



SAMURAI AND KOIS OF KYUSHU

Experience the colourful routes of Japan... Words by Patricia Weismantel

Watch out for the koi, is not a usual warning one hears when cycling, but in the Samurai district of Shimabara the koi swim up and down canals adjacent to lanes that you don't want to accidentally ride into. Cycling alongside koi, who swim up and down the canals, is just one of many surprises to discover when bicycling around Kyushu, Japan's third largest island at the southern end of the Japanese archipelago.

Each day of cycling provides a new experience – ferry crossings, volcanoes to climb, castles to conquer, shrines to visit and even hell to ride to. Riding through "hell" turned out to be not as ominous as it sounds, as luckily this hell was geothermic. Approaching the billowing clouds of steam looks foreboding from a distance, but as one cycles closer comes the realization that the vents producing the steam are all safely fenced off and the steam is harmless to cycle through, if at times a bit smelly.

Starting in Nagasaki gives you a chance to visit this modern city that also has retained some accents of its multi-cultural past when it was an important port for the Portuguese and the Dutch, prospering as Japan's sole "window" to Western culture during its 300 years of national isolation. Nagasaki has thriving shipbuilding and fisheries industries and is especially noted for its marine products, such as cultured pearls, tortoiseshell and coral works. To the world, it was also known the second city in Japan, after Hiroshima, to experience an atomic explosion during the Second World War.

From the flat and breezy sea coast one turns inland and it's a climb up the base of Mt. Unzen volcano, a perfect illustration of the varied terrain cycling through Kyushu offers. The volcano was most recently active from 1990 to 1995, with a large eruption in 1991 that killed dozens. You can take a ropeway part way up the mountain slope to an observation deck with views over the

surrounding mountains and the Ariake Sea.

Another positive by-product of all the geothermal activity are the abundant natural hot springs that dot the island and Unzen is one of many such famous resorts. Soaking in these hot water baths after a day of cycling quickly becomes a ritual as it is the perfect antidote for sore muscles. If the onsen is part of a hotel you can don the kimono given to you in your room and then head to the appropriate bath – men and women are separated. Be sure to shower before entering and then lay back and let the water do its magic.

Stepping back in time and imagining life during the Edo period when samurai's reigned is made easy when visiting the castles in Shimabara and Kumamoto. Kumamoto Castle is considered an impregnable fortress, even today. Its main defensive features include very high stone walls with wooden overhangs (originally designed as protection against ninjas),

and a wide moat. There are many escape passageways within the castle. At night, the castle is illuminated and the view is breathtaking. Though both castles have been rebuilt they house museums that bring the era to life and are worth a visit to understand the lifestyle in the 17th and 18th Centuries.

Smack in the middle of Kyushu the landscape of Mount Aso offers completely different scenery from the rest of the island. Its ancient caldera ranks among the world's largest, with a diameter of up to 25 kilometres and a circumference of over 100 kilometres. Cycling up to the smoking crater of Nakadake is a steep climb, but there is an option of taking a ropeway to the top. Nakadake is an active crater with turquoise-green water that is heated up to 60°C at times, with the water turning grey as its temperature rises. There are many sensors and alarms installed around the crater to warn visitors of an increase

in volcanic activity as well as emergency shelters made of solid rock to duck into for cover in case volcanic rocks that might suddenly fly out from the crater during unexpected volcanic activity. The area was filled with sulphuric fumes and the crater lake was incessantly bubbling.

From the crater it is a cruisey downhill to the picturesque onsen town of Kurokawa. Situated along a river that provides a lovely accompaniment to the many outside baths, more than 20, that incorporate the natural features of this setting. Here it is possible to do a tour of outdoor baths by buying a wooden pass to gain admission to the baths of three different ryokan of one's choice. These baths were once enjoyed by the feudal lords of Kumamoto Castle.

For a dramatic setting the ride down into Takachiho Gorge is unbeatable. Its best to boat on the stunning blue waters through the narrow chasm of cliffs to get close to the 17-metre high Minainotaki waterfall.

There is also a paved path that runs along the edge of the gorge with stunning views of the cliff walls.

From here it's a long cycle to Kumamoto, but with the majority of the kilometres being down the caldera it is possible to arrive with plenty of time to see the lights come on at Kumamoto Castle!

The hard decision is when to do the tour, during spring when the cherry blossoms are in full bloom, or in the fall when the leaves are in brightly colored? Either choice makes for a colourful bicycle ride, just watch out for the koi!

TOUR INFORMATION:

SpiceRoads Cycle Tours offers two tours in Kyushu - Kyushu's Hot Springs and Volcanoes and Cycling Colourful Kyushu Island. More information on them can be found at www.spiceroads.com