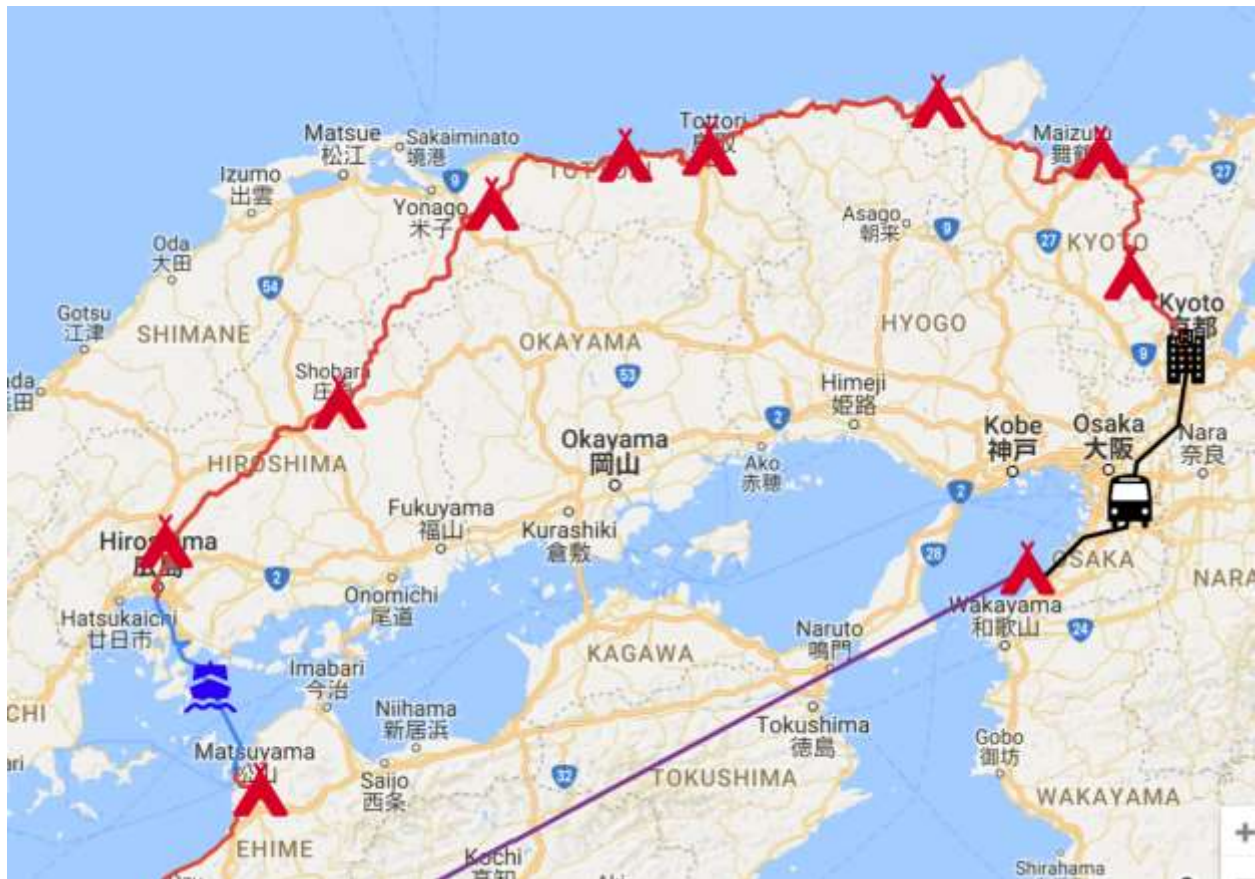


Season 11 – Part 2. Japan - Through the hills of Honshu to Hiroshima.



Fr 12.8.2016, day 397. (Tottori - Ishiwaki, 42 km)

We were planning on taking it easy after the huge day yesterday. However, the free campsite we were staying at had no showers and we were feeling quite sticky. So we decided to pack up and do a bit of biking all the same and maybe find a shower at a beach or even check out one of the Onsens (hot baths). We biked a couple of km along a nice little bike lane into the centre of town. Everything was really quiet and most of the shops were closed. We biked around in circles for a while, I went to withdraw cash and only later realized that I only withdrew 3000Y (about 30\$) instead of 30'000Y.

We wanted to sit down and charge all our electronic gear and use the internet for some planning, but we really didn't find a good place, so we ended up in a Starbucks. Even here they are popular! Good old Starbucks...

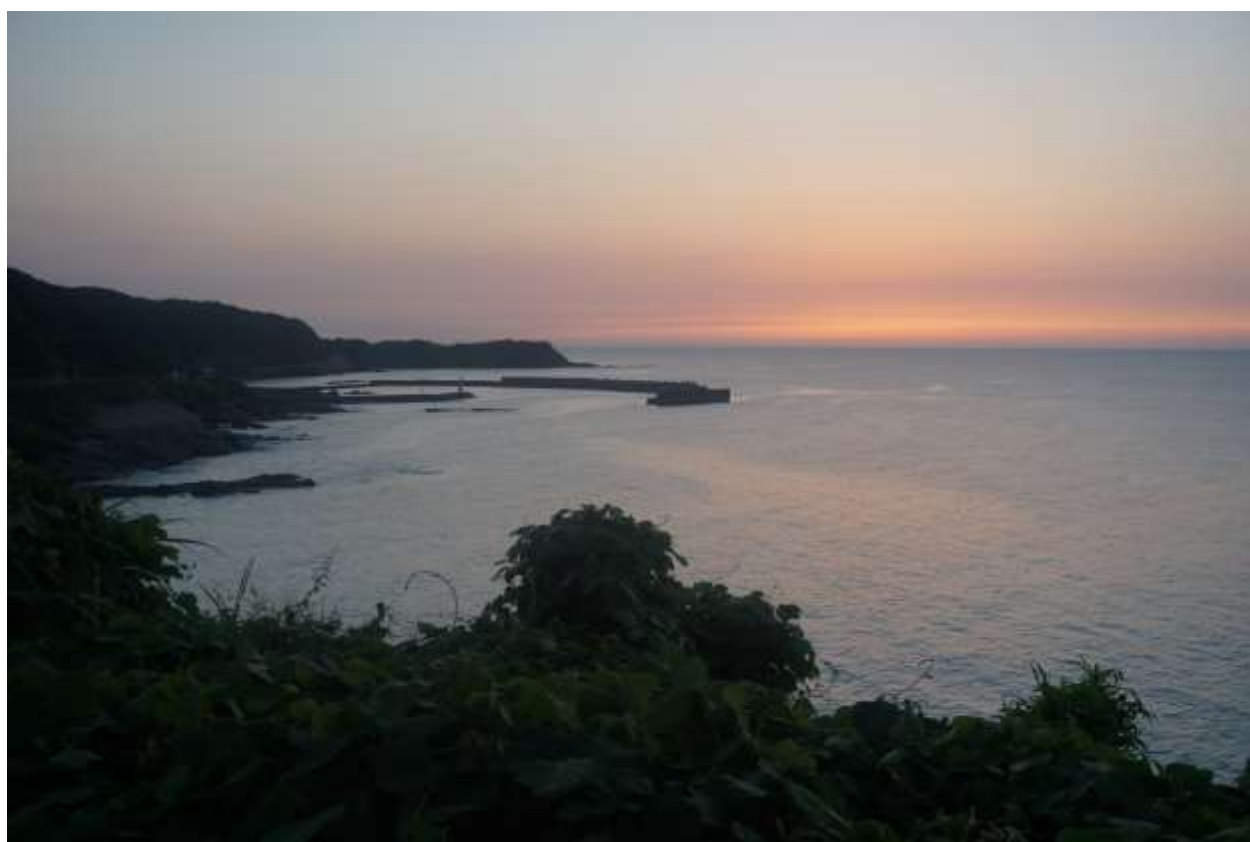
We got everything charged up, all the maps downloaded, and headed off towards a laundromat. This was fun, everything was labelled in Japanese, we couldn't figure out anything. We bought an anti-static cloth from a dispenser thinking it was washing powder. Finally, we figured out that one of the machines was an all-in-one washer-dryer with integrated washing powder dispenser, so we dropped in the 9\$ (expensive country!) and went to buy some lunch at the supermarket. We biked for about 40km along the coast, sometimes along incredibly busy roads, sometimes along very quiet side lanes through villages that seemed a bit like ghost villages. Just before it got dark we arrived at a campsite, right on the

beach in some pine trees. It was almost empty, there were only 3 or 4 other tents up. It was a wonderful place and it seemed like a free camping, there was no reception anywhere. We took a quick stroll through the village. Again it was completely dead. There was no light on in most of the houses. The street lamps were very dim and there were no cars or other traffic. The funniest thing, was that there were 6 youths down at the beach having a party. They were drinking beer and had a grill going. They also had huge speakers, a complete DJ desk and a diesel generator and were blaring out music over the empty beach. Probably the only 6 young guys living in the village, having their Friday night disco party.

We went back, were very pleasantly surprised that the little shacks on the camping housed fantastic hot showers, cooked a huge bowl of spaghetti and crawled off to sleep to the sound of waves breaking on the beach.









Sa 13.8.2016, day 398. (Ishiwaki – Mount Daisen, 68 km)

The day was all about the bike ride up Mount Daisen. It was a really hot day and we didn't take the most direct and easy way up the mountain, but circled around it to some extent. This meant that we had a couple of additional hills to climb, by the end of the day we had clocked a total of 1200 m altitude up. Maybe not too much with a light racing or mountain bike, but you certainly feel it if you are dragging 100 kg of camping and kite surfing equipment! The route we had chosen is a very popular bike route and it therefore had a very high density of sweet fizzy drink dispensers along the way. I can hardly count how often we stopped to have some cold sweet drink or other. The temptation was simply too strong to resist. These dispensers are anyway quite a thing in Japan. They can be found all over the place and the amazing thing is that they always work and are never vandalized.

Mount Daisen was quite a pleasant surprise for us. It seemed very much like a touristy Swiss village in the alps. It was a ski resort and had one long, straight and steep main street full of restaurants, shops, hotels and guesthouses. The camping was relatively cheap at 13\$ per night and very nice indeed. We were guided to our camp spot by the extremely friendly lady running the place. After a delicious hot shower, we managed to summon enough energy to make a little excursion over to the village and we were very glad we did. There was some festival going on and the place was buzzing with activity. There were beautifully coloured and illuminated parasols on display and there was a fantastic Japanese drum session going on. It was a really magic experience. One of those things you don't expect and suddenly you are dropped right in the thick of it.















Su 14.8.2016, day 399. (Mount Daisen, 0 km)

I was feeling quite battered from the bike ride the day before, still I couldn't resist the temptation to hike up to the top of Mount Daisen, another 1000 m up to about 1800 m altitude. Siria had more sense and decided to take it easy.

The hike up was very easy, there were steps most of the way up and if there was a path it was in perfect condition. There were lots and lots of Japanese hiking up as well, most of them equipped with the latest high tech Goretex mountain gear. There was an interesting tradition in place. The mountain apparently had gained huge popularity in the 80ties and hordes of people climbed up and in a very short time the whole of the top of the mountain was trodden bare. Then they started to construct paths and started to replant the forest of Daisen Ewes, a tree endemic to the mountain. Every hiker was obliged to carry one rock or one tree to the top of the mountain. Now the forest is again in full bloom, so it is no longer necessary to plant trees, but still everyone takes a rock up to the top and puts it on the huge pile that has accumulated over the years and that is used as building material.

I walked up and down quite quickly and in 2.5h I was down at the bottom again, legs shaking. I'm sure to get sore muscles from this little excursion!

I met up with Siria who was sipping a milk tea in a rather stylish café. I went for the soft ice cream, which was delicious! In the evening we went over to the local Onsen for our first hot bath in Japan. We had to do a bit of head scratching and guessing to figure out how everything worked, but finally we figured it all out. The hot tub was outside and it certainly felt delicious, however the hot season is not really the right time to go Onsening.



















Mo 15.8.2016, day 400. (Mount Daisen – Shobara, 103 km)

There were absolutely not shops whatsoever up on Mount Daisen (probably to force people to eat in the restaurants) and we had nothing left over for breakfast, so we headed out on an empty stomach. After a short climb of 200 m up to the pass we had a blast of a 15 km downhill ride. At the bottom of the hill there was a sacred Family Mart with bicycle park and space to sit inside. We had our favourite rice triangles, rice rolls and rice buns. The stuff these convenience stores sell is really not that bad at all.

It was a drizzly sort of day, which was a relief from the previous day's heat. We found that bicycling in cooler condition was significantly easier, especially Siria was full of energy and was racing up the hills leaving me panting in her wake. I had the additional problem that my muscles were badly aching from my hike up to the top of Mount Daisen the day before. Later in the afternoon we had a spell of quite heavy rain, luckily we quickly found a bridge to take shelter and we stayed more or less dry.

Again we didn't really know where we were going to camp, we were thinking of a park in the village that we had seen on the map, but decided to take a detour along a river just to check if we could find a good spot on the river bank. It turned out that we found an absolutely splendid spot down along a little gravel road. The river was dammed and just about deep enough for a wonderfully refreshing swim and wash. The clean rivers here in Japan are truly a blessing. I couldn't have imagined taking a swim in any of the murky stinking rivers in Cambodia, Vietnam or even China.















Tu 16.8.2016, day 401. (Shobara – Kabe, 78 km)

The day's ride was no much to write home about. It was overcast but far hotter than the day before, a really sticky sort of heat. We took refuge in a McDonalds where we enjoyed the coolness for an hour or two before pushing on to a free campsite that looked very nicely situated on the river banks of a steep valley. When we got there we found that the place was very Un-Japanese with a lot of thrash lying around everywhere and the toilets were disgustingly blocked. There were a bunch of youths having a wild BBQ party under the bridge, we decided to pitch our tent away from the rowdiness on a flat spot by some trees. We went for a swim and wash in the river and just when we got back we first heard some thunder and quite soon it started to rain. The rain turned into a downpour and we took shelter in our tent and were happy to see that it was still more or less waterproof. The rain continued to pour down. At one point Siria looked out and realized that a deep pool of water had formed right in front of the tent. Had we made a blustering beginner's mistake and pitched our tent in a hollow? A quick expedition out into the rain revealed that we were lucky, our tent was just beside the depression, but this is certainly one thing that we must remember in future!

Finally, the rain subsided and we walked over to the pebbly river bank, found some nice stones to sit on and cooked dinner as the moon started to peek through the breaking clouds. It was actually a very nice end to the day, but the not so nice bike ride and the heavy rain had taken a toll on our spirits and so moods were a bit subsided.









We 17.8.2016, day 402. A big day with the A-Bomb Dome, Onsens, Brothels and Urban Camping (Kabe – Hiroshima – Matsuyama, 32km)

It was a short ride from our camp spot down into Hiroshima. The only problem was that the route Siria (aka Garmin) chose took us over a diabolical hill. Again we didn't have anything for breakfast, thinking that it would be an easy ride to the next convenience store where we could buy fresh cool milk to make our Müesli (the milk in Japan is absolutely delicious by the way, after months of other Asian countries where the milk tastes really artificial and bad, we find ourselves drinking milk by the liter!). Finally after panting up the steep hill and shooting down the other side we finally found a blessed 7 Eleven. Breakfast was delicious! We rode into Hiroshima heading for the Peace Park and the A Bomb dome, took a stroll round, were once again shocked at the devastation the bomb brought to the city just over 70 years ago. The bomb exploded 600 m above ground and completely flattened a whole district. It is really hard to believe even if you are standing right in front of the only surviving structure looking at the twisted and bent metal girders. It is chilling to think that modern bombs have several times the explosive power of the Hiroshima bomb.

We then headed down to the harbour to catch the ferry over to Shikoku Island. We were unbelievably lucky, boarding had just started when we arrived. We bought the ticket, rode onto the ferry and a couple of minutes after sitting down we were already on our way. The ferry ride was very nice, the passage took us past lots of little islands and through narrow passageways. Also the boat was pretty empty and we had great seats right at the front. We felt a bit like two old age pensioners taking a cruise down the Danube.

Our plan for the night was to bike into Matuyama where we had heard that there is the oldest Onsen in all of Japan, have a nice bath and shower and then find a nice spot to pitch our tent in Dogo Park that is right beside the Dogo Onsen and according to the internet is an ideal park for what is called “Urban Camping”. When we got to the Park to check it out, we found it was an ancient fort surrounded by a perfectly groomed Japanese garden and the Onsen turned out to be a tourist magnet. It was absolutely packed. There were queues of people waiting outside and the entry fee was 12.5\$ per person. All around the Onsen there were very posh hotels and lots and lots of Japanese tourists were strolling to and from their hotels in their Kimonos either coming from or going to the Dogo Onsen. We knew there was also a public bath somewhere close by and so we made a little circle with our fully packed bikes and stumbled right upon a huge brothel district, again packed with one hotel after another, but different hotels this time. The public bath was nowhere to be found. It was getting late and at this point we were really not sure how the evening would play out. We decided to take a break in a holy Family Mart to check the internet again and decide what we should do. We found that the public bath was quite close by, so we parked our bikes and immediately a very friendly elderly gentleman appeared and offered to take us through the procedure of taking a bath, showing us where to buy the ticket, where to take off our shoes and put them into the locker, etc... The bath was absolutely terrific, it was a simply concrete pool surrounded by showers with the typical tiny little chairs you sit on when taking your shower. The average age of the people in there was probably between 80 and 90, one very senior gentleman was doing push ups beside the pool, stark naked. He managed about 8, each one a bit slower than the previous, his arms shaking more and more. When he was done he looked around proudly and everyone nodded their head respectfully. This was certainly the real Onsen, these guys have probably been coming here for decades. We felt much better after the bath, the only remaining problem was where to spend the night. We again went over to the park and finally decided to pitch the tent behind a bush on the Samurai parade lawn. I slept really well and didn't bother about setting the alarm as I was sure Siria would wake me up and kick me out of the tent at the crack of dawn...















