When Resident Pride Becomes Tourism Value: The Iwamura Model of "Living, Learning, and Traveling

Ena City, Japan
Ena city
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story
Iwamura, an 840-year-old castle town in Ena City, Japan, guided by the philosophy On-ko-chi-shin ("learning from the past to create the future"), faced population decline and the risk that its historical figures' teachings would remain confined to museums, disconnected from residents' daily lives. Through the Iwamura Grand Design, schools, families and community organisations placed "learning" at the centre of revitalisation — teaching local history through hometown education, maintaining rice terraces and townscape through steady volunteer work, and developing hands-on visitor experiences like "Iwamura Gokko" and the Iwamura Lantern Walk that connect guests with local artisans, brewers and women entrepreneurs. Over nine years this helped 17 new businesses (cafés and guesthouses) open in the district, lifted Lantern Walk attendance to 117% of previous years, and shifted residents from passive preservationists into active custodians of their heritage. The core lesson: sustainable tourism begins with local pride, which must be nurtured through education and participation before new tourism products are built, not the other way around.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

Iwamura is a historic castle town in Ena City, Gifu Prefecture, with more than 840 years of history. It is home to Iwamura Castle, one of Japan's three great mountain castles, and a nationally designated preservation district of traditional buildings.

What makes Iwamura unique is its deep culture of learning. The town produced three influential figures who shaped modern Japan, and their philosophy of On-ko-chi-shin ("learning from the past to create the future") remains a guiding principle for the community today.

Like many rural areas in Japan, Iwamura faces population decline and an aging society. However, residents continue to protect the townscape, castle ruins, and surrounding rural landscapes while passing local values on to future generations. This story takes place in a community where heritage is not only preserved, but actively lived through everyday actions and shared with visitors.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

Despite its rich cultural heritage and beautiful historic townscape, Iwamura faced a growing challenge shared by many rural communities in Japan. Population decline, an aging society, vacant houses, and a shrinking local economy were gradually weakening the vitality of the town.

The greatest concern was not the loss of buildings, but the loss of meaning behind them. The teachings and achievements of Iwamura's great historical figures were preserved in museums, monuments, and history books, yet they were becoming increasingly disconnected from everyday life. Many visitors admired the castle ruins and traditional streetscape, but left without understanding the philosophy, values, and community spirit that had shaped the town for generations.

Residents began to ask themselves an important question: How could Iwamura remain a living community rather than becoming simply a preserved historic site?

There was a growing realization that preserving physical heritage alone would not secure the future of the town. If the pride, wisdom, and traditions carried by local people were not passed on to younger generations, the true identity of Iwamura could gradually disappear.

This challenge became the turning point. The community recognized the need to reconnect the philosophies of the past with the lives of present-day residents and to transform cultural heritage from something that was merely protected into something that was actively lived, shared, and experienced.

The Vision: What you set out to do

Our vision was not simply to preserve historic buildings or attract more visitors. We wanted to create a living community where local heritage, philosophy, and everyday life remained meaningful for future generations.

Inspired by the spirit of On-ko-chi-shin ("learning from the past to create the future"), local leaders, residents, educators, and community organizations came together to rethink the future of Iwamura. Through the Iwamura Grand Design, we set out to transform the wisdom of our ancestors into a source of civic pride and community action.

We believed that sustainable tourism could only be achieved if residents themselves valued and understood their heritage. Therefore, our goal was to strengthen local identity, nurture pride among younger generations, and encourage residents to become active stewards of the town's cultural and natural assets.
Rather than creating tourism for visitors alone, we sought to build a community where people could continue to live, learn, and thrive. By connecting people, place, and culture, we aimed to create a model of sustainable tourism rooted in local values and driven by residents themselves.

The Journey: How change happened
The journey began by reconnecting Iwamura's heritage with the everyday lives of its residents. First, the community placed "learning" at the center of local revitalization. Schools, families, residents, and local organizations worked together to pass on the teachings of Iwamura's historical figures. Through hometown education and community learning activities, children and residents began to see local history not as something distant, but as something connected to their own lives and future.
Second, this renewed pride led to concrete conservation actions. Residents, volunteers, and local groups continued to maintain the historic townscape, castle ruins, and rural landscapes. In the Tomida area, local people and the NPO working to protect Japan's beautiful rural landscape carried out regular maintenance of rice terraces, fields, and surrounding scenery. These activities were not large events, but steady, everyday efforts rooted in local pride.
Third, the community transformed heritage into visitor experiences. Programmes such as "Iwamura Gokko" offered hands-on experiences in local food, crafts, and traditional learning. More recently, the Iwamura Lantern Walk and new "live like a local, learn while traveling" tours connected visitors with residents, traditional houses, local women entrepreneurs, brewers, artisans, forests, and fields.
The process was not always easy. Population decline, vacant houses, and limited human resources made it difficult to sustain activities. However, by working step by step with residents, schools, tourism organizations, NPOs, local businesses, and government, Iwamura gradually created a shared vision. The most important innovation was simple but powerful: tourism was not treated as something separate from community life. Instead, it became a way to share the pride, wisdom, and daily practices of the people who continue to protect Iwamura.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
The transformation of Iwamura can be seen not only in measurable results, but also in the renewed pride and confidence of its residents.
What was once a heritage preserved mainly in museums and monuments has become part of everyday life. The philosophies of Iwamura's historical figures are now reflected in local education, community activities, landscape conservation, and tourism experiences. Residents increasingly see themselves as active custodians of their heritage rather than passive observers.

The impact can also be seen in the local economy. Over the past nine years, 17 new businesses, including cafés and guesthouses, have opened in the district. New tourism experiences such as the Iwamura Lantern Walk and “Live Like a Local, Learn While You Travel” programmes have encouraged visitors to stay longer, engage more deeply with the community, and experience the town beyond its physical attractions.

Visitor interest has also grown. Attendance during the Lantern Walk period increased to 117% compared with previous years, and international tourism professionals visiting Iwamura in 2026 recognised its strong potential as an example of “Authentic Japan.”

Perhaps the most important achievement is the shift from preservation to participation. Heritage is no longer viewed simply as something to protect, but as something to live, share, and pass on. Today, Iwamura is not only a historic destination—it is a living community where culture, learning, landscape, and tourism reinforce one another and contribute to a more sustainable future.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

One of the most important lessons we learned is that sustainable tourism begins with local pride. Real change happened when residents rediscovered the value of their own heritage and community.

At first, we focused on preserving historic buildings and promoting tourism. Over time, we realized that heritage becomes meaningful only when it is actively lived, shared, and passed on by local people.

A major challenge was maintaining momentum in a community facing population decline and aging. We learned that community pride cannot be created overnight—it grows through education, participation, and shared experiences.

What surprised us most was how small actions could create lasting change. Conservation activities, local learning programmes, and conversations between residents and visitors gradually strengthened community confidence and created new opportunities.

Our advice to other destinations is simple: before creating new tourism products, discover the stories, values, and wisdom that already exist within your community. When residents become proud ambassadors of their place, tourism becomes more authentic, resilient, and sustainable.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The impact of this initiative continues to grow beyond its original goals. What began as an effort to reconnect residents with their heritage has inspired new tourism experiences, community projects, and local businesses.

Initiatives such as the Iwamura Lantern Walk, Iwamura Gokko, and immersive learning tours provide visitors with deeper opportunities to engage with local culture and residents. New cafés, guesthouses, and community-led activities have also emerged, contributing to the local economy.

The project strengthened collaboration among residents, schools, local organizations, businesses, and government. Heritage conservation, education, landscape management, and tourism are now viewed as shared efforts supporting the future of the community.
Most importantly, the initiative renewed community pride. Residents are not only preserving Iwamura's heritage—they are actively shaping its future. This spirit has supported initiatives such as NEXT GIFU HERITAGE and Green Destinations.
Looking ahead, we hope to continue creating opportunities for people to live, learn, and travel in Iwamura. By passing local values to future generations while welcoming visitors into authentic community life, we believe Iwamura can remain a living heritage destination for years to come.

Awards or Certifications
• NEXT GIFU HERITAGE (Gifu Future Heritage), certified by Gifu Prefecture (2024–2026)
• Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings (National Designation)
• Iwamura Plan – Minister of Education Award (2019)

Web Articles
• Iwamura Great Figures
https://iwamura.jp/greatlist
• NEXT GIFU HERITAGE – Official Gifu Tourism Website
https://www.kankou-gifu.jp/article/detail_205.html
• Iwamura Lantern Walk
https://www.kankou-ena.jp/event/10402.php
• Iwamura Gokko
https://iwamura55.com/

Other Relevant Links
• Sato Issai Learning Plaza
https://www.city.ena.lg.jp/soshikiichiran/kyoikuiinkai/shogaigakushuka/8/18624.html
• Kaya no Yado
https://www.kayanoyado.jp/
• "Live Like a Local, Learn While You Travel" Tour
https://sites.google.com/tricolage.com/green-destinationtouriwamura/home
• Ena City – Lifelong Learning Declaration
https://www.city.ena.lg.jp/soshikiichiran/kyoikuiinkai/shogaigakushuka/3/2044.html

Quotes or Testimonials
"Through learning about our history and the teachings of our predecessors, we rediscovered pride in our community. We realized that preserving Iwamura is not only about protecting buildings, but about passing our values and way of life to future generations."
– Local resident and community volunteer

“Iwamura offers something increasingly rare in today's world: a place where heritage is not staged for tourists, but genuinely lived by the people who call it home.”
– International tourism professional participating in a familiarization tour (2026)