



DESTINATION

JAPAN

Gaining Elevation from Nagasaki to Tokyo

Smooth roads, switchback views and soothing hot springs

by **Christina Palassio**

We rode into Lake Kawaguchi the day before the Mount Fuji Hill Climb, an annual road race that ascends more than 1,255 m across 24 km to around the halfway point of the iconic peak. Pelotons cruised around the lake on warm-up rides, stopping to snap pics of their bikes with Mount Fuji in the background. It was a treat to get a glimpse into Japanese cycling culture over a cold pint of Asahi beer after our own 90-km ride south from Fujimi through the Minami Alps.

We'd started the day on a 50-km flowy downhill into the valley—a welcome break from days of climbing. Then the daily downpour had started, and so had the ascent: a 40-km, 7 per cent grade past plum, apricot and grape fields and near-abandoned villages. I'd tried to spot *Fuji-san*, as he's called in Japan, throughout the day but it was too cloudy. I worried I'd have to scratch that entry on my Japan must-see Yahtzee card. But, as I tucked into that post-ride beer and a warming bowl of hoto hot pot, the skies cleared, freeing Fuji's snow-capped summit from its cloudy crown. I was surprised at how emotional I felt, given how ubiquitous the mountain is in modern culture, imprinted on everything from clothing to housewares to phone cases. But I found seeing it in real life profound in a way I didn't expect. It was an awesome reward after 1,000 km of some of the

Photos: Courtesy TDA Global Cycling



OPPOSITE

A climb through a bamboo forest leaving Nagasaki

RIGHT

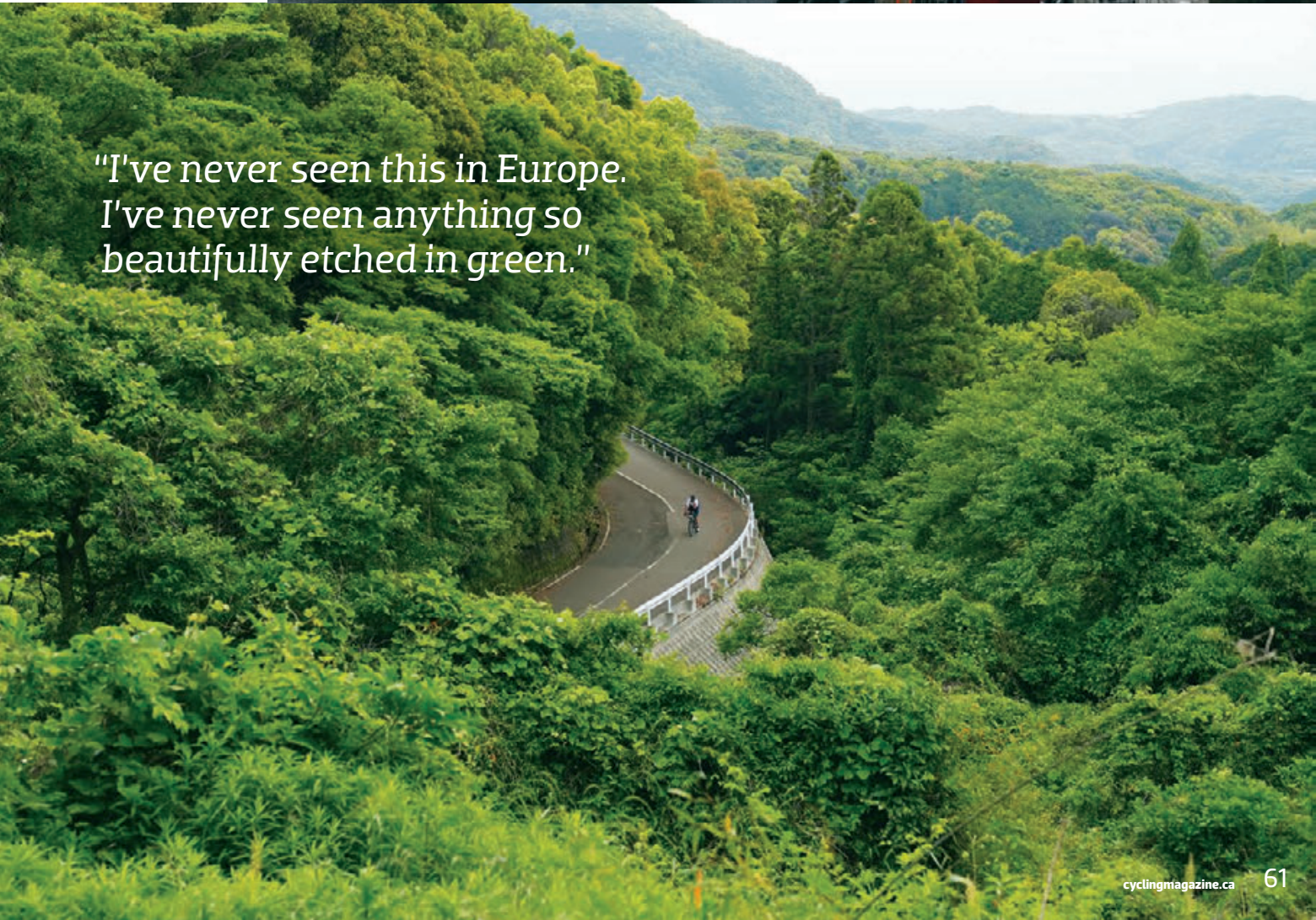
Bikes get loaded into TDA Global Cycling support vans to shuttle to Tokyo, with Mount Fuji in the background

BOTTOM

Dense forest between Nagasaki and Kumamoto



"I've never seen this in Europe. I've never seen anything so beautifully etched in green."



best and most challenging riding Japan has to offer.

The route that brought us to Fuji was part of a longer 2,790-km trip offered by TDA Global Cycling that starts in Seoul, crosses South Korea, hops over to Nagasaki, Japan, and heads north, finishing in Sapporo. While Japan's best-known cycling routes—like the Shimanami Kaido, which links Shikoku Island and Honshu Island across the Seto Inland Sea, the path around Lake Biwa, and Kyoto and environs—are all unarguably great, cyclists will be rewarded for exploring beyond the greatest hits. What's special about TDA's route is that it gives riders access to some of those hits as well as a backstage pass to less-travelled parts of the country, from volcanic landscapes, deep river gorges and mountain passes to abandoned rural villages, seaside towns and fascinating networks of narrow urban lanes lined with *izakaya* bars, karaoke boxes and pachinko gambling parlours.

I joined the group in Nagasaki, and we pedalled through the islands of Kyushu and Shikoku before hopping onto Honshu Island and heading north to Tokyo. Each island has incredible riding to offer; you could easily spend a month exploring just one. More than once, I cruised down a paved, car-free rural switchback that in many countries would be a rutted out gravel road and gave a nod to the Japanese cycling gods and their exceptional paving equipment and expansive road-maintenance budgets. Most days had what I came to call a Fuji moment: a moment when

Basically, don't sleep on cycling in Japan.

One of my favourite sections of the trip was on Kyushu Island. We climbed more than 4,000 m along a 260-km route from Nagasaki to Beppu via Kumamoto and Aso during a few days that made me question my gearing. Kyushu is a subtropical volcanic island that's covered in peaks, hot springs and forest. We had a spectacular day riding through green hillocks and grassland plains in Aso-Kuju National Park. We rode past terraced farm fields and rice paddies, descended toward misty sea views and climbed narrow switchbacks that cut through wooded areas fragrant with lilies, honeysuckle and jasmine. May is the beginning of the rainy season in Japan and everything was lush and green and humid. It felt like riding in Rwanda, but suddenly we'd come upon torii gates, Shinto temples and other symbols of Japan's unique history and culture.

I thought it'd be hard to top Kyushu, but then we got to Shikoku. During our first day, we rode up the west coast of the island to Matsuyama in the rain, past rocks wrapped in rope—which marks them as sacred—and then spent the evening rambling the narrow streets of Ekimacho on the hunt for ramen. And it only got better. With around 288 km and 3,840 m of climbing from Matsuyama to Kochi, and then to the Iya Valley and Kotohira, we rode along sublime river gorges that seemed almost primordial, though bamboo and cedar forests and on roads thick with mist. It rained, oh it rained, and I got tired of trying to avoid skidding out on wet leaves and moss going 40-km/h downhill. But the hilltop onsen and the soft cream cones—Japanese soft serve—were a fine reward.

Cycling is prevalent in Japanese cities: cigarette-puffing seniors and uniformed school kids ride their clunky steel *mama-chari* bikes on bike lanes that line roads and sidewalks, and parents load two kids on the front and back of commuter bikes to get them to school. Cycling isn't politicized in Japan the same way it is in many cities in Canada. "Cycling is just a part of many people's



everything feels absolutely sublime.

Wes Rother, a cyclist from B.C who was on the tour, describes it this way: "Everywhere you turn, it's almost eye candy to see. I've never seen this in Europe. I've never seen anything so beautifully etched in green."

Japan's natural beauty is at the top of my reasons-to-bike-in-Japan list. The other reasons are that drivers are generally courteous. The ascents and descents never end. There are thousands of *conbini* with an inexhaustible supply of snack options, from pudding cups, butter-and-red-bean pancakes and onigiri to flan, matcha ice cream bars and soda-flavoured popsicles—enough carbs to power a lifetime of riding. The *onsen*—Japanese hot springs—which you'll find in almost every town and most hotels—are the perfect way to relax after a ride. The heated toilet seats are a sight for sore glutes. (Many toilets will also play you a little song while they dry your butt.)

ABOVE LEFT
The author outside of Matsuyama

ABOVE RIGHT
Near Beppu

OPPOSITE
The traditional village of Tsumago-juku

lives here. There are more people who consider bicycles as a tool for spending their daily lives, rather than an equipment for sports, which I think is unique and special," says Shintaro Karaki, manager of the global sales team at Blue Lug, the bike shop to visit when you're in Tokyo. "We are trying to celebrate the idea of the 'tool for spending daily life' aspect of bicycles."

After an unforgettable few days on Shikoku, the group hopped over to Honshu and the Japanese Alps. We started in Tsumago on busy Route 256 and climbed for a few kilometres before turning onto Route 8, a car-less, winding road that climbs and climbs through cool forest. I alternated between watching the route on my Garmin turn more irate shades of red and taking in the cool shades of green in the forest. The switchback descent was so perfectly undulating that I felt both breathless and weightless, and I had to pop my ears after getting back to sea level.

Photos: Courtesy TDA Global Cycling



The next day we climbed again, 40 km this time, from Komagane up to the sweetest café with *My Neighbour Totoro* teacups and sweeping views of the city of Chino, and then onwards to Fujimi and Lake Kawaguchi. We climbed more than 4,590 m across 340 km on Honshu before we arrived in Tokyo. We got our fill of city views that night from the 47th-floor terrace of Shibuya Sky, but while the endless lights and excitement of Tokyo are beguiling, I'd trade them for a few days back on those dreamy misty Shikoku switchbacks any day.

Details

When to go

Let's start with when not to go to Japan. Do not plan a cycling trip in summer. It's like riding through a swamp. Instead, plan for April and May or October and early November. If you choose spring, keep in mind that the days spanning the end of April and beginning of May comprise Golden Week, a national holiday that makes booking flights and hotels tough and expensive. Mid-May is when the rainy season starts, but if you're OK with some warm rain, you'll be rewarded with reasonable temperatures and unbelievable flora. The autumn is also a nice biking season, but check temps before you go, as they differ between the southern and northern parts of the country.

How to get there and get around

There are daily flights from major cities in Canada to Tokyo, and many domestic flight options within Japan. The major airlines are ANA and JAL, but there are also other low-cost carriers. The country's rail network is dependable and relatively affordable, but taking bikes on trains requires disassembling your rig and putting it in a *rinko* bag. Do your research before you go. Look to forums such as Bikepacking Japan on Facebook.

TDA Global Cycling (tdaglobalcycling.com) offers two terrific routes that include Japan: Journey to the East, which crosses Kyushu, Shikoku, Honshu and Hokkaido, and Island Hopping Japan, which focuses on the south part of the country, including Okinawa. My trip was made possible by TDA Global Cycling.

Where to stay

There are many accommodation options in Japan. Western-style hotels offer all the amenities North Americans and European travellers are used to. Japanese inns, known as *ryokan*, are a lovely option, featuring traditional futon mattress beds on tatami and sometimes shared bathrooms. Capsule hotels and business hotels are also an option, as are campsites. The stand-out hotel on our trip was Hotel Kazurabashi on Shikoku (kazurabashi.co.jp/lq_en), which was just a few minutes' walk from the Iya Valley's suspension bridges made of vines, and was equipped with a cable car that ferries guests to a private onsen with a view. Check with hotels on their bike-storage policies before arriving.

Eating and drinking

Food culture is huge in Japan. Every prefecture has its regional specialties. Restaurants are plentiful and affordable. There are *conbini*—Japanese convenience stores—on every street corner, which sell a lot of affordable bento boxes and prepared meals, as well as the aforementioned assortment of snacks. No matter how rural you go, you're guaranteed to find a vending machine with a cold Coke or bottle of Pocari Sweat, Japan's answer to Gatorade.

Bike planning

Most cities will have bike shops with the major brands, and bigger cities will have stores, like Blue Lug (bluelug.com) in Tokyo, with more boutique brands. Some places offer rentals, but it's generally better to bring your own bike and, don't forget your climbing gears. 🚲