

Interview with Yosuke Kawasumi, Manager of the Administration Department, Toyooka Tourism Innovation

Destination Management Organization (DMO) in Toyooka City — Home of the Oriental Stork — Playing Role in New Tourism Business

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

The Destination Management Organization (DMO) in Toyooka, a small city in western Japan, is playing a key role in promoting the local region as a tourism spot. DMOs carefully examine all the potential tourism resources of their area, assess their market value for tourists and promote them in relevant ways. In order to enhance the market value for Japanese locals, their contribution is vital. Assuming that touristic assets are scattered all over the country, each local DMO must do its job to reach the national target of attracting 40 million tourists to Japan in 2020 and 60 million in 2030, since it is they, the local people, who know the real charms of their tourism assets, better than tourism companies.

Toyooka, which is not far from Kyoto, has about 85,000 inhabitants. Its own DMO, Toyooka Tourism Innovation, has been actively promoting close collaboration between public entities and private business. *Japan SPOTLIGHT* had an interview with Yosuke Kawasumi, manager of the Administration Department. He joined Toyooka Tourism Innovation from the Toyooka city municipal government.

(Interviewed on July 12, 2017)

Introduction

JS: Could you please tell us briefly about your DMO's history?

Kawasumi: Toyooka was established by the merger of six small towns, the most well-known one being Kinosaki, a hot spring. The other towns also all have tourism resources, such as a ski resort or a castle, as well as many lodging facilities, and all of them had been working hard on the tourism business even before Toyooka was founded. Each town has an independent tourism association that continues to work even after the towns merged into a city.

Kinosaki Hot Spring has been one of the most well-known resorts in the western part of Japan since the Edo Period (1603-1867). It has a history of 1,300 years, and there is a famous legend that a hot spring was discovered here when an Oriental stork came to cure its injury. Kogorou Katsura, one of the young political leaders who played a key role in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, retreated there once to escape from the military police working for the Tokugawa government, his



Yosuke Kawasumi, Manager of the Administration Department, Toyooka Tourism Innovation

enemy. Naoya Shiga, an important novelist in the modern history of Japanese literature in the Meiji Period (1868-1911), also stayed there for three weeks. Kinosaki also now has a well-known International Art Center that specializes in performing arts by artists-in-residence.

Kinosaki Hot Spring has been nominated the best hot spring resort in the world by the *Lonely Planet* guidebook, while the Nishimuraya Inn's Main Building which has a 150-year history, was also mentioned as the best inn in the world by this guidebook. Another popular guidebook, Michelin, also introduced Kinosaki as a two-star venue, and we now see an increasing number of tourists from all over the world coming to Kinosaki.

Takeno town, which faces the Sea of Japan, has a geopark where you can go canoeing and swimming, and Hidaka town to the northwest of Takeno, has a ski resort, thus catering for both summer and

winter pastimes. Izushi to the east to Hidaka is a castle town with traditional-style shops and residences that used to be owned by the upper-class warriors working for the ruler in this area. We call it "Small Kyoto" in our Tajima Province, the area north of Kyoto, our

ancient Japanese capital. In this town, we have the “Eirakukan” Theater, the oldest Kabuki theater in the Kinki District, opened in 1901. Since the 1940s it had been used as a cinema, but in 2008 it was renovated and restored as a Kabuki theater again. Kataoka Ainosuke, a well-known Kabuki actor, gives performances with his colleagues every year. Tanto town, to the east of Izushi, has beautiful woodland, and contains typical Japanese farming lodges used now as pensions and you can enjoy a scenic view of the ancient landscape there.

In addition to this, Toyooka is well known for reviving Oriental storks that once disappeared from Japan, and we can now see around 100 of them.

In contrast to Kinokawa, we see a gradual decline of the population in Toyooka just like in the other regional Japanese cities. The population is expected to fall to 38,000 in 2060, less than half of the current size. Assuming this trend is most likely, we will need to develop our principal industries such as hotels, inns and restaurants for the interest of municipal management.

The number of Japanese tourists visiting Toyooka has been stable at around 1.2 million per year over the past few years. However, the number of inbound tourists visiting Kinokawa per year has significantly increased by 40 times in these five years and finally exceeded 40,000 per year. Though we still have a small number of inbound tourists, I believe we have a potential for tourism and Toyooka city has set up a target of 100,000 inbound tourists in 2020, the year of the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics.

In order to achieve this goal, we founded our DMO with three main functions: marketing for tourism venues, connecting local to local and business to business, and producing local tourism programs. So far, tourism has been developed by large tourist agencies' efforts to produce tours by collecting local materials and promoting them among residents in large cities. But these days, the majority prefer touring as individuals rather than in groups. By using the Internet, they can find more individual trips to meet their own needs and



The interior of Eirakukan, the oldest kabuki theater in the Kinki district

interests. In responding to such diversified needs, we thought that we local people engaged in the tourism business should make our own efforts to attract such people with personal preferences, as we know the details of our tourism resources better than anyone else and we are the best to recommend to those tourists what would meet their personal interests.

We started to discuss the feasibility of founding a DMO to achieve our mission in 2014, formulated a budget for it by November 2015, and finally founded Toyooka Tourism Innovation on June 1, 2016.

JS: Who has joined your DMO?

Kawasumi: WILLER Inc. running a nationwide express bus service as well as a local railway, Zentan Bus Inc., a local bus transportation company, the two local banks and Toyooka city government: those five groups joined as the original members. Toyooka city government studied about a DMO and asked the others to join it. Though all have different backgrounds and incentives, I believe they all agreed on the need to promote our tourism business in this region. Zentan Bus Inc., a local bus company with 100 years of history, agreed with the city government to promote tourism in order to keep the civic transportation as it is. WILLER, with its main office in Osaka, is strongly motivated to revitalize all local Japanese economies by its express bus transportation; it looks for local partners for that purpose, and got connected with us through the introduction of the Japanese government. Our two local banks agreed in the light of their fundamental business interest, which is restoration of the local economy.

Meanwhile, the local tourism associations active in each region for a long time did not completely share our views and they refrained from joining us. Our DMO, with funding and human resources provided by those five original members for three years, is now into its second year.



Photo: Shogo Nishiyama

The Ootani River flows through Kinokawa Onsen beside a row of hot-spring resorts.

CHART

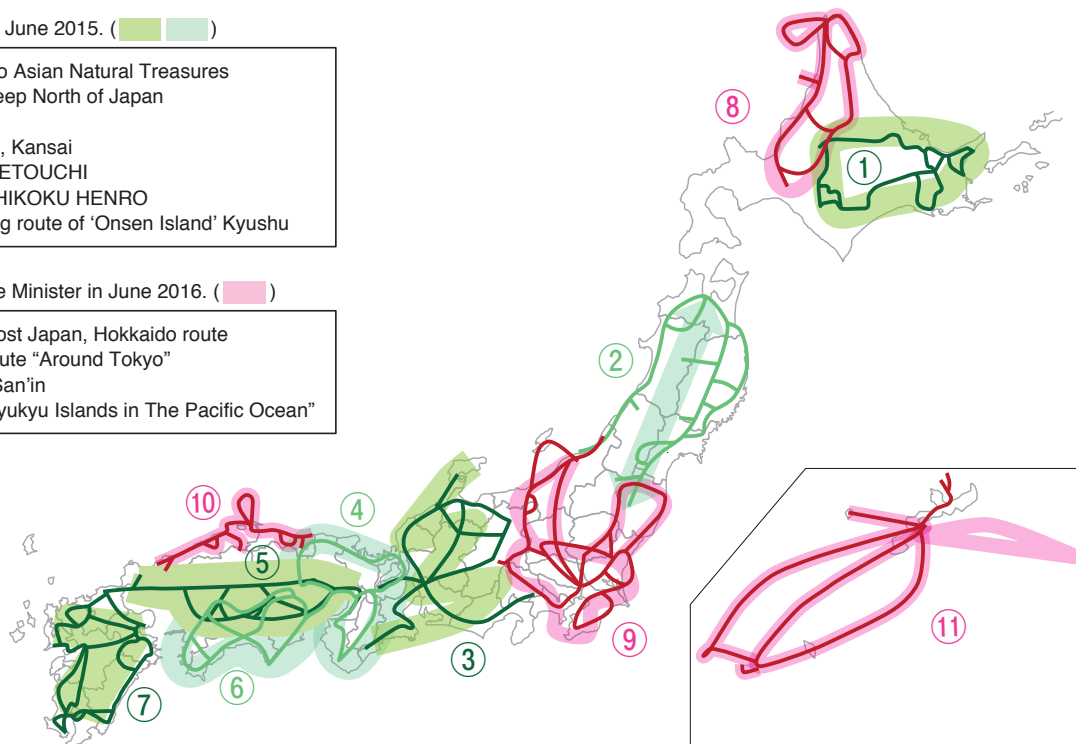
Eleven routes for amazing round trips to discover new charms in Japan

Certified by the Minister in June 2015. (■ ■)

1. Hokkaido — Route to Asian Natural Treasures
2. Exploration of the Deep North of Japan
3. SHORYUDO
4. The Flower of Japan, Kansai
5. The Inland Sea — SETOUCHI
6. Spiritual Island — SHIKOKU HENRO
7. Extensive sightseeing route of 'Onsen Island' Kyushu

Additionally certified by the Minister in June 2016. (■)

8. Amazing Northernmost Japan, Hokkaido route
9. The Wider Kanto Route "Around Tokyo"
10. Route Romantic San'in
11. "Visit Our Exciting Ryukyu Islands in The Pacific Ocean"



Source: Japan Tourism Agency, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism

Rich Resources of Tourism

JS: The Japan Tourism Agency thought it would be important to encourage foreign tourists to visit local areas for the benefit of their economies and announced in public seven model round-trip routes expanded over a wide region. One of them is called "The Flower of Japan, Kansai". This is a round-trip route coming to the north from Kyoto and Osaka, visiting Obama, Toyotsu, Toyooka and Tottori, cities on the coast of the Sea of Japan, and going through Himeji and then Tokushima in Shikoku Island and coming back to Arima in the Kinki District. On this route, Toyooka is introduced as a place where it is recommended to visit the Toyooka Municipal Museum for Oriental White Stork and the San'in Kaigan Geopark. Toyooka is very rich with tourism resources and thus it would be easy for you to collaborate with other regions in making the idea of a round-trip route development successful.

Kawasumi: We are already working with the neighboring city, Kyotango, as well as Kobe and Himeji in Hyogo Prefecture, but we have not yet actively engaged in a round-trip route development

initiative. At this moment, we are thinking about encouraging tourists visiting Kyoto to come to Toyooka. I believe that Toyooka could provide tourists interested in traditional Japanese culture with a view of traditional rural hot-spring resorts that they cannot see in Kyoto and time to relax in tranquility. Furthermore, as 90% of the 44,000 foreign tourists visiting Toyooka are coming to Kinokuni Hot Spring, we need to think about encouraging them to visit the other tourist spots in the Toyooka area and prolong their stay there.

JS: What do you think would be the challenges for you to achieve this goal?

Kawasumi: Access to each tourist spot would be a significant challenge. We do not have enough transportation to move around our area. Bus services are limited and there are tourist spots which you would find it difficult to visit without a taxi or rented car.

JS: The artist-in-residence scheme in Kinokuni is the largest in Japan. This is truly an innovative idea, isn't it?

Kawasumi: Yes, it is. The concept of artists producing works and performances while staying in a tourist spot is unusual in the world and we have an increasing number of applications for this artist-in-

Photo: Madoka Nishiyama



Kinosaki international art center for "artist-in-residence"

residence scheme. The facility used to be a prefectural public lodging facility suffering from low capacity-utilization rate. Toyooka city turned it into an artist-in-residence facility after an exploratory study in 2014. You can stay there for three months without any charge and we invite applications in public for the service each year. It is so popular that we have to turn down some applicants. In 2016, we received 37 applications of which 19 were from overseas.

JS: As they use the facility without any charge, what do you ask them to do for the interest of the region in return for the free service?

Kawasumi: We ask the artists to show the citizens or tourists their costume rehearsals or exercises, or to teach them dancing etc.

Capacity to Promote Tourism in Toyooka

JS: In this region, even before the foundation of Toyooka Tourism Innovation, the local tourism business people seemed to be very eager to promote their resources and also competent to do so. What do you think is the historical background of this?

Kawasumi: Tourism is a principal source of revenue for Toyooka and thus people are very conscious of the need to promote it. We also have a long history of tourism. Kinokasa has more than 1,000 years of history and you can see one of the oldest inns there alleged to have opened in 617. One of our oldest customs at Japanese hot springs is to bathe in several kinds of sources of spring water at one resort after another. This began at Kinokasa.

JS: Japanese tourism has further room for development. In particular there are few experts on tourism. Would it be necessary to develop human resources with such expertise?

Kawasumi: Yes. It is certain that as time passes, we note the tourism business changing. Tourist agencies are not only business agents attracting tourists but also DMOs like ourselves expected to develop the originality of tourism products and services, since customers today seek anything unique in local places, apart from a tourism agency's ready-made services. We are now looking for a partner for collaboration in organizing new types of tours like programs for providing tourists with physical experiences in a cultural or sports activity or community-based tourism. I believe such trial-and-error efforts could lead to development of tourism experts.

JS: In taking care of foreign tourists, is it important to have multilingual experts?

Kawasumi: In our DMO, we have staff speaking English, French, Thai and Chinese. In our local towns, this is not the case. However, I believe that as the number of inbound tourists increases, they would be ready to respond to meet their needs. In Kinokasa, they were not ready to accept foreign guests at the beginning, but as it is becoming popular among foreign tourists, the inns actively hosting them are increasing. Meanwhile, on the side of foreign tourists as well, some are truly keen on exotic contacts and prefer to talk with local people who can speak only broken English. Thus, I think all the tourism business people need not necessarily be fluent in a foreign language.

JS: From which regions are many people coming to visit Toyooka?

Kawasumi: There are many coming from East Asia. But as we are promoting for tourists from Europe, the United States and Australia, the percentage of people from these places is higher than in Japan overall.

JS: Do tourists coming from Europe, the US and Australia prefer Western-style hotels, rather than Japanese inns?

Kawasumi: I do not think so. As they decided to come to Kinokasa, they were interested in staying in a Japanese inn. They do not mind sleeping in a tatami room. I do not think we should have more beds for such Western customers in our inns.

Collaboration with Other Regions & Residents

JS: You have worked on promotion among tourists visiting Kyoto, Osaka and Nara, the big tourist spots, to come to Toyooka as well. How do you assess your achievement so far?

Kawasumi: We had an opportunity to work with neighboring tourist

areas in promoting our region at the World Travel Market 2015 in London. We also have a contract with a media representative in Paris, New York and Sydney and let it promote our tourist resources on our behalf. Kyoto has a contract with the same media representative and it can promote Kinosaki as well. Thanks to these efforts, we see now a significant increase of our presence in Western travel magazines.

JS: How are you collaborating with your local residents? Are they well aware of your activity?

Kawasumi: Communication with our local residents has not been well done yet and this will be a future challenge. We are planning to organize a seminar every month to inform them of our recent activity and issue related information by using SNS as well as press releases. To achieve our goal, I think it will be important to promote local residents' understanding of our work as well as promoting our tourist spots among the overseas media.

JS: Do you think such efforts would lead to a continuous increase of tourists visiting your area in the future?

Kawasumi: Yes, certainly. The national goal is now to reach 40 million tourists per year by 2020. We would like to achieve a faster pace of increase than this. Our area has so many tourists in winter and very few tourists in periods like April-July and September-October. So we would need to invite as many tourists as possible mainly from Europe, the US and Australia during these periods. This would result in stability of employment in our economy.

Other Efforts for Tourism Development

JS: Are there any other unique efforts your DMO is making?

Kawasumi: Yes. Toyooka Tourism Innovation is doing research on the trends among visiting tourists based upon data analysis from free Wi-Fi spots and smartphones, as well as interviews with tourists and surveys of their needs. We also conduct research on overseas inhabitants and are thinking about how to brand our local values as touristic spots. We also get data on visiting tourists' consumption amount, not only the number of tourists. We can also analyze the differences in needs by the regions our tourists are coming from by getting data from the venues they visited via their activities using Wi-Fi. We can make a distinction now between the needs of our Asian customers and those of Western customers.

JS: Are you running a hotel reservation website as well?

Kawasumi: Yes. We are running a website named www.visitkinosaki.com.

This has an English version and French version. We are not only getting reservation requests directly but also providing people with tourism information. It will be fine even if they request hotel reservations on other websites after getting information from ours. I think above all it is more crucial to get them to know better about our area.

JS: What are the percentages of access from Japan and from overseas to your website?

Kawasumi: This English and French site is only for foreign tourists but in reality 15% of the access comes from inside Japan. That means some foreign tourists after coming to Japan access our site and make reservations.

JS: Could you please explain about the other programs you are running?

Kawasumi: We have a membership system for the tourism business and with this we are trying to increase our supporting members paying only 10,000 yen as a membership fee. We recently started a multilingual reservation agent service for the benefit of the restaurants that have joined as supporting members. We translate their menus into English and take reservations on their behalf. Thus, even those restaurants where the staff cannot speak English will find it easy to accept foreign guests.

JS: You also developed unique programs providing tourists with new experiences on their travels, didn't you?

Kawasumi: Yes. We are now promoting a program to enable tourists to take scenic photos by using a drone or to rent Japanese *yukata* (summer kimono). There are programs like adventures in forests or kayaking at sea. There is also a special tour program to view an airplane taking off from the runway at Tajima Airport. This is only for Japanese tourists but it is very popular among them.

JS: Finally, could you please tell us your future plans or ambitions?

Kawasumi: At first, it is to achieve our numerical target of 100,000 tourists visiting our area in 2020. But our goal is not just about the number of tourists but also their consumption amount. In order to increase their consumption, we would like them to prolong their stay as much as possible and make a round trip around our area and its vicinity. To make this happen, we must create new and entertaining travel programs on our own.

JS

Written with the cooperation of Naoko Sakai who is a freelance writer.