



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title:

Anyone, Anywhere : Overcoming Mobility Challenges

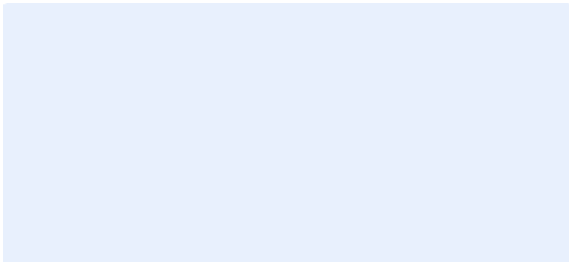
Destination, Country: Hakone Town

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- In the category:**
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Destination Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Environment & Climate | <input type="checkbox"/> Thriving Communities |
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The Story in a picture:

View of the volcanic area from the 1044-meter-high Owakudani



Summary:

Hakone Town is located within the Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park in Japan. It is a popular hot spring resort and tourist destination known for its historic and natural sites. Hakone can be reached in just one hour from Tokyo and has been welcoming approximately 20 million tourists annually from the metropolitan area and abroad. However, due to its mountainous terrain with significant elevation differences, numerous slopes, stairs, and steps, Hakone has not been a travel-friendly destination for people with limited mobility. In response, the town and Hakone DMO have aimed to create a "welcoming tourist destination" where anyone can travel comfortably and to promote universal tourism and accessibility.

A collaboration between tourism and welfare organisations and extensive discussions with various stakeholders in the town, various forms of information and media were created and distributed as well as awareness programs for hospitality providers. This initiative received significant positive feedback from wheelchair users, and other welfare organisations with the goal of providing memorable experiences for all while sharing and inspiring other tourism destinations in Japan to create similar initiatives.



Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

The Hakone area is known as one of Japan's leading tourist destinations; popular for mountain views, hot springs, historical sites, and museums. It has a significant elevation difference ranging from approximately 94m to 1400m. Hakone lies on the historic Tokaido Road connecting Tokyo and Kyoto and has been considered one of the most challenging sections of the historic Tokaido road due to the mountainous nature of the area. There are also many slopes and stairs compared to other tourist destinations. Hakone has often been seen as a place that was difficult or challenging for older people and those with physical disabilities to visit.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

Despite the challenging geography of the area Hakone had not catered to or made widespread efforts to accommodate travellers with limited mobility.

From research trips and interviews we learned that hot springs resorts and mountains are not easy to navigate for wheelchairs and others with physical challenges. The mountainous nature of the area led to many slopes and stairs and challenges to access public transportation. There was also no overt effort to accommodate these special needs as a whole for the area. This posed a significant challenge for Hakone, which aims to be a tourist destination that is accessible to everyone.

In Japan, the ageing of the population is rapidly progressing which limits the travel frequency, safety, and satisfaction among seniors as well. It was deemed necessary for Hakone to improve the accessibility of tourism-related facilities and services, share information, and enhance the town's image as an accessible destination in the medium and long term by actively approaching the senior population and individuals with mobility concerns through marketing efforts.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address sustainability problems or issues.

- Hakone town and Hakone DMO formed a project that initially consisted of DMO office staff, town tourism department employees, and accommodation providers. The initial members of the project were neither directly involved nor experts in the matter so the group was expanded to include local experts and people with experience with mobility issues. In order to improve the situation for travellers with disabilities and address accessibility concerns, the project group first consulted with the Hakone Town Council of Social Welfare which had not previously been involved in this sort of project. They provided insight, suggestions, and introductions to wheelchair users living in Hakone and introductions to caregiving facilities.
- Stakeholders such as wheelchair users, caregivers, accommodation providers, transportation providers, as well as experts, were included in creating and holding the research trip for those with mobility challenges.
- Based on interviews conducted with wheelchair users it was discovered that while each facility individually made efforts towards barrier-free accessibility, there was no unified approach. Travellers faced difficulties starting from the information-gathering stage and often ended up giving up on their travel plans. It became clear that the key was to consolidate, create, and disseminate information in an efficient, collected, and accessible manner.
- It was also found that if there was even a single barrier during the travel itinerary, travellers would have to rethink their travel (itinerary) and even overall plans. Therefore, it was realized that simply providing a list of facility information was not sufficient. What was needed was not just individual pieces of information, but a comprehensive guide on how to move from one place to another. The accommodation providers' responses varied, with some offering solid support while others adopting a passive approach of "providing assistance within

their capabilities."

- As a result, a comprehensive booklet titled "Exploring in a Wheelchair: Trip to Hakone" was created as an all-in-one solution for maps, information, and (suggestions) travel tips. Two model courses were developed: one utilizing public transportation and the other using private vehicles. 10,000 copies were distributed to 42 locations, including regional social welfare organizations, clinics, and public transportation stations in the Tokyo metropolitan area. The initial 10,000 copies were quickly depleted, and requests for reprints were received.
- Recognizing the need for a change in the mindset of the hospitality providers, seminars and study sessions were held in 2022. Over 100 participants from a total of 25 companies and accommodation facilities attended and showed great enthusiasm in learning from demonstration experiments and listening to wheelchair users' experiences.
- Lectures were conducted for Hakone DMO-certified guides, with a total of 15 participants. The guides had the opportunity to experience the situation as individuals by actually using a wheelchair, gaining firsthand knowledge of the challenges. Newfound information and understanding from this experience have contributed to the guides' ability to better accommodate travellers with disabilities.
- This year, we are planning to provide more opportunities for frontline tourism operators to learn about assistance methods and continue to promote a barrier-free mindset for guests and hospitality providers. Programs are also being created to encourage local school children to be mindful and proactive in finding solutions for those having mobility issues.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

- Creating opportunities for various stakeholders from tourism, welfare, and business to interact and problem-solve for the whole community was integral to our success.
- Gaining information and opinions from those directly affected by mobility challenges. For travellers with disabilities, a research trip was created to gain insight and discover specific challenges for those visiting Hakone. Practical explanations on how to push a wheelchair on challenging slopes and other helpful insights were filmed in Hakone and actively shared on YouTube.
*Wheelchair version and Transportation version
- Based on the research trip results, recommended routes were created suggesting "If you take this route, it will be smoother." Additionally, based on advice from wheelchair users the guidebook was designed to focus on photos to provide a clear understanding of the actual conditions at each location. As the degree of disability varies among individuals, including photos allows the person to make their own judgement. For multipurpose toilets, detailed information such as whether the handrail is on the right or left side and whether the doors were automatic or manual was included. Due to the previous lack of information on how travellers with disabilities could enjoy their trip, such information received significant positive responses.
- Through lectures, it was possible to encourage a mindset change among hospitality and accommodation providers, which tended to be passive. These lectures highlighted the significance of accommodating special needs guests. Voices expressing the intention to utilize the information and share it with potential guests were received, leading to a gradual mindset change within the entire community.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

In Japan travel frequency, barrier-free measures were primarily driven by government policies with individual facilities left to handle the implementation. While some facilities have taken solid measures, the reception of travellers with disabilities tended to be passive. The time and effort required for the facilities to make changes were cited as the main reasoning.

The median age of Japanese travellers is increasing and the domestic accommodation travel market is shrinking. There is a growing focus on the elderly market. By improving the travel environment, travel frequency, safety, and satisfaction among seniors can be maintained with an expected increase in the number of travellers in this segment.

With the establishment of a welcoming environment in the community, wheelchair users and elderly residents can also experience increased residential satisfaction in terms of access and “liveability.” Both businesses and customers, as well as local residents, can have improved experiences in the community and visited tourism areas and sites.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

There was a need for a comprehensive plan for accessibility and an inclusivity policy for the area as a whole. Through a collaboration between tourism and welfare groups, extensive discussions were held with stakeholders in the community for over a year and actively shared specific and visual information to guests and service providers. It was realized that this approach could generate new travel demand and provide a better experience for those with mobility challenges.

It was reported that some individuals who saw this booklet made inquiries such as, "I am considering Hakone for my last trip in my life. Is it possible to request assistance with bathing?"

Through this initiative we have increased the level of hospitality to travellers, especially the elderly and people with disabilities. We have been able to bring joy to many individuals and establish a WIN-WIN relationship from a marketing perspective as well.

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions

This project was a success through collaboration between tourism and welfare.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

- Production and distribution of 10,000 copies of the "Hakone Sightseeing Map for Wheelchair Users," which received a great response.
- Featured on social media and in newspapers. People planned their routes while referring to the map. During their travels they frequently checked their Maps, keeping it in the back pocket of their wheelchairs. These experiences were shared on social media. There were also requests and posts asking for the map to be distributed in more places.
Link: https://www.hakone.or.jp/files/w007_2023051011121997943.pdf
- It was prominently covered in the local newspaper.
Link: <https://www.townnews.co.jp/0607/2022/05/07/624210.html>
- A video of wheelchair travellers riding the Hakone Ropeway during the demonstration experiment was posted on social media, and the number of views increased from 3,778 to 61,000, more than ten times the usual number of views. The increase in views was attributed to sharing information that wheelchair users were unaware of (the possibility of wheelchair-accessible sightseeing in Hakone).
Link: <https://hakone-japan.com/pre/wp/wp-content/uploads/accessible-tourism-results.pdf>
- The local social welfare council always offered wheelchair rentals. Usage increased significantly after this project. In comparison to the fiscal year 2021, the number of rentals increased significantly from 2 cases to 45 cases in the fiscal year 2022. (*As per the survey conducted by the social welfare council)
- 2 versions videos are available on YouTube:
Wheelchair version : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcRQPxnzhIY>
Transportation version : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ecW58jcxAE&t=254s>