



Good Practice Story Title:

KANMON – The Strait of Seven Paths

Destination:

KANMON

Country:

JAPAN

Submitting Organization:

STRAIT CITY KANMON DMO

Category (*check only one box*):

- ☒ Destination Management
- ☐ Nature & Scenery
- ☐ Environment & Climate
- ☐ Culture & Tradition
- ☐ Thriving Communities
- ☐ Business & Marketing

Destination description

The Kanmon Strait is a narrow channel approximately 700 meters wide that separates Moji Ward in Kitakyushu City, Fukuoka Prefecture—the gateway to Kyushu—from Shimonoseki City, Yamaguchi Prefecture, located at the westernmost point of Honshu. Throughout Japanese history, this strait has held strategic importance: in ancient times as a vital maritime artery to the western provinces, in the medieval and early modern periods as a hub for defense and trade, and in modern times as a crossroads of industrialization where ports, railways, and naval bases converged. It has long served as a key node in the maritime history of Japan.

Because of this, a wide array of transport networks has developed across the strait to facilitate the movement of people and goods. These include the world's first undersea railway tunnel, the Kanmon Bridge connecting Honshu and Kyushu, the vehicle and pedestrian tunnels beneath the strait where a prefectural border lies underwater, and ferry services linking both shores. Together, these "Seven Paths" bridging "Kan" and "Mon" symbolize the strait's function as a connective artery and are collectively referred to as the Kaikyō Shichiro—the "Seven Paths of the Strait."

On the Mojiko(Port) side, historical red-brick buildings such as the former Osaka Shosen Company and the former Moji Customs House remain preserved alongside the Mojiko Station, opened in 1891 and now a designated Important Cultural Property. The area has been thoughtfully developed as Mojiko Retro, a unified historical district. Across the water in Shimonoseki, vibrant tourism destinations such as the Karato Market, Akama Shrine, and sightseeing boats to Ganryujima Island combine history with culinary culture, enriching the visitor experience.

This rare confluence of culture, industry, and landscape—when experienced through various modes of transport such as walking, cycling, railways, and cruises—offers travelers a chance to "cross borders" and experience the area as a single, cohesive tourism destination.

The most distinctive feature of the Kanmon Strait lies in its ability to transform a physical boundary into a cultural and experiential bridge. Though divided by sea, the area is perceived and experienced as if it were one unified city. That, precisely, is the vision and reality of Kanmon: The Strait City.

Summary of Good Practice Story

The Kanmon Strait—though it separates Honshu and Kyushu, Japan's two major islands—serves not only as a geographic divide, but also as a vivid landscape where people and cities, history and the future, are profoundly interconnected. Beneath its waters runs a railway tunnel; above, a towering suspension bridge stretches across the sky. These iconic pieces of infrastructure, once the engines of Japan's modernization, now breathe as part of everyday life. Despite the appearance of a seamless metropolitan area formed by the cities on both shores, the region has long been fragmented by multiple boundaries—administrative, jurisdictional, and perceptual—making interregional tourism collaboration particularly challenging.

We discovered that the key to overcoming this division lay in infrastructure tourism. By opening up restricted-access infrastructure sites and integrating them with local cultural heritage and cuisine, we transformed places of "passage" into platforms for regional storytelling. Roads and rail operators, local residents, governments, and the DMO gradually began working hand-in-hand, establishing a cross-strait collaboration framework that had never existed before.

Today, the very structures that span the strait—once symbols of industrial function—have become connective tissue uniting both shores. They now underpin a new tourism area that transcends conventional boundaries, illuminating a

shared vision of social, economic, and environmental harmony. Through the lens of infrastructure, the Kanmon Strait has redefined itself—not as a line that divides, but as a place that bonds.

Issues faced

The Kanmon Strait region, though geographically separated by only 700 meters of water, straddles two vastly different administrative jurisdictions: Shimonoseki City in Yamaguchi Prefecture on Honshu, and Kitakyushu City in Fukuoka Prefecture on Kyushu. Despite appearing to form a single urban zone to the casual observer, the establishment of a unified tourism strategy and cohesive area management has long been a formidable challenge. In the tourism sector especially, administrative divisions have hindered joint policymaking, public relations efforts, and the alignment of budgets and institutional frameworks.

Moreover, the Kanmon Strait has historically served as a backdrop for conflict and national defense, particularly during wartime. These historical legacies have left an enduring psychological boundary embedded in the collective memory of the region—an often unconscious barrier to cross-regional cooperation. Among residents and tourism operators alike, collaboration in tourism initiatives remained sporadic and lacked institutional and financial continuity.

Despite the presence of globally rare infrastructure such as the Kanmon Bridge and the undersea Kanmon Tunnel, these engineering marvels have largely been regarded as utilitarian transit systems, their potential as tourism assets left untapped. As a result, while individual attractions like Mojiko Port, Karato Market, and Akama Shrine have drawn visitors, the region as a whole has failed to offer a coherent narrative experience. There were few mechanisms in place to encourage deeper stays or meaningful exploration, and visitor mobility across the area remained limited.

Although the idea of “Kanmon collaboration” has often been articulated as an aspiration, it had yet to be realized in concrete terms. At the heart of this project lay a bold challenge: How could we transcend the region’s multiple layers of division—geographic, administrative, institutional, psychological, and cultural—to reweave its scattered assets into a seamless, cross-boundary narrative? And more critically, how could tourism become the driving force behind a new sense of regional unity?

Solution

For years, “Kanmon Collaboration” remained an aspirational ideal, admired in theory but elusive in practice. The breakthrough came through a bold reimagining: to perceive long-overlooked infrastructure not merely as utilitarian constructs, but as shared regional assets—and to use tourism as a means of reconnecting the region through these foundations.

The Kanmon Tunnel and Kanmon Bridge are not only architectural landmarks but historical achievements in Japan’s modern civil engineering. The Kanmon Railway Tunnel, opened in 1942, was the world’s first undersea railway tunnel, and the Kanmon Bridge—once hailed as the largest suspension bridge in the East when it opened in 1973—have long served as the physical links between Honshu and Kyushu, Yamaguchi and Fukuoka. Yet these structures had blended into the everyday landscape, regarded by most as mere transit routes, unrecognized for their potential as cultural and experiential assets.

To challenge this oversight, we turned the spotlight on these structures, launching a new tourism concept centered on “Infrastructure Tourism.” Our goal was to create fresh cross-strait narratives by transforming these monumental facilities into protagonists of the visitor experience.

Concretely, we developed exclusive tours granting special access to parts of these facilities usually closed to the public. For the first time, we established a cooperative framework with road administrators (NEXCO West Japan) and railway operators (JR Kyushu), organizations that had previously had limited involvement in tourism. These collaborations offered visitors direct engagement with the “technology and memory of an era” embedded in the region’s infrastructure.

Moreover, these infrastructure tours were woven together with other local tourism assets—such as the historic Mojiko Retro District and the vibrant Karato Market—offering guests a curated experience that connected culinary culture, architectural heritage, and civil engineering into one compelling storyline. This transformed the act of visiting into a deeper practice of interpreting the region.

Thus, the meaning of infrastructure shifted—from static structures to dynamic conduits that bridge time, place, and community life. This redefinition laid the groundwork for a new, action-oriented form of cross-boundary collaboration, one that overcomes spatial, administrative, and cultural divides and positions the Kanmon Strait as a singular, integrated tourism destination.

Methods, Steps, and Tools applied

The development of Kanmon Infrastructure Tourism was driven by a multi-tiered and incremental approach, in which Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), local governments, private operators, and infrastructure managers formed an integrated alliance. Together, they enhanced cross-regional coordination and deepened the visitor experience. Below are the key phases and methodologies of this transformative initiative.

1. Establishing the Framework and Initiating the “Kanmon Collaboration”

Following repeated discussions among municipalities, private operators, and civic groups, a major step was taken in 2020 with the launch of the Kanmon Strait City DMO, a cross-boundary platform uniting Kitakyushu and Shimonoseki. In 2023, the mayors of both cities met for the first time in 12 years and officially committed to reinforcing wide-area tourism and exchange. Thus, the long-held aspiration of “Kanmon Collaboration” was elevated from principle to policy.

2. Symbolic Joint Initiatives to Inspire Public Engagement

To foster public enthusiasm and increase visibility, a collaborative commemorative event was held to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Kanmon Bridge. Activities included guided climbs of the bridge’s main tower, exclusive cruises beneath its span, and even an elementary school challenge to create “Japan’s longest tin-can telephone” using the pedestrian tunnel. These playful yet symbolic experiences reframed the bridge and tunnel as “connective icons” of regional unity, capturing the imagination of both residents and tourists.

3. Premium Tours Developed in Collaboration with Infrastructure Operators

Through partnerships with infrastructure managers such as NEXCO West Japan and JR Kyushu, exclusive behind-the-scenes tours were developed. The Kanmon Railway Tunnel Backstage Tour, made possible by JR Kyushu, took participants deep into Japan’s oldest undersea railway tunnel, including ventilation shafts, construction-era passageways, and water management systems. Meanwhile, the National Route Tunnel Backstage Tour, hosted by NEXCO West Japan, offered rare access to ventilation towers and the original pilot tunnel—the oldest undersea road tunnel in Japan.

Both tours featured live interpretation by a world-renowned expert in blasting and tunnel excavation engineering (whose English-language work was published in *Nature*), transforming the excursions into immersive learning experiences that blended heritage, technology, and safety history. These high-level, guided explorations created an exceptional tourism offering with rich educational value.

4. Cross-Disciplinary Journeys Through Infrastructure and Cultural Heritage

To broaden the narrative arc, infrastructure tours were interwoven with visits to cultural and historical landmarks within the Japan Heritage-certified “Kanmon Nostalgic Strait.” Visitors were guided by stationmasters through the historic Mojiko Station, and visited sites such as the Kyushu Railway History Museum and the Former Moji Mitsui Club, paired with local delicacies like fugu cuisine. This created a multi-sensory journey that enabled travelers to traverse both technical and cultural heritage, elevating the experience into one of interpretative exploration rather than mere sightseeing.

5. Digital Tools and Strategic Media Engagement

To enhance the region’s most captivating feature—the scenic journey itself—a “Kanmon Digital Free Pass” was introduced, allowing seamless movement across the area while providing digital content to enrich the in-transit experience. Strategic use of traditional media, social networks, and digital marketing amplified visibility and helped attract diverse interest from both within and beyond the region.

By integrating hard infrastructure assets with soft cultural narratives, this multifaceted approach laid the foundation for a scalable, cross-border tourism model. It serves as a blueprint for regions grappling with fragmented governance and heritage dispersion—demonstrating that innovation emerges not only in new builds, but in the reimagination of what already connects us.

Achievements and Results

The greatest achievement of this project lies in transforming the long-standing but previously unrealized vision of “Kanmon Collaboration” into a tangible, region-wide movement—through the practical and emotionally resonant framework of infrastructure tourism.

With the establishment of the Kanmon Strait City DMO, a new governance structure was created in which government agencies, local residents, and private-sector actors co-designed and implemented tourism policies rooted in infrastructure experiences. This enabled the redefinition of the Kanmon Strait as a unified tourism zone, crossing administrative and mental boundaries.

The infrastructure-based tours and events recontextualized facilities once seen as unrelated to tourism, prompting both visitors and locals to rediscover value in these familiar structures. For example, the Kanmon National Route Tunnel Backstage Tour sold out shortly after opening and achieved a 100% satisfaction rate in participant surveys—indicating not only high experiential value but also robust potential demand for infrastructure tourism. Moreover, stakeholders historically unconnected to tourism, such as NEXCO West Japan and JR Kyushu, began collaborating as resource holders and co-creators of tourism content. This marked the emergence of a novel, cross-sectoral model of cooperation.

Additionally, a new cross-boundary eco-tourism route was developed by combining low-mountain hiking trails with the pedestrian tunnel that links both shores—part of Setonaikai National Park. With a focus on walking and public



transportation, and through the development of the Kanmon Digital Free Pass, a low-impact visitor flow was designed. Data analysis from this digital pass showed that, within just two months, over 1,000 users had participated, with an impressive circulation rate of 84% across the Kanmon area.

Looking ahead, there are emerging plans to designate the future Second Kanmon Bridge as a cycling route after its construction. This suggests growing momentum toward a holistic area management approach—where infrastructure enhances not only tourism mobility but also long-term environmental sustainability.

Furthermore, the DMO has launched a series of educational initiatives around disaster preparedness and infrastructure resilience. These include disaster awareness programs and hands-on experiences such as “liquefaction path walking,” designed to communicate the critical role of infrastructure in emergencies to both residents and domestic and international visitors.

Today, the Kanmon Strait region, promoted as a unified destination, attracts over two million visitors annually from both Japan and abroad.

Ultimately, infrastructure tourism has functioned as a social adhesive, catalyzing new relationships, reconnecting communities across the strait, and illustrating a vision of a sustainable, united “Strait City.” The project continues to evolve, paving the way—literally and figuratively—for the emergence of the next bridge, and with it, a future-oriented model of tourism-driven urban revitalization.

Lessons Learned and Advice

The Kanmon Strait infrastructure tourism project yielded a wide range of valuable insights that can inform future tourism development in boundary regions and areas rich in infrastructure assets—both within Japan and abroad.

First, the project demonstrated the potential of cross-boundary collaboration. Despite being administratively divided, regions can foster unified tourism development by identifying shared resources and challenges. Infrastructure that spans regional borders not only functions as a physical bridge but can also serve as a powerful symbol of emotional and social connectivity.

Second, the initiative highlighted the transformative power of interdisciplinary collaboration. By involving infrastructure managers—such as road and railway operators—in tourism planning, the project unlocked new perspectives and resources. This inclusion also deepened public understanding of the challenges related to aging infrastructure, positioning the project as a model for the sustainable use of social capital.

Third, the project emphasized the importance of embedding local narratives into infrastructure experiences. Rather than offering simple facility tours, the integration of historical significance and technical storytelling enhanced emotional engagement and the perceived value of the visitor experience. This narrative-driven approach holds high transferability to other destinations seeking to develop infrastructure tourism.

Together, these lessons offer transferable knowledge and strategic direction for other boundary regions and destinations seeking to reimagine their infrastructure assets—not as mere utilities, but as vibrant cultural and tourism resources capable of fostering connection, innovation, and sustainability.

Recognitions and Additional References

- Kanmon Strait City DMO: <https://www.kanmon-dmo.org/>
- Kanmon Strait Infrastructure Tourism: <https://kanmon-dmo.com/>
- YouTube / Behind the Scenes of the Kanmon Tunnel - A Rare Look at the Pilot Tunnel (Japanese):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsGQnfl6xRQ>
- Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism - Infrastructure Tourism (English):
<https://www.mlit.go.jp/sogoseisaku/region/infratourism/en/about/>