

Season 11 – Part 3. Japan – Shikoku and Kyushu Islands



Th 18.8.2016, day 403. (Matsuyama – Beppu, 82 km)

At 5am sharp a light came on automatically right beside the tent. Siria was up and out of the tent in an instant. We packed up quickly, the first visitors to the park were already jogging or walking their dogs. No one took the slightest notice of us, if out of politeness or if they simply couldn't care, we will never know. Soon we had everything packed and were sitting on a park bench munching our Muesli.

The ride of the day was fantastic, there was a bike path all along the coast, again marked with a blue line. At one point I checked my odometer and realized that we had overshoot the 17'000 km without even taking the obligatory selfie.

The fishing villages we passed were again, like much of the country side of Japan, completely empty, most of the houses seemed to be no longer lived in and most of the shops were closed and looked as if they had been closed for quite a while.

The ride into Yawatahama, where we were planning to take the ferry over to Beppu on Kyushu Island was fascinating. The town is somehow hidden in a bay that is surrounded by hills. The only way in was

through tunnels. There was one highway tunnel, one tunnel for the main road, a tunnel for the train and one tunnel made specially for bicycles! The tunnel was several kilometres long, quite amazing!

We headed straight for the ferry port, deciding against going to the supermarket on the way there, to find out when the next ferry ran. Again we couldn't believe our luck. We arrived at the ferry terminal just as boarding was about to begin. We just about had enough time to dash in and get our tickets.

In Beppu we checked into a hostel. It was really nice to have a kitchen and some place to sit and relax out of the heat of the day. Also the hostel had its own little Onsen. It was also nice chatting to other travellers for once. In Japan it is very difficult to have a conversation with almost anyone, as almost nobody speaks English.













Fr 19.8.2016, day 404. (Beppu, 0 km)

It was definitely a good decision to take a day's rest. Biking in Japan is tough as everything is up and down hill all the time, we were doing well over 1000 m altitude up every day and also there was a bit of a heat wave with temperatures over 35°C every day. It felt so good to sleep in a clean bed in an air-conditioned room. We had a nice long sleep, breakfast of granola and delicious Japanese milk at the hostel, explored the town a little bit before ending up in Starbucks, still the best place for hanging out and internetting. I spent quite some time trying to organize my trip onwards from Japan. I'm really looking forward for biking through S Korea on the 4 river bicycle path!

We cooked dumplings and had some sake for dinner at the hostel and spent a nice evening chatting with the other travellers at the hostel. By coincidence we were sharing the dorm with two very nice young Swiss guys who were travelling round Japan before starting University in autumn.







Sa 20.8.2016, day 405. Ride into the mountains (Beppu - Kujurenzan, 70 km)

We crept out of the dorm as quietly as we could as our two room-mates were still fast asleep, had a nice breakfast, packed up our bikes and just as we were ready to leave the two Swiss guys came out. Seems they got up just to say good bye, we thought it was a very nice gesture.

The first part of the ride was nice and easy along the coast on a perfect bicycle path. I had the route programmed into the Garmin, so navigating was easy. However, it soon turned out that the Garmin was taking us on tiny little side roads where there were very nasty little hills with very steep grades. But the route was rather direct so we decided to keep following him. We then came to a junction with a red arrow pointing one way and some Japanese symbols on the other road that we had to take. It was a steep hill down and we soon realized what the symbols meant: the road was closed! There had been a pretty severe earthquake in Kyushu island in spring and this obviously was one of the roads that had been destroyed.

So we ended back on the main road that steadily climbed up into the hills passing through several tunnels. The scenery was really beautiful with mountains, an artificial lake and sparkling clear streams. We passed through a small village that was full of Ryokans and Onsens. We were hoping to find some shop or other for lunch, but there was nothing. We did however find a splendid little hot pool build right beside the river. We stopped to cook spaghetti in the underpass leading to the pool where it was a bit cooler. There was an old man teaching probably his grandson how to fish. They already had caught two fine specimens and we got chatting to the kids mother who invited us to use the pool. When we had done eating our spaghetti, she came over and offered us some slices of watermelon. We were really

touched by her kindness, especially as the going price for watermelons is 30\$ each! Of course I took a dip in the pool and also tasted the sulphurous water coming bubbling into the tub. Apparently the water is very healthy. I decided to believe this, judging by the age of the guy who told me this bit of wisdom, taking a big gulp himself, just to prove his point.

Close to the camping where we were planning to spend the night we bumped into some sort of village festival. We decided to stop by and see what was going on. We had no clue what it was all about and everything seemed very amateurish, but it was great fun to watch. It was also interesting to see the average age of the spectators!

We arrived at the wonderful camping right on the top of a hill, completely exhausted after this long day. The air was wonderfully cool and fresh up here in the hills and we had a delicious sleep.











Su 21.8.2016, day 406. Past volcanoes (Kujurenzan - Aso, 44 km)

Being at the top of a hill I was in a mental mindset for a nice relaxing downhill ride. And so we headed off, the road climbed for a bit at first and then we came to a junction and Siria said "Let's go up here, there's apparently a nice waterfall and a hot bath just two kilometres up the road!". Also it looked as if there was a road we could take from the waterfall that looked like a short cut. And so we headed up the road that turned into a devilish climb up into the mountains. Siria really likes these early morning climbs! I really had to fight to keep up. The Onsen at the top of the hill turned out to be unaffordable and the waterfall somewhat of an anti-climax. To cap it all, it turned out that the road, the shortcut, that we were planning to take was closed, again probably due to the earthquake. However the ordeal turned out to be well worth our while, as we got chatting with two delightful elderly ladies who offered us two delicious figs then two equally delicious pears.

The ride of the day again was absolutely fantastic. The countryside up here was mostly pasture with dairy farming. It felt a bit like small town USA. We reached the rim of a large crater from where we got a nice view of the famous Mount Aso. From there it was a thrilling downhill ride to the bottom of the crater and the town of Aso. In Aso we learnt that the whole of the mountain was closed due to damage caused by the earthquake. We also learnt that the camping we were planning to stay at was closed, but there was another one that was open. The guy at the information assured us it was very close, just straight up the road. We lingered round the tourist information for a while escaping the brutal heat of the day and bought some very reasonably priced tomatoes and cucumbers that seemed to be from local farms. Towards the evening we headed off to the camping checking out the local Onsen on the way where we hoped to pop in for a little bath after dinner. The road to the camping turned out to be a

steep mountain road leading up the face of Mount Aso and it also turned out to be a full 5 km up the hill with an elevation gain of 300 m! A hell of a ride with a bike weighing 150 kg!

The camping turned out to be wonderful and was almost completely empty except for a couple of motor cyclists. It was run by a very nice guy, who turned out to be a paraglider and a good friend of a Swiss world champion paraglider, so he was very happy when he learnt we were from Switzerland. "Ooooh! Very beautiful country!!".

We had a delicious tomato and cucumber salad with onions followed by a huge pot of spaghetti in the middle of a large field with a spectacular view of the sun setting behind Mont Aso that was puffing out plumes of steam or smoke. The sky was crystal clear and the stars put on a spectacular show. Suddenly to our surprise we started to see flashes of lightning! This really puzzled me as there was not a single cloud in the sky. I wondered if it could be due to charged dust particles coming out of the volcano right above us.









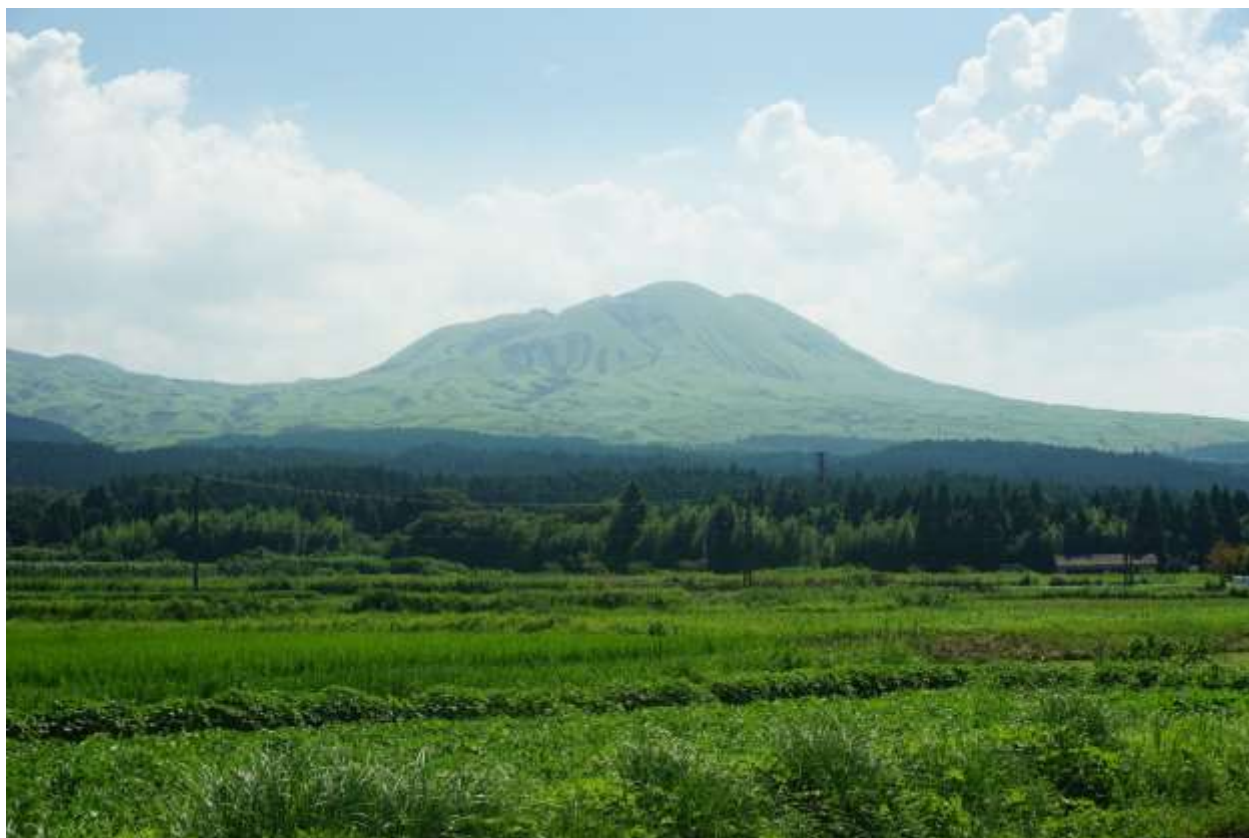














Mo 22.8.2016, day 407. Traffic and a naaaice downhill ride (Aso – Shimabara, 80 km)

For once the day started with a downhill ride from the camping to Aso where we had breakfast. We then got on the main road leading out of the large caldera in which Aso lies. This road was actually the only road that was not closed due to the earthquake and therefore it was packed with traffic. We got to the rim of the crater and there the road started to climb. Traffic was terrible and there was no hard shoulder and also no bike path. Luckily we found what was probably the old main road that was now disused and completely overgrown with grass. It snaked steeply up the hill and rejoined the new main road just before the summit. From there it was a blast of a downhill ride almost all the way to the coast. We were planning to take a ferry over direction Nagasaki and once again, we arrived just before the ferry left. We just had enough time to go in and buy the tickets before we were husked into the high speed catamaran. There was internet on the ferry and we saw that on the other side there was what looked like a park that seemed like a likely place to pitch the tent. So after we had arrived we headed straight over there to scout it out. It was perfect, it seemed like a disused park right on the water's edge. There was even a drinking fountain. It was switched off, but the Leatherman easily sorted that out. We cooked a delicious pasta salad that we ate while the sun slowly sank below the hills. We then found a Family Mart to get some dessert and to wait for a while before returning to set up camp for the night.











Tu 23.8.2016, day 408. A depressing town (Shimbara – Kashima, 85 km)

As always when stealth-camping we were up early, just before sunrise. It was wonderful sitting on the harbour wall having breakfast while the sky turned brighter and finally Mr. Sun came peeping up over the hills. It got very hot very quickly and so we set off, stopped at the famous Family Mart to get a coffee and then biked all along the coast northwards. The road was very busy and it was not such a nice ride. One highlight was a 7 km long dam across the estuary of a river that we crossed. Slowly we got to Kashima where we were planning to spend the night.

I was really looking forward to this trip to Japan. A lot of things that are happening in Japan are for me things that will soon be happening all over the world: society is getting older, in Japan now 26% of the population are above 65 years of age, population is slowly dropping, every day in Japan 1000 more people die than are born, and society seems to be saturated in terms of material wealth, people are not striving for ever bigger houses or bigger cars or holiday homes or whatever, they are more or less happy with what they have got. This means that the economy is not really growing despite Shinzo Abe's best efforts flooding the market with free cash. But then why should the economy always grow? For me this is one more of those nonsense dogmas that are always repeated as absolute truths, like prayers in a church and never questioned. But our world is full of nonsense things like countries, customs, armies and many more. Completely ridiculous things that everyone seems to think are necessary.

So anyway, arriving in Kashima I felt I got a very interesting glimpse at the future and actually it was quite depressing. The town is incredibly clean and tidy. Everything is perfectly orderly, the cars drive slowly, there is no graffiti anywhere, no thrash lying around. But the place has a completely dead feeling about it. The shopping streets are empty. There is no life on the streets anywhere, there are no cafes or restaurants or bars to sit down and hang out, the only thing we found was a shopping mall that was eerily empty inside, some of the escalators were shut down, there was one place to sit down and there were a couple of young school kids sitting at some of the tables doing homework at other tables a bunch of very senior citizens compete with Zimmerman frames were sitting in silence. In fact, the whole town was silent. In Europe we can be really thankful that we have immigration of young energetic people from all over the world, giving us things like Thai restaurants, Kebab stands, Pizzerias, Asia markets, little convenience stores run by Tamils, etc. I think if all these things we take so for granted, would suddenly disappear overnight we would wake up and see how depressing a city without all these things is. If anyone doesn't believe me, I would invite him or her to spend a one-week holiday in Kashima.

One thing you can count on in Japan, however, are 7 Elevers or Family Marts. These can be found in most places and offer everything on the first, most basic level of Maslov's pyramid of needs for touring bicyclists: air-conditioning, spotless toilets, WiFi, coffee and ice cream. So that is where we hung out for an hour or two, out of the worst of the heat. We then headed off to the next village without any idea where we were going to spend the night. We were both feeling the need for a place just for ourselves, out of the heat of day, away from mosquitoes to just sit down and relax. Siria was really feeling quite depressed and even shed a little tear or two. But hotels were simply way too expensive, there was nothing for it, we would just have to rough it, find some place somewhere to pitch our tent. We stopped at the first best place by the side of the road, I anyway had to fix the mounting system of my kiteboard as it was constantly falling off the trailer and was quite a pain in the neck. Siria went off on a reconnaissance mission to see if there was a better place. She finally found a rather nice spot at a nearby sports park where we cooked spaghetti and things started to look up. We then found a

laundromat to do our washing and hung out at 7 Eleven waiting for the wash to finish. There a guy started chatting to us. We had no idea what he was saying, but luckily the cashier spoke quite good English and was able to translate. Turns out he wanted to show us the best place in town to pitch our tent. It was down by the river under a lovely trellis. Things started to look up even more. The Japanese are really the kindest most polite people you will ever meet.

But then the night turned out to be rather restless. It was still stiflingly hot and we had to sleep in the tent due to the mosquitoes. Sweat was simply running off my body as I lay there trying to fall asleep. Then, when I finally dozed off, we were both woken up by motorbikes tearing through town revving their engines like madmen. This is one of the hobbies of the young. The tune up their bikes, meet up at 7 Eleven late in the evening and then tear around the neighbourhood at night on their bikes making the most unbelievable loud noise. I guess this is their revolt against the dying, overly orderly and regulated society they live in.



