



This combination image of six pictures taken on June 15, 2020 shows drive-in haunted house actors (from top center, clockwise) Ayaka Imaide, 34, Kenta Iwana, 25, Asami Takeuchi, 33, Haruna Suzuki, 20, Kota Hanegawa, 28, plus a group photo (top left) of the cast with their sound and lights engineer Daichi Ono (L in frame), 33, at their garage in Tokyo.—AFP

Don't open the door! Japan haunted house goes drive-in

A car horn beeps and the horror begins: a bloody murder and rampaging zombies. But this drive-in haunted house in Japan protects against the most terrifying enemy of all—coronavirus. Inside a car, guests can scream as loudly as they like, with no mask required, as hideous creatures daubed in blood swarm towards them. In fact, the new format might even be scarier than a traditional haunted house, producer Kenta Iwana, 25, told AFP. “At the drive-in haunted house, guests are confined in a car so they can’t escape the horror until the end,” he said. “It makes it even more scary for them.” Iwana came up with the drive-in solution after struggling with a string of cancellations as the coronavirus outbreak took hold.

“It’s because a haunted house creates an environment with three Cs,” he said, referring to the conditions Japanese experts warn risk spreading the virus: closed spaces, crowded places and close-contact settings. “Orders for conventional-style haunted houses were cancelled one after another and we lost about 80 percent of our clients.” The squad is usually hired to set up haunted house experiences at amusement parks and similar venues. A normal experience might involve a windowless facility with actors playing ghosts quietly following visitors and whispering directly into their ears to scare them—all impossible in the age of coronavirus.

‘Wanting to scare’

Iwana and his team Kowagarasetai—meaning “A squad wanting to scare”—initially tried to create coronavirus-compatible performances by wearing masks painted with fake blood and playing recorded screams rather than unleashing real ones. But most of their events were cancelled anyway. “We’ve even had Halloween events scheduled in October and November cancelled,” said Ayaka Imaide, 34, head of the squad. Iwana, who quit university to become a ghost house producer, wondered if a drive-in format might work instead.

Ghost stories and haunted houses are popular forms of entertainment in Japan and are associated particularly with the summer, though the reasons for the link are unclear. Iwana says he was told the tradition began when up-and-coming kabuki actors began performing ghost stories in the hot summer months, when star actors took time off.

Behind windscreens

Kota Hanegawa, 28, plays a blood-soaked killer in the squad, though he admits he is not a big fan of scary things. He says the new format—with the actors outside accompanied by a soundtrack and narration playing inside the car—has a few positives, particularly in terms of audience feedback. “I can get very close to guests even though they’re behind the windscreens,” said Hanegawa. “It’s interesting to see their reactions so close up, while keeping social distance.”



This picture shows a demonstration of a drive-in haunted house at a garage in Tokyo.



Actors Kenta Iwana (left), 25, and Asami Takeuchi (right), 33, performing during a demonstration of a drive-in haunted house.