, its lowest for 2022 and far from a peak of 150,000 around a month ago. Mr. Morrison meanwhile said the government would send up to 1,700 Australian Defense Force personnel to fill staffing shortages in the aged care sector, following complaints of understaffing and fatigue due to increased pressures brought by the pandemic. Around 2.4 million cases have been recorded in Australia since the first Omicron case was detected in Australia in November. Until then, Australia had counted only around 200,000 cases. Total deaths stand at 4,248 since the pandemic began. — **Reuters**

Japan PM Kishida calls for doubling booster shots to 1 million a day

TOKYO — Japan's Prime Minister (PM) Fumio Kishida said on Monday he wants to speed up the country's COVID-19 booster shot program to 1 million shots a day by the end of the month, about double the current pace. Mr. Kishida told a televised parliamentary budget committee meeting that he has instructed ministers to work with local governments to speed up inoculations as much as possible. Nationwide infections surpassed 100,000 on Saturday for the first time. Most regions are now under infection control measures to try to blunt the spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant that has exploded among a population where less than 5% have received vaccine booster shots. Tokyo and 12 other prefectures are in final discussions to extend the virus curbs for about three weeks, the *Asahi* newspaper reported on Sunday. — **Reuters**

IZU, Japan — For three decades, Mitsuyasu Asada has proudly tended the same lush mountainside terraces where his father and grandfather grew wasabi, the horseradishlike plant with a fluorescent-green hue and head-clearing pungency that unmistakably connotes Japanese cuisine. Yet at the age of just 56, Mr. Asada is already thinking about retiring, worn down by the many threats facing this indispensable condiment that graces plates of sushi and bowls of soba. Rising temperatures have rendered his crops more susceptible to mold and rot. He worries about unpredictable rainfall, deluging floods and more intense typhoons. The thick cedar forest that blankets the mountain overlooking his paddies — a result of postwar timber policy — has degraded the quality of the spring water that the wasabi needs to grow. Wild boar and deer increasingly attack his fields, driven down the mountains for lack of nutrition at higher altitudes. And his two adult daughters have married and shown no interest in succeeding him on his 1 1/2 acres in Izu, a city in Shizuoka prefecture, about 90 miles southwest of Tokyo. "If no one will take it over," Mr. Asada said, "it will end." Mr. Asada is just one of many growers in Shizuoka, one of Japan's largest wasabi-growing regions, who must confront rising challenges from global warming, the legacy of untended forests and demographic decline.

'A sense of crisis for wasabi'

Already, these hazards have chipped away at the centuries-old culture of wasabi in the area and imperiled the future of one of the prefecture's most important agricultural products and a pillar of its tourism business. Over the past decade, the volume of wasabi produced in Shizuoka has declined by close to 55%, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. "I have a sense of crisis," said Hiroyuki Mochizuki, president of Tamaruya, a 147-year-old company in Shizuoka that processes wasabi to sell in tubes, as well as in salad dressings, flavored salts, pickles and even nostril-tickling chocolate. "In order to protect Japanese food culture," he added, "it is important to protect wasabi." Wasabi plants sprout in spring water that flows down from the mountains, helping to foster gradations of pungency and hints of sweetness. The most well-known Shizuoka variety, called *mazuma*, tends to sell for 50% more than wasabi from other parts of Japan. Over time, local growers say, the spring water has deteriorated in quality, compromised by an abundance of cedar and cypress trees. In an effort to supply Japan with a fast-growing source of lumber to rebuild after World War II, government planners seeded mountain tracts exclusively with Japanese cedar or cypress.

But as cheap wood imports supplanted Japan's lumber in the 1960s, the cedar and cypress were left to grow, crowding out other kinds of plants that would better contain and nourish the mountain springs that wasabi needs to thrive. "People talk about climate change and how there is less water," said David Hulme, a retired Australian journalist who now grows wasabi in Okutama, about 50 miles from central Tokyo. "But the real problem is that the hills are not holding the water long enough." Global warming has upset the balance even further. The delicate wasabi plants, which take more than a year to mature, do best in conditions no higher than about 70 degrees Fahrenheit. In recent years, heat waves in Japan have regularly pushed temperatures into the 90s and even above 100 degrees, causing more stalks to rot. On a recent afternoon, Masahide Watanabe, 66, a fourth-generation grower, stepped into one of his paddies in blue waders. With a small hoe, he dug a wasabi plant from the mud, unearthing a pockmarked green rhizome sprouting leaves shaped like water lilies. He rinsed the plant in flowing spring water and chopped off the leaves and a tangle of roots, inspecting the remaining body for blemishes. "Sometimes the plant will be missing the stems that grow out of the top," he said. "We

call it 'headless syndrome.'" Other times, he said, he discovers what look like tumors on the roots. Such diseases, he said, have grown more frequent as temperatures have warmed. Government researchers and local growers have started to experiment with crossbreeding in an effort to develop hearty wasabi varieties that will thrive even in the rising heat. The challenge is that, unlike with other crops such as cucumbers or tomatoes, extracting seeds and growing seedlings from wasabi require sophisticated technology. Most growers rely on specialized companies to clone seedlings in labs and greenhouses. Crossbreeding new varieties entails complicated pollination efforts and, most of all, time. Hope may yet come from people such as Haruhiko Sugiyama, 44, who recently started his own wasabi-growing operation in Izu. He leases a half-acre of paddies from a retired grower whose own son does not want to enter the family business. A dozen years ago, Mr. Sugiyama, the son of grocery store owners, decided he wanted to work outside. A middle school friend who descended from a long line of wasabi growers connected him to another farmer who needed help. Yet to reach the point where he could start his own operation, Mr. Sugiyama had to prove his worth to the local growers association, which controls access to wasabi fields. In 12 years working for another grower, Sugiyama said, he never took a day off while learning every step of local wasabi-growing techniques. — © 2022 The New York Times

JOB OPENING

Company Name: Zachry Philippines, Inc.
Address: 9th Floor Units A and D, Robinson Cyber Omega, Pearl Drive, Ortigas Center, Pasig City
Contact details of the Company: dayritt@zachrygroup.com
Job Position: Vice President of Engineering, Asia
Job Description:

- Align the Zachry Philippines, Inc. ("ZPI") strategic objectives and goals with those of Zachry Group (US), as well as cultivate and grow relationships between ZPI and Zachry Group (US)
- Serve as an Executive Level presence in Asia for Zachry Group (US), as well as meet with Zachry Group's Asian partners and customers throughout Asia in order to foster/develop current and future business opportunities in Asia, and help foster/develop Zachry Group's international supply chain activities
- Direct, supervise and provide leadership for all aspects of Zachry Group's Asia operations, fostering continued growth of ZPI's Manila office as well as positioning ZPI's Manila office for long-term, sustainable future, including the development and implementation of strategies for continuous improvement of ZPI's Manila operations
- Direct activities of engineering operations in the planning, scheduling, cost control, quality, and execution of projects in order to ensure the use of proven practices applicable to US EPC projects
- Provide leadership for all ZPI engineering processes and initiatives in order to ensure conformance with Zachry Group's (US) established processes, policies and objectives

Basic Qualifications for the Position:

- Minimum 25 years of US-based Engineering and EPC Project-related experience, including Executive-level experience
- Bachelor of Science Degree in Engineering or other qualifying degree
- Executive-level EPC company leadership experience
- Experience with planning, scheduling and execution of engineering projects and EPC projects
- Able to travel internationally, particularly between the United States and the Philippines, and in Asia

Salary Range (monthly): PHP 200,000 – PHP 250,000

France's Macron flies to Moscow in high-risk diplomatic mission

MOSCOW — French President Emmanuel Macron flies to Moscow on Monday in a risky diplomatic move, seeking commitments from Russian President Vladimir Putin to dial down tensions with Ukraine, where Western leaders fear the Kremlin plans an invasion. Mr. Macron has made a frenetic series of phone calls with Western allies, Mr. Putin and the Ukrainian leader over the past week. He will follow up on Tuesday with a visit to Kyiv, staking a lot of political capital on a mission that could prove embarrassing if he returns empty-handed. "We're heading to Putin's lair, in many ways it's a throw of the dice," one source close to Mr. Macron told Reuters. Russia has massed some 100,000 troops near Ukraine and demanded NATO and US security guarantees, including that NATO never admit Ukraine as a member. Two sources close to Mr. Macron said one aim of his visit was to buy time and freeze the situation for several months, at least until a "Super April" of elections in Europe — in Hungary, Slovenia and, crucially for Macron, in France. The French leader, who has earned a reputation for highly publicized diplomatic forays since he took power in 2017, has both tried to cajole and confront Mr. Putin over the past five years. His efforts have brought close dialogue with the Russian leader as well as painful setbacks.

Soon after his election, Mr. Macron rolled out the red carpet for Mr. Putin at the Palace of Versailles, but also used the visit to publicly decry Russian meddling during the election. Two years later, the pair met at the French president's summer residence. But Mr. Macron's many overtures did not prevent Russian encroachment into traditional French spheres of influence in Africa, culminating late last year with the arrival of Russian mercenaries in Mali. French officials think they are supported by the Kremlin. Eastern European countries who suffered decades under Soviet rule have criticized Mr. Macron's cooperative stance on Russia, leery of Mr. Macron's talk of negotiating a "new European security order" with Russia. To counter critics ahead of the trip and take on the mantle of European leadership in this crisis, Macron has been at pains to consult with other Western leaders this time, including Britain's Boris Johnson and US President Joseph R. Biden. The French president's visit to Moscow and Ukraine comes less than three months before a presidential election at home. His political advisers see a potential electoral dividend, although Mr. Macron has yet to announce whether he will run. "For the president, it's an opportunity to show his leadership in Europe. That he is above the fray," one French government source said. — **Reuters**

Vietnam starts reopening schools after year-long pandemic closure

HANOI — More than 17 million Vietnamese students were due to return to school on Monday for the first time in about a year, the health ministry said, as authorities announced plans to start vaccinating children from as young as five against coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The Southeast Asian country lifted many of its coronavirus curbs in October, but almost all students had been confined to taking on-line classes since early last year. Most schools in the country are due to reopen by the middle of February, the health ministry said in a statement. In a separate statement at the weekend, the government said it intended to buy 21.9 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for children aged between five and 12.

More than 75% of Vietnam's 98 million people have received at least two vaccine shots and authorities aim to administer a booster shot to all of the adult population by the end of March. Schools in the capital Hanoi will start reopening from Tuesday, with precautions such as temperature checks and protocols in place in case positive cases are detected, authorities said. Vietnam managed to contain the coronavirus for most of 2020 before the Delta variant drove up infections last year. The ministry of health said the country reported 14,112 new cases on Sunday. Overall, Vietnam has reported 2.34 million COVID-19 infections and more than 38,300 deaths. — **Reuters**

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