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attracted attention in some quarters for a less geopolitically significant asset, the seaweed that grows in the waters off Eilat. Japanese health and beauty company Nikken, among the largest of its kind in the world, sent 250 of its workers to Israel last week to learn about

the southern city's seaweed supply, and to visit Rehovot's Weizmann Institute, where a

number of the company's seaweed-based products are developed.

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Nikken has offered visits to Israel as "incentive trips" for years, and in addition to Eilat and Rehovot, this latest group visited sites at the Dead Sea and in Jerusalem, including the city's Hadassah Hospital.

Accompanied at times by Yoshinori Katori, Japan's ambassador to Israel, members of the delegation also met with President Shimon Peres and Tourism Minister Yitzhak Aharonovich. On the agenda for the meetings was the start of non-stop flights between Tel Aviv and Japan, which Nikken officials described as a major potential boost to both business relations and tourism ties between the two countries.

The discussions marked the second time in recent months that the subject has been raised with Aharonovich. In August, the tourism minister met with the head of JTB, Japan's largest travel agency, in Tokyo.

The agency official, Takashi Sasaki, pledged to lobby the Japanese government to facilitate the flights, and agreed to return Israel to the list of travel destinations promoted by his firm.

Israel had been removed from the list in 2002, when foreign visits to the country plunged as a result of the second intifada.

#### Israeli hotels honored with World Travel Awards

Two Israeli hotels are splitting prizes in five categories, the World Travel Awards organization has announced. Tel Aviv's David Intercontinental Hotel took honors as Israel's best hotel and business hotel in the WTA voting, while the Le Meridien Dead Sea Hotel was named the country's leading resort and leading spa resort. A fifth prize, for Israel's nicest hotel suite, went to the David Intercontinental

Voted on by travel agents from around the world, the World Travel Awards are given on both a regional and country-by-country basis. Israel, which is considered part of Europe in the WTA voting, failed to take any prizes in the regional competition. Turkey, also defined as a European country by the WTA, took top honors for the region's best tourist and convention bureau

The World Travel Awards, now in their 14th year, have recognized Le Meridien Dead Sea in each of the past three years. The awards have been called "the Oscars of tourism" by The Wall Street Journal.



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