

Lake Biwa Canal

The Lake Biwa Canal runs from Lake Biwa in Otsu to multiple rivers in Kyoto. It supplies the former capital with fresh drinking water and hydroelectric power, and provides a cruising route for pleasure boats between the two cities.

Construction of the 20-kilometer main canal began in 1885 and was completed five years later. The project was spearheaded by civil engineer Tanabe Sakuro (1861–1944) and was considered a feat of modern engineering at the time. Tanabe also built Japan's first hydroelectric power station in Kyoto, utilizing water flowing through the canal. Besides being a source of drinking water and power, the canal was also the fastest way to move people and goods between Kyoto and Otsu.

The main canal begins at the southwest portion of Lake Biwa and runs past Miidera Temple into its first (and longest) tunnel, emerging in the Yamashina area of Kyoto. From there, it passes through three more tunnels and runs close to Nanzenji Temple, where a brick aqueduct still carries water. It joins the Kamo River near the Imperial Palace and eventually joins the Hori River in Fushimi. There is a difference in elevation between Otsu and Kyoto, and one section along the canal route near Nanzenji Temple is particularly steep. The Keage Incline, an inclined plane with tracks, was built to move boats up and down a slope in that area.

The Lake Biwa Canal was so successful that a second, completely underground canal was added in 1912, joining the first below the Keage Incline. However, railway and road transport quickly eclipsed the canal's convenience and boats stopped running by 1951. The Keage Incline became a walking trail, and the cherry and maple trees that line the canal route could no longer be enjoyed by boat. Although boat traffic stopped for a time, water kept flowing through the canal, which has continued to be used to generate power and to supply fresh water. In 2015, boats began running on the canal again. The trip from Otsu to Kyoto takes roughly one hour, while traveling from Kyoto to Otsu takes about half that time.