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Hot on the trail of coolness, he scours Japan for fads

Consultant shows others the way of the streets

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TOKYO - Loic Bizel leads visitors through alleys packed with wild-haired youngsters, makes his way into tiny boutiques tucked beneath stairwells and points out fatigue-inspired jackets, hand-painted sneakers and plaid miniskirts.

Part tour guide and part business consultant, the 32-year-old Frenchman is a "cool" hunter, with a mission to uncover the ever-changing street fads of Japan and translate them into a language the rest of the world can understand.

"The people in the streets are very creative," Bizel said, noting a man wearing baggy shorts on top of long pants, a look that's the rage in Tokyo. "The search to be unique, to be different, creates style."

Bizel's expertise is in demand because Japan has shifted from being a powerhouse of manufacturing to an exporter of culture, including manga animation, gourmet sushi and now fashion tastes. Global businesses eager to get a glimpse of what's in store for the future are sending their executives here just to hang out with the cool hunter and absorb what's hip.

In Bizel's world, parodies of hip-hop clothes are mixed with school uniform slacks altered to sag. The stereotypical Japanese "salarymen," with their lookalike drab suits, are nowhere to be seen. And hair is dyed in so many shades you almost forget that Japanese have black hair.

"Japan is advanced. What will happen 10 years from now is already in Japan," Bizel said.

Fake-fur trims, oversized sunglasses, dogs dressed to the T, chains and gemstones embedded in shirts and hats of all shapes are "in," says Bizel, who dresses sedately compared with the people he studies.

Bizel, who began his cool-hunting business three years ago after initially working as a manager for a French company, made \$95,000 last year, showing executives and other visitors the ways of the streets.