

## Welcome to Japan!

Japan is composed of many islands and is isolated from the rest of Asia. This geographical position made Japanese culture distinctly unique from others. Japanese tradition has been developed throughout a long history spanning over 1500 years. In the Edo era, the government limited contact to the west for more than 300 years, despite many countries in South-East Asia having open trade or being colonized. As a result of this policy of national isolation, Japanese culture developed with little influence of its surrounding neighbors at this time.

Most foreigners have a certain picture of Japan. Japanese cars, electronic goods, and cuisine are seen throughout the world. Many western tourists have seen pictures of the vast skyline of Tokyo, shadowed by Mount Fuji, or the temples of Kyoto. But unfortunately not so many people know about the natural beauty of Japan, which has a unique archipelago to offer!

We would like to show Japan from a different perspective. Aside from the Stereotypes and famous tourist spots, there is another Japan. Through our travels and experiences, we wish to bring you closer to the outstanding beauty of Hokkaido, Northern Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu.



## We escaped from the heat

In the summer of 2008 we arrived in Osaka and the weather was hot and quite humid at Honshu Island!

We visited the old and very interesting capitals of Nara and Kyoto, which are clustered with beautiful temples and attract tourist from all over the world.

Because of the great heat, we departed after two weeks from the Kansai district and boarded a ferry boat in Tsuruga bound for Hokkaido.



## Hokkaido, a natural retreat

Hokkaido remains one of the few places where roads disappear into the horizon, forests are still untouched, and mountains rise out from the ocean with glimpses of grand vistas.

It is the second largest, northernmost and least developed of Japan's four main islands. The weather is harsh in winter with heavy snowfall, below zero temperatures and frozen seas. Summers there are not as hot and humid as in the other parts of the country. While Hokkaido comprises one-fifth of the country's land mass, only 5% of the population lives there, in part because of the Siberian cold which sets in from November to March.



Our ride along the wild coastline took us through small sleepy villages, where the local income depends mostly on fishing. All over Hokkaido it was easy to find beautiful camp sites and easy accessible drinking water. Unforgettable were the natural hot springs, which are nestled in astonishing surroundings at the foot of active volcanoes. The Shiretoko national park lies in the north-east corner of Hokkaido and is another natural treasure of Japan. Here we found the perfect combination of an idyllic campsite and outdoor hot spring. This unique and untamed area

has the biggest population of brown bears in Japan and so one must be more careful there, especially when camping and walking in remote areas.



### **Along smaller roads**

At the end of September, the temperature slowly starts to drop, so it was time for us to leave Hokkaido and start cycling south. We prefer to cycle along smaller roads, so we chose an alternate route through the center of northern Honshu and the Japanese Alps. On this less-traveled road, we were rewarded with a varied and pristine landscape. Northern Honshu is charming and atmospheric, with a combination of natural beauty and an intriguing, well-preserved look into historic Japan. We rode along the shores of several untouched lakes and rivers and took the chance to visit Kakunodate, a small village where a well preserved samurai district surrounded by cherry trees and lush gardens is found.





## Shikoku: The Underestimated Island

Rugged and mountainous Shikoku is home to Japan's best-known pilgrimage. Pilgrims, or henro, as they are known in Japanese, have been walking around the 88 Buddhist temples of Shikoku for over 1000 years.



We cycled through the awesome and scenic Oboke gorge, making a side-trip into the hidden but spectacular Iya valley. The Iya region is a natural wonder and undiscovered adventure-sport heaven. Kayakers, rock-climbers, and hikers can all find what they are looking for here and without the crowds of more famous locales. We felt especially lucky to happen upon it when we did, because of the beauty of Japan in the autumn when the leaves are changing colors.



Along with the famed vine bridges and emerald green rivers, Iya boasts rustic folk architecture, with traditional farmhouses nestled in the steep hills. The cycling down from Kochi to the Ashizuri Cape was a real pleasure, with a variety of twisting intersecting roads you can choose from on your way down. We passed numerous beautiful beaches, many offering whale-spotting tours. A truly unique opportunity presents itself to water-sport enthusiasts: a chance to paddle down the Shimantogawa, which is the last undammed free-flowing river in Japan. The southern most Cape is home to one of the 88 temples and a picturesque jetty ending at a lighthouse.



## **Bubbling and steaming**

Kyushu is the third-largest of the four major islands of Japan and the closest island to Korea and China. During Japan's long isolation from the west, the Dutch settlement at Nagasaki was their only legitimate connection to the outside world.



One of the most famous sights in Kyushu is the Aso crater, a must-see for tourists! It is a key site for writers and artists and has been used as a backdrop for a number of movies, which includes those from Japanese film director Kurosawa Akira. We did a lot of hiking in this unique landscape and after a long day we were granted a relaxing bath in the Onsen town hot springs close to Aso. Our favorite was the local and very traditional Sento, but there are also fancier ones in more modern and luxurious hotel complexes.

Just a day's ride by bike west of Aso in the centre of Kumamoto-city lies one of Japan's finest reconstructed castles. We arrived just in time to see the beautiful sunset and enjoyed the relaxing atmosphere of the surrounding park.



The Shimabara peninsula, which is just a short ferry-ride away from Kumamoto is worth a longer visit. The Unzen-dake gives a picturesque background and the whole area is a very active volcanic centre. Unzen town is also a starting point for many popular walks, which are all situated within the Unzen-Amakusa National park, Japan's oldest national park. It is simply a fantastic sight to see: The bubbling and steaming gases bellowing out from the earth, giving these phenomena of Japan the name "Hells".



## Back to school

With pleasure we took an invitation to visit local schools. It was really a refreshing experience. We were impressed by the efforts by the schools, especially in smaller towns, to involve young students in Martial Arts like Kendo, or playing the drums to maintain their long traditions. Often they perform their skills to the elderly on weekends.

We also enjoyed showing the school children and teachers pictures of our travels and had some interesting discussions about other countries and their customs.



## Homestay

We were very lucky to meet some very kind and lovely people in Japan.

Truly a highlight was our stay with two young families in Honshu and Hokkaido. This allowed us a better understanding of Japanese society and their life at home. We also used this opportunity to gather useful tips and insider information to travel in Japan.



## When Sashimi meets pizza

Food and eating are very important aspects of life, requiring the utmost care. The majority of Japanese people are not picky and also quite curious about foreign foods. So we often cooked and exchange recipes with our hosts. The result was an interesting fusion of Japanese and western food.



### The “last” but not least ferry

We arrived by ferry to Japan and we left the land of the rising sun in the same manner. We greatly enjoyed our stay in Japan and were surprised about the variety that it has to offer. We would lightly recommend an extended stay in Japan, due to its vast natural beauty, distinct culture and hospitality. These make Japan truly unique!



## Japan is not to be missed!

Japan has the reputation among travelers to be one of the most expensive countries in the world, but there are many different options, even if you are on a tight budget!

From a simple campground in the countryside to the high end luxury hotels in big cities, Japan offers many options for the modern or the more independent traveler. There are always good deals at the Spa (Onsen) centers, especially in the off-season. You can get a good scrub, followed by a delicious dinner and a comfortable stay in a cozy room all for an affordable price. This is a real Japanese experience and should not be missed!

## Nuts and Bolts

- From free camp-sites in Hokkaido to small family run pension, guest houses to luxury hotels, there are accommodations for every budget!
- All over Japan, there is easy access to free potable water!
- In Japan, all the main islands are perfectly connected by ferry-boats. The much smaller and more remote islands, are still easily reachable by affordable boats and for a small additional fee you can bring your bicycle along. Bigger ferries are equipped with Onsens and other essentials that offer you a unique surrounding on your journey, an extraordinary experience!
- There are plenty of good bicycle and outdoor shops all over Japan. A heaven for ambitious hikers and cyclists!
- There are amazing 100 Yen (approx. 1U\$) shops where you can find almost everything, including souvenirs.
- Japan is a paradise for hot spring lovers with a variety of options such as simple Sentos (public bath), natural Onsens (natural hot spring) and luxury wellness oasis.
- Good maps are essential. The booklet series "Mapple" is particularly useful for bikers and covers the whole of Japan. For more details about Hokkaido try the "GO!" Magazine, which offers a great bunch of information's about campgrounds, Onsens and scenic spots.
- Very helpful are the members of the Japanese cycling network JCN. Have a look at <http://www.japancycling.org>, where you will find a lot of useful information's, even if you are not a cyclist yet!
- Travel by cargo-boat and try another way of transportation. They open up new horizons for you by offering individual trips far from the well-beaten tourist tracks. There are departures from Osaka and Yokohama to different ports all over the world.