

Sustainable creation of tourism areas open to the world: Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau—a pioneer in drawing inbound tourists that thoroughly pursues foreign visitors’ perspectives

Tanabe City,
Wakayama Prefecture



Background to the Project

Desire for many people to experience the magnificence of the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage routes following their designation as a World Cultural Heritage

Located in the southern part of Wakayama Prefecture, Tanabe City has a wealth of regional resources, boasting not only abundant nature featuring the ocean, mountains, rivers, and hot springs, but also ancient history and culture represented by the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage routes and Kumano Hongu Taisha Grand Shrine, which are designated as World Cultural Heritage sites under the collective title “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range”.

Following Kumano Kodo’s World Heritage designation in 2004 and a large-scale merger of local municipalities the following year, the Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau—a collaborative public-private regional organisation for promoting regional development through tourism centered on the World Heritage Kumano Kodo—was launched in 2006.

As a public-private collaborative organisation, the Bureau has consistently carried out its activities through role-sharing, with the private sector taking the lead in tourism promotion and government agencies preparing and maintaining physical resources and infrastructure.

Project Aims

Endeavour to sustainably invigorate the local region by balancing the preservation of Kumano Kodo’s nature and culture with tourism.

Project Overview

Simultaneously performing the role of a collaborative public-private tourism promotion organisation and developing travel industries targeting FIT

In order to establish the region’s position as a sustainable tourism area, the Bureau disseminates information that foreign visitors find to be important and improves the environment for hosting tourists from overseas, endeavouring to attract visitors targeting mainly FIT (Free Independent Travelers) from Europe, America, and Australia.

In 2010 the Bureau attained corporate status and created “Kumano Travel”, a community-based tourism industry. As an intermediary support organisation connecting foreign travelers and the local community, the Bureau is undertaking regional development through tourism by planning and selling stay programs in cooperation with the local community.



Kumano Kodo

Features and Innovations

By sharing its basic stance regarding tourism with local business operators and residents, and thoroughly pursuing hospitality from the perspective of the foreign visitors who are the target of its activities, the Bureau has become a frontrunner representative of Japan in community-based tourism, realising dramatic increases in attracting inbound tourists.

1. Basic stance on tourism shared within the region

- (1) “Roots” over “Boom”
- (2) “Maintenance/preservation” over “rampant development”
- (3) “Independents” over “masses”
- (4) “Low impact” rather than “seeking impact”

2. Constructing inbound strategies based on thorough foreign visitors’ perspectives

- Thoroughly pursued the thinking that “the sensibilities of foreign visitors need to be considered in order to attract foreign visitors to the region”.
- Native English-speaking staff were hired since the establishment of the Bureau; signs/labels are standardised and information is disseminated in multiple languages; signboards were prepared,

and guidebooks introducing local culture were compiled.

3. Presenting “pilgrimage culture”, with which the West is deeply familiar, to the world

- In 2008, the Bureau concluded a “Joint Promotion Agreement” with Spain’s “Camino de Santiago” (“Way of St. James”) pilgrimage routes, which have also been designated as World Cultural Heritage, and began disseminating information to the world.
- In 2015 the Bureau began “Dual Pilgrim Credential” activities, with 3,400 people from 57 countries completing both pilgrimages by October 2020.



4. Frontrunner in generating demand from independent travelers from Europe, America, and Australia

The Bureau has been quick to identify and focus on the potential of community-based tourism that targets independent travelers from the West, and in 2010 established “Kumano Travel”, a travel agency providing online booking services.

“Kumano Travel” sales increased 13-fold over an 8-year period, from 40 million yen in 2011 to 521 million yen in 2019, contributing tremendously to the invigoration of the regional economy and leading to Kumano

receiving praise as being a pioneer in Japanese community-based tourism in both name and reality.



Foreign travelers walking the Kumano Kodo

Issues, Problems, and Responses

1. Insufficient accommodation facilities

Precisely because of the “pilgrimage” style of travel being promoted, securing accommodation in areas with few accommodation facilities is an issue. Efforts are needed to utilise vacant houses and increase the number of small-scale family-operated accommodation facilities, without harming the surrounding scenery.

2. Maintaining the regional landscape

Along the Kodo (pilgrimage routes) there are an increasing number of areas of abandoned farmland resulting from an increase in marginal settlements in the region caused by the declining birthrate and aging of society. Maintaining the scenery in such areas is difficult.

However, in recent years there have been movements by private companies and others to clean, repair, maintain, and preserve the Kumano Kodo. Accordingly, the Bureau intends to expand these activities while simultaneously promoting actions that boost the momentum for them to be supported by the entire community.

Future Developments

In order to attract new and repeater tourists, the third and fourth pilgrimage routes will be made into tourism content

Kumano Kodo has several pilgrimage routes, but efforts to attract tourists are currently centered on two routes: the Nakahechi route and the Kohechi route. Moving forward, the Bureau intends to add the “Iseji route” and “Ohechi route” into the current tourism content, thereby further enhancing the appeal of the Kumano Kodo, securing repeater tourists and increasing visitors’ length of stay in the region by generating demand for these routes.

Reference URLs

<http://www.tb-kumano.jp>

(Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau website (available in Japanese; multilingual translation services provided))

<https://dual-pilgrim.spiritual-pilgrimages.com/>

(Dual Pilgrims (Pilgrims who have walked both the “Kumano Kodo” and “Camino de Santiago” (“Way of St. James”) pilgrimage routes))

Contact

Division in charge: Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau

Phone: +81-0739-26-9025

E-mail: info@tb-kumano.jp

Key Terms

◆Community-based tourism

A style of travel whereby communities welcoming travelers provide the travelers with travel products and experiential programs that are based on local tourism resources (e.g.: “Green Tourism” providing farm work experiences)

◆Dual Pilgrim Credential

This is a “passport for pilgrims” who are undertaking both the “Kumano Kodo” and “Camino de Santiago” (“Way of St. James”) pilgrimages.

Pilgrims who complete both pilgrimages receive an official Dual Pilgrim Credential (completion certificate) and commemorative gift, and their names are registered on the “Dual Pilgrim website”.