

OSHIKATSU FANDOM MEETS BLOCKCHAIN: DRIVING TOURISM TO REGIONAL JAPAN

By combining fandom-driven consumer behavior with the latest blockchain technology, a Japanese startup is launching an initiative to spark tourism in regional areas.

Efforts to revitalize regional areas through digital technology are expanding, and one initiative gaining attention in Japan is a new tourism experience that combines digital currency and non-fungible tokens (NFTs) with *oshikatsu*. The term *oshikatsu* refers to behavior in which people spend time and money to support their favorite celebrities, anime, and game characters, or other beloved figures. Creating more opportunities for people to visit regional areas on a regular basis by harnessing the

passionate energy of fans who want to support the things they love is the vision of TANAKA Masaaki, founder and CEO of Rural Co., Ltd. By offering unique NFTs that integrate popular content such as anime characters with tourist destinations, the company is attracting both people and vitality to local communities.

NFTs are unique digital assets created using blockchain technology, making them impossible to duplicate or replace. Rural produces original

illustrations and photos exclusive to certain tourist destinations and sells them as limited-edition NFTs with serial numbers. Users visit these locations, scan a QR code displayed at stores or facilities, and purchase the NFT, at which point their smartphone's location data is shared, ensuring that the NFT can only be bought by those physically present.

To enhance their value as experiential NFTs, these digital assets also come with perks such as access to events and

facilities. Additionally, while NFTs are typically purchased with cryptocurrency, Rural has introduced its own regional digital currency, which can be used not only to buy NFTs but also for payments at partner establishments such as hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops. This system enhances convenience while incorporating additional exclusive benefits that capture the essence of *oshikatsu* fandom.

Since launching its service in June 2022, Rural has primarily partnered with popular hot spring resorts, along with other tourist destinations across Japan, generating nearly 80,000 trips with an estimated economic impact of as much as 4.5 billion yen.

“Increasing the number of people engaged with and visiting regional areas is crucial for revitalization. But for those living and working in the tourist regions, the immediate concern is simply getting more visitors to come,” explains Tanaka. Fans, on the other hand, are driven by a desire to obtain exclusive, one-of-a-kind content or collect serial numbers with personal significance—motivations that serve as powerful incentives for travel. Rural’s NFT service aligns

the interests of both parties. Fans eager to obtain NFTs featuring their favorite characters visit new destinations for the first time, discover their appeal, and share their experiences on social media. Some even return repeatedly, fostering ongoing connections with local communities.

For tourist destinations, including areas that previously struggled to promote themselves, the service provides an opportunity to attract a new demographic. What’s more, as local staff interact with visitors, those who were unfamiliar with digital technology become more knowledgeable about NFTs and digital currency, helping to bring

The QR code payment system “Rural Coin” is Japan’s first regional digital currency designed specifically for tourism. It not only simplifies NFT purchases but also encourages local spending. Participating stores display their stickers in storefronts and elsewhere (left photo).

digital transformation to the region.

Looking ahead, Rural plans to further encourage travel to regional areas by integrating *oshikatsu* into transportation options such as trains and flights.

“People visit regional areas because they have some kind of motivation—ultimately, they go because they *want* to go. As a result, these areas become more vibrant. That’s why it’s crucial to provide people with a reason to visit,” says Tanaka. The company is also exploring collaborations with department stores and entertainment facilities in urban areas. The power of *oshikatsu* fandom might just be the key to revitalizing Japan, starting with its regional areas. ●

TANAKA Masaaki, founder and CEO of Rural Co., Ltd. An entrepreneur leveraging Web 3.0 for regional revitalization, he also supports numerous startups as an angel investor.



Forms of *oshikatsu* vary widely. Rural has created not only NFTs of popular characters, but also those featuring regional tourism assets such as trains and castles.

