

The Secrets of Japan



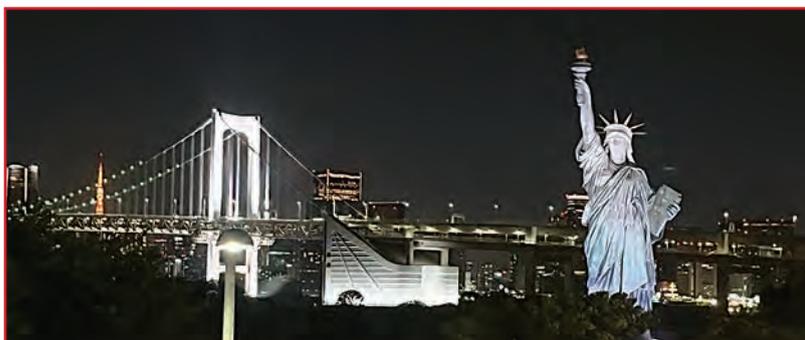
On the map of the world, Japan appears like a mark in ink. It's fitting that this slender archipelago – stretching for some 1,900 miles across four main islands, and 14 thousand more – assumes the form of calligraphy. In Japan, there is always the inspiration for something finer.
Excerpt from the Monocle of Japan

words: Brian Rathjen • images: Brian Rathjen, Shira Kamil, Edelweiss Group

The Land of the Rising Sun. It was named this as, from the east coast of Asia, it is where the sun comes up. The name Japan is an exonym derived from the Chinese pronunciation of Nihon, which started back in letters from the Chinese Sui dynasty some 1,500 years ago. For Europeans, this was an almost legendary land, and it was not until the 1500s that Giapan was mentioned, and it was the Portuguese missionaries that renamed it Japan for European traders. The book *Shogun* was based on all this, and the name has seemed to stick.

The world back then was enormous, and seems far smaller now – yet it was still a 14-hour non-stop flight from Newark to Tokyo. Non-Stop. One tank of gas. As a rider who has run out of fuel a few times, this concerned me – but the captain assured me that he, Boeing, and United had this. Hmmm.

We settled in for the long flight, heading to Japan for a fourteen-day tour with Edelweiss Bike Travel's Secret of Japan Tour which would cross the center of the island nation, through the Japanese Alps mixing both ancient and modern Japanese culture. This was going to be different for sure.



Tokyo

We arrived in midafternoon, and an entrance into Japan was quick and easy, with a short bus ride bringing us to the opulent Grand Nikko Hotel in Odaiba, a man-made island in Tokyo Bay created in the 1850s for defense of Tokyo. Specifically from the USA and Admiral Perry; and the U.S. Navy, who was looking to open up Japan from its 200 years of self-imposed isolation. There is deep history here kids, so go look for yourselves.

Today Odaiba has a number of hotels and tourist sites, including a replica of the Statue of Liberty, a gift from Paris to Tokyo in 1998.

Play Ball...

We are lovers of baseball, and not wanting to miss an opportunity for a game in Japan, we cabbed it into Tokyo proper for a cross-town rivalry game between the Swallows and the Giants being held at the oldest stadium in Tokyo, the Meiji Jingu Stadium, built 99 years ago.

Superb experience, and just a bit different from Citifield. Somewhere in the middle of the game the rain started to fall, which in Japan is not unusual. What was unusual was the

lack of tarp or rain delay. Out came the ponchos, up went the Swallows little umbrellas, and the cheering continued.

The next day we went sightseeing around Odaiba and then had a mid-afternoon introduction with Edelweiss and to meet the rest of our group. We had three tour guides, Angela, who we have toured with in the past, Holger and James, an ex-pat Brit, who would be handling a passenger van, our luggage, and hotel logistics.

We had 13 riders on twelve machines, and Shira and I two-up. We had a mix of BMW, Yamaha, and Ducati and riding them were a mix of humans – two from Australia, four from Germany, and the balance from the United States. We were an international lot for sure. This time around we'd be piloting a Ducati Multistrada V4, a machine I had long wanted to ride. With fourteen days on the road, and the entire island of Honshu ahead of us, we knew this would be fun, enlightening, and full of history, and perhaps mystery.

Secret of Japan:

Japan is an archipelago, or string of islands, on the eastern edge of Asia. There are four main islands – Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. There are nearly 14,000 smaller islands, too! Almost four-fifths of Japan is covered with mountains.



Tokyo to Kawazu

We have been to many cities, but Tokyo is special in many ways.

But let's talk size.

The city of Tokyo proper has a population of roughly 14 million people. When considering the greater Tokyo area, the population swells to around 41 million, making it the largest metropolitan area in the world.

It is big, busy, and can be confusing to Americans, for sure. The elevated highway and tunnel systems are a design marvel, but can be a nightmare to negotiate; so we broke our group up into two smaller gaggles, each following a lead bike south from Tokyo, and along the coast.



It was Sunday and, like Sundays everywhere, the local motorcycle riders were out in force. Running through a Tokyo Harbor tunnel we got passed by a number of Harley riders.

It was surreal, with the thunderous (and they were) American V-Twins, piloted by Japanese riders, pacing along with us for a bit, before heading off to wherever they were going this Sunday. We vectored south of Tokyo, with its huge industries and ports slowly thinning out as the scenery became more and more rural and beachy.



This afternoon we came across dozens of Japanese riders busy doing that 'On Any Sunday' thing Japan-style, and some of the motorcycles were eye-catching, some historic, and some simply outrageous – one group of riders looking like they took their styling cues from Schwinn Stingray bicycles; a nod to the Bōsōzoku motorcycles of the 1950s.

We stopped for coffee along the way, the small beach towns full on this sunny spring weekend, and then we turned inland, and towards the mountains that run down the spine of Japan. Japan has a number of 'Skyways' that are sprinkled around and atop these peaks. Our group motored up through deep forests of pines and bamboo, and then I heard Shira say "Oh, my. Holy S*@t!" The trees swallowed up my view, but when we got to the Daikanzan Observatory, I parked the Ducati in the middle of



the dozens of other motorcycles that filled the parking lot, and taking off my helmet I looked up and over and... there it was - Mount Fuji. Holy F*@k!

Fuji-San, as it is called by so many, is the picture-perfect volcano. It is 12,400 feet tall and is considered sacred. We could see why. With her snow-capped peak, she is stunning and would be part of our riding for the next few days.

We had lunch, and then spent the rest of the day riding atop the Japanese skyways - and down along the Izu Peninsula. The pavement, here in this region, was - well Japanese. Which is like saying Mary Poppins – practically perfect and all that. That would not be the case for this entire trip. Later that day we stopped at Mount Omuro - one of the oddest mountains we have ever seen. This extinct volcano is shaped like an inverted rice bowl (we were in Japan), and it is almost 2,000 feet high with a 1,000-foot crater – and all of it is as green as can be. We rode the chair lift to the top and strolled the summit, amazed at both Omuro, and the view from atop it, and sharing the summit with a Black Kite, a Japanese bird of prey, that fearlessly flew in and around the humans strolling the top of the ancient volcano.



A young woman walked by with a lemur on a leash. How cute. It bit me. Ahh, all the way to Japan, to climb an ancient volcano and die from the bite of a jacked-up monkey-squirrel. How nice.

Descending we rode into the seaside town of Kawazu, and a neat seaside hotel, that had the first of many Onsen – the hot springs for which the very volcanic Japan is famed.

Shira and I are okay with the Onsens – that are segregated with men and women having their baths. Japanese tradition holds with this always. Men here. Women there. No bathing suits. Best be comfortable in your own skin, and just let these naturally heated waters soak away the day's miles.

It would take a few days for most of this group to take a soak.

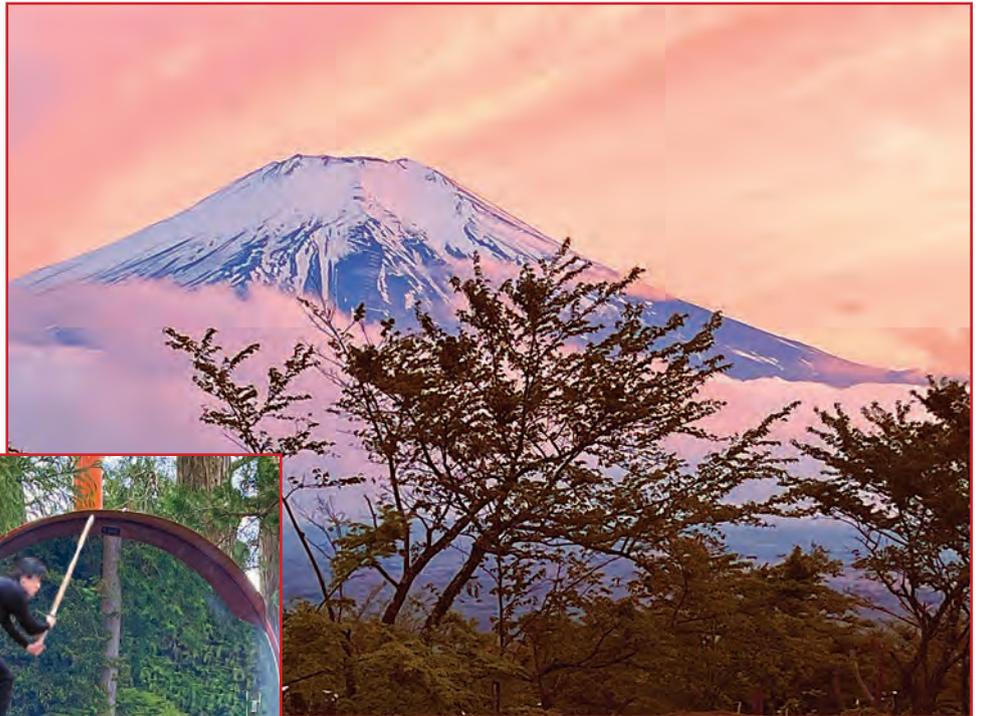
We tried to hit them all.

Kawazu to Yamanakako

We headed back the way we had come the previous day, along the Izu Skyline and then around Mount Fuji. We had lucked out the previous day, with a clear look at Fuji-san, but this day was a mix of wet and dry, sun and deep clouds, and many times we had little in the way of visibility, making our way softly along the curves and peaks. Edelweiss ran us along a number of very tight and heavily forested roads, that were really one lane wide, and the Japanese have even put mirrors at the apex of many hairpins, just to give all a fighting chance if folks are heading in both directions.

Rounding the tight and blind curves were much like the Pink Panther's Inspector Clouseau, calling out and waiting for an inevitable attack from his manservant Cato.

The bamboo, called Sasa here, oak, and Japanese cedar, run close to the road, with deep streams and waterfalls running along the tight, and rougher pavement. I would glance at the beauty, and then get back to business, as this sort of motorcycle riding, especially in the wet, demands attention, and rounding each turn I would think... "Cato? Cato?"



The bigger roads went high again, as we rode the Hakone and Ashioko Skylines – mostly made up of superb sweepers, and that nice Nippon pavement from the previous day.

We rode through small mountain towns that looked like, in many ways, all mountain towns do. They could have been Europe, but were distinctly Japan. The old men walking together talking; the same hill they had walked and talked for years could have been in the European Alps – but they were in Japan.

The world can be so much alike, yet different at the same time.

At day's end we were still in the arms of Fuji-san, but she was hidden by the clouds, and we made for our hotel on the big lake below her.

Later that evening, as the sun almost finished its ride west, the purples and pinks came across the huge mountain. Fuji-san had been hiding, but as the sun set, the winds shifted and the clouds parted allowing the mighty mountain to make one last appearance this day. I knew she was there, but I did not really grasp how close we had ridden to her. Yesterday she was in the distance. This evening we were truly in her shadow. Fuji is titanic. A behemoth. When the clouds moved, she loomed like a monster above us. Like Godzilla. Stunningly majestic, yet clearly terrifying at the same time.

It was what we had come to Japan for. Unless the G-Man himself showed up, it would be hard to top this.

Secret of Japan:

The number four is extremely unlucky. The number four ('shi') is widely avoided in Japan since it sounds too similar to the Japanese word for death. Keep an eye out in Japan and you'll notice buildings don't have a fourth floor, items are sold in sets of three or five, and special care is taken to avoid encountering the number in daily life.

Does Reed Richards know this?

Yamanakako to Hamamatsu

The different regions of Japan are called Prefectures, run by local governments, and there are 47 of them. These local forms of government first began in the mid-1800s to replace the feudal shogunates that had divided the nation. We'd pass through many over the next few weeks. On this day we would ride further south and into Shizouka, ending in the port city of Hamamatsu.

But, before we would do that, we took some time to pay respects to Fuji-san, by riding the 18-mile Subaru Line Autoroad just below the snowline, what is called the 5th Stage, at 7,562 feet. Here, on the lower portion of the Subaru Line, there were still blossoming cherry trees, along with the other dense forest of oak and maple. The higher we rose the colder it got, and by the time we reached the 5th Stage, it was in the low 40s. We had a moment or two when Fuji showed her face but, even though it was a fine day, the clouds still surrounded us, and the mountains peak. That did not stop our sneak snowball attack.

Back below we motored along a mix of larger roads, and then along miles of green tea plantations, with tea being grown everywhere.



Along one of these roads we stopped for lunch at the most amazing stop, what might be considered a “Truck Stop,” in the US, here it was a mix of fuel, and shopping mall, with really wonderful and high-end wares and shops. There was even a Kushitani Shop. For those not knowing of Kushitani, they are one of the world’s top makers of leather racing and road suits and jackets on the planet.

the river here was the Shiogo Suspension Bridge – a very narrow wooden and cable bridge built back in 1931 - and used daily by locals until the building of the nearby dam in the early 1960s. Today the bridge is mostly used by tourists and travelers looking to brave the nearly century-old swinging span.

We rolled into Hamamatsu, and our hotel along Lake Hamma, by early evening, and after a soak in the Onsen, made it an early night as the next day was long, and started with a ferry ride from Cape Irago to Toba.

Hamamatsu to Kumano

We had to break the group up and take two different ferries this day, and a few of us got going at 7:30 am, ranging down the coast of smaller roads and making time to Cape Irago, where we would pick up the Isewan Ferry to take the hour voyage across to Toba. The ferry was enjoyable and offered some superb views of the passing islands, and after docking we rode into the heart of the pearl and nori (seaweed) industry of Japan.

Tripping down along the coast, and to one of the piers along the curving bay, we parked the bikes and walked along the rocky shore, watching women spread out nori to try in the sun.



It was a beautiful and peaceful day. This was the region that was decimated by the tsunami that occurred back in March 2011. Almost 20,000 Japanese were killed, or never found, after this surge of water, 100 feet high,

They had a small display of their history, as well as a set of Ai Ogura’s Gulf livery leathers from earlier in the MotoGP series this year. We could not help but grab an Ogura and Somkiat Chantra tee shirt.

ran more than 3 miles inland, devastating the region. Every block and corner had Tsunami Escape signs.... a clear and ever-present danger here in Japan.

Angela had scouted this tour a few months back and she brought us back along some more of her tinier mountain forest roads. These roads, mostly one lane, with mirrors at the apexes, were a steady and concentrated ride, but easier than the previous day’s hairpins. Cato lite. In truth, we got to see

Near Honkawane-Haruno we followed Angela up and over some of the local mountains, once again on Cato roads, that have been traveled for centuries, and were so tight two cars would not fit. More than once we had to make room to the left, as forest and service trucks were busy heading the other way on a Tuesday afternoon. Tight, still damp, and with a series of very, very tight one-lane hairpins they were roads to try one’s skills. Shira tried cheerfully to remind me that they were at least paved. Yep, there was that.

We stopped for coffee, and tea (of course), along the Oi River, a wide waterway, that for the most part was running at a fraction of what it can be during the snow-melt of early spring. Crossing



a hidden part of Japan that those, riding by on the bigger Pearl Road, would never have experienced. Thank you, Angela.

Later this day the mountains became more ridge than peak. Like a long line of sharp 'Seneca Rock-style' mountains, enshrouded in the perpetual green of the many trees that lay against the mountain like a living tapestry of different shades, hues, and shapes.

We had one of the best lunches this day, at a small roadside place, run by an elderly couple that have been serving up food for travelers for more than 50 years. Tiny and cramped – we sat at a small counter and were served the best sashimi in the region. Wherever you are, whatever nation you ride, it is tiny roadside restaurants like this that seem to make the journey that much more memorable.



Late that afternoon we arrived at a superb inn that was very tied to the old Japanese ways. Tea, robes, private Onsen bath, and tub.

Lovely in every way.

Kumano to Kyoto

We started the day riding some nicely paved two-lane roads into the mountains, and then along more tight and forested semi-asphalt that would rise high above the valleys, along a sweeping run of forest, with the trees crowding onto the road like Ent-like centurions hovering guard over us. Truly remarkable, and unlike anything we had ridden through in a long time.



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Back down on the roads where the mere mortals live, we vectored onto the Koya-Riujin Skyline, which had miles and miles of twisting sweepers that allowed for a marvelous riding rhythm, and groove. This road would lead us, like the thousands of pilgrims before, to Koya-san.



Located in the lush Koya-Ryujin Quasi-National Park, it is said that the eight peaks and the basin resemble a lotus, making it an auspicious location; and you will find more than 100 temples in this town. It is one of the most Holy Japanese Buddhist sites, and stunning to behold.

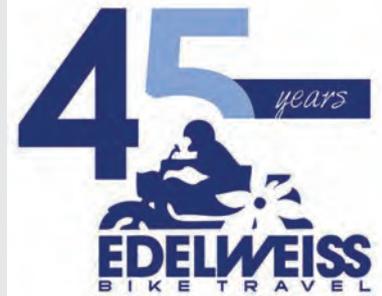
We parked the Ducati and spent a few hours wandering around the temples, giving thanks and prayers, and lighting candles in honor of our mothers and family now gone.

It was a place of joy, with a tinge of sadness; much like life. Breathe in. Breathe out. Be one with the journey.

EDELWEISS BIKE TRAVEL

This tour of Japan was our 11th motorcycle adventure with the Austrian tour company, and they all were adventures – with more memories and miles than should fit into a life well ridden.

From our first European ride in the Alps, to a smokey Montana, around the fiords of Norway, and running the Italian coast from Rome down to Mount Etna in Sicily, across Iceland and to a humble visit to Omaha Beach in Normandy, and other points on the globe, Edelweiss Bike Travel has provided a most excellent ride. From clean, modern and showroom condition machines - to hotel choices, routing, and other extras – they have come through on a consistent basis.



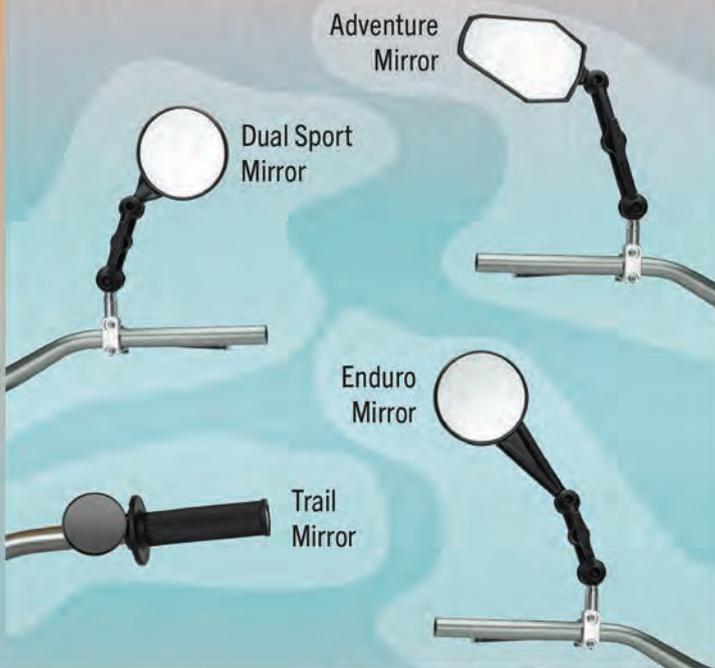
Celebrating its 45 year of motorcycle touring, the company now has destinations and tours in Europe, Africa, North and South America, Asia and the Pacific. Edelweiss offers Adventure Tours, along with their Classic, and Royal Tours. If you want to do self-guided, they can help you there too.

We can not speak highly enough about Edelweiss... they have been doing it for years and doing it right.

Hmmm.... where to next? www.edelweissbike.com

We were heading to the city of Kyoto, once the capital of Japan. But, before the big highway, and the battle with city congestion and traffic, we had about 40 miles of the rest of the Skyline to conquer like two-wheeled samurai, and it made for some spirited riding that afternoon. We'd spend two nights here in Kyoto, and it would be a chance to park the bikes and explore this old Japanese city on foot.

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Free Day in Kyoto

Long considered the cultural center of Japan, Kyoto was once the capital before it was moved to Tokyo in 1869. During World War II the city was generally spared from Allied bombing and was taken off the list of targets for the atomic bomb by the Secretary of War Henry Stimson. He argued for Kyoto's removal from the target list due to its historical and cultural significance as the ancient capital of Japan. Stimson's efforts, despite some opposition within the military, ultimately led to President Truman agreeing to spare the city.

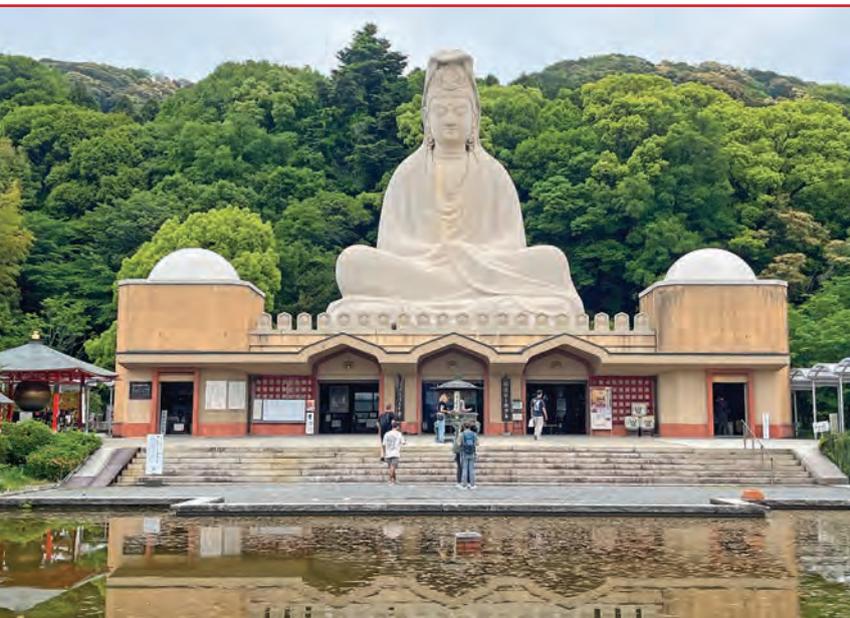
Thus spared, this city has retained and cherishes its ancient buildings and temples. Though a modern city, Kyoto's past still can be seen and felt.



We left the Ducati parked for the day and cabbied it to the Kodai-Ji temple in the historic Gion District, a magnificent complex of structures, built by noblewoman Kita-no-Mandokoro in memory of her late husband, Toyotomi Hideyoshi – the Shogun and Unifier of Japan. The buildings, and the grounds, especially the bamboo forest, were sublime, and a treasure to walk through, and to stop to have tea.

This city was spared from the horror that Hiroshima and Nagasaki endured, yet the people of Kyoto have a place, that I think might be as sacred as the temples that surround the city.

Ryozen-Kwan-On. The giant Buddha.



This huge white temple stands as a striking testament to peace and remembrance. Established in 1955, it serves as a solemn memorial to those who lost their lives during the Pacific War. With its towering 24-meter concrete statue of Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy, overlooking the grounds, Ryozen Kannon offers visitors a profound space for reflection and contemplation. We walked the Buddha, lit incense, and offered prayers, but then we found something unexpected – almost chilling.



To the right was a smaller temple – a place of prayer for the World's Unknown Soldiers, and all who have died for their country.

We all want peace.

A prayer and wish was easy, then my eye caught a side room, off the small temple.

Along one wall were

ten filing cabinets atop each other. On the top of the cabinets were signs, in black and white... "Individual Names of Allied Personal who Perished in a territory under Japanese Jurisdiction during World War II" USA, Australia, England, France, Canada, and others...

Across from the cabinets were shelves holding soil or sand from military cemeteries from all over the world. My hand went to touch the glass urn that held soil from Arlington, and we knelt and offered a second prayer.

It was nearing lunch so we took another cab to the Nishiki Market, called Kyoto's Kitchen. Narrow and fully five blocks long, this market is packed with seafood and meat markets, offering some things we have never seen before. There are restaurants along Nishiki, and the Kobe beef, with noodles and egg, along with the fresh tuna and homemade soda were enjoyed in a crowded side restaurant that offered a true local feel to the meal.

After lunch we walked the larger stores, picking out a Kimono for Shira, and then dropped in on a very weird Japanese thing called Mi Pig Café. Ever sit down with a beverage and some pigs... we bet you have, but maybe not these cute micro piglets, who really just wanted a lap to crawl into and snuggle for a short nap. It was different – that is for sure.



Kyoto to Himeji

So far, more or less, we had little moisture. Japan made up for that this morning with a strong steady rain soaking us as we navigated the Saturday morning traffic out of Kyoto and then made our way west towards Himeji. If the sun was shining, we might have attacked some more Cato roads, but the steady rain kept us on larger two-lane roads, that tunneled through the mountains, rather than twist themselves over it. Japan does love its tunnels and has more per mile than anywhere else on the planet, and we'd ride through hundreds on this trip.

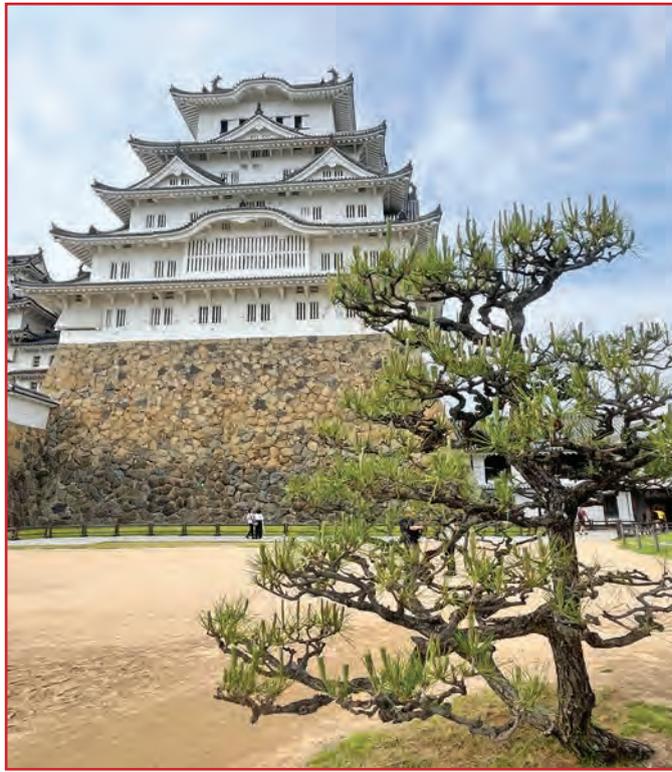
We arrived in Himeji by late lunch and fought traffic that was even worse than Kyoto's. Japan is a mix of old and new, and the new has traffic. We dealt with it.

Secret of Japan:

"We'll also need a company of first-rate men. Do you have any Commandos here?" - James Bond
 "I have much, much better. Ninjas. Top-secret Bond-san. This is my Ninja Training School"
 - Tiger Tanak

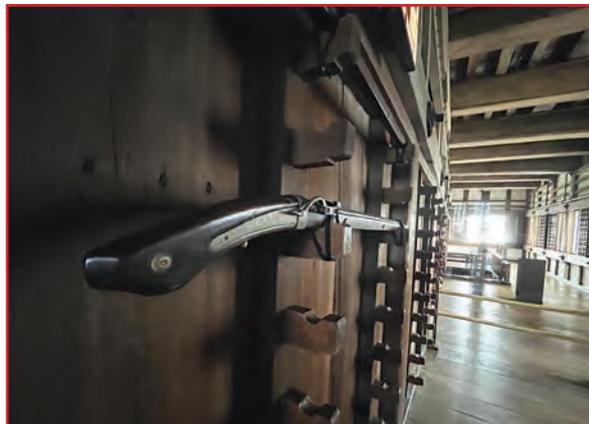
This is a classic Bond scene from 'You Only Live Twice'; but unlike so many elaborate and created Bond sets, this location, Himeji Castle, was as real as it gets.

We parked at our hotel and then Shira and I began to walk over to the famed Castle – the only true and remaining wooden castle in Japan. It started as a fortified hilltop, in the 1300s, and over decades and rulers expanded, and grew more and more grand. Now it is a UNESCO Heritage Site and can be seen for miles.



Himeji to Eiheiji

Getting out of Himeji, on a Sunday morning, was far easier than getting in the previous day; and being another Sunday in Japan, the backroads were sprinkled with riders. Not the Bōsōzoku of Japan's past; just riders like us getting out on a beautiful day. For us, the road would take us to the west, and all the way to the Sea of Japan, then north along Mikatagoko and Rainbow Lines; stunning limited access highways that were a blast to ride and gave an elevated and wondrous view of the western coast. Mikatago means "The Five Lakes of Mikata," and these lakes are a mix of sea and freshwater that give these mountain waters a most interesting hue. The Rainbow



On our way to the castle, we stopped for Thai food in a small alleyway restaurant, for crab & curry, and some cold Leo lager and we watched an ongoing parade of local children and dancing groups that took over the historic section of Himeji. It was the Himeji Oshiro Matsuri... the Himeji Castle Festival. Held over three days, this historic celebration blends Edo-period reenactments, traditional performing arts and lively community spirit. First held in 1948 as a symbol of postwar recovery, the festival celebrates the cultural legacy of Himeji Castle.

The rainy morning had given way to a sunny Saturday afternoon, and the town was immersed in the local culture. People were cheering, children laughing... all was very good in Himeji.

The castle was outstanding, and we walked every step of the five-story castle, marveling at the construction, and details that went into this building. We stopped and sat on the lawn... imagining Tiger Tanaka's Ninja School training on the wide lawn.

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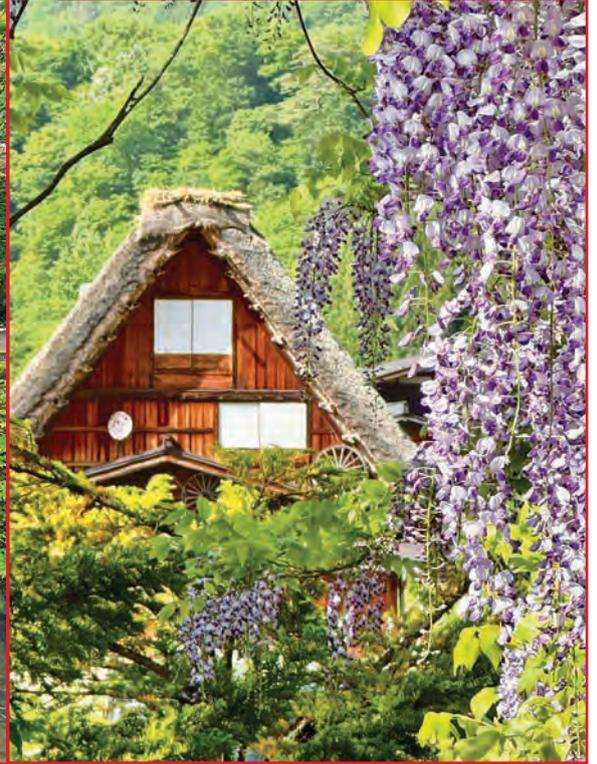
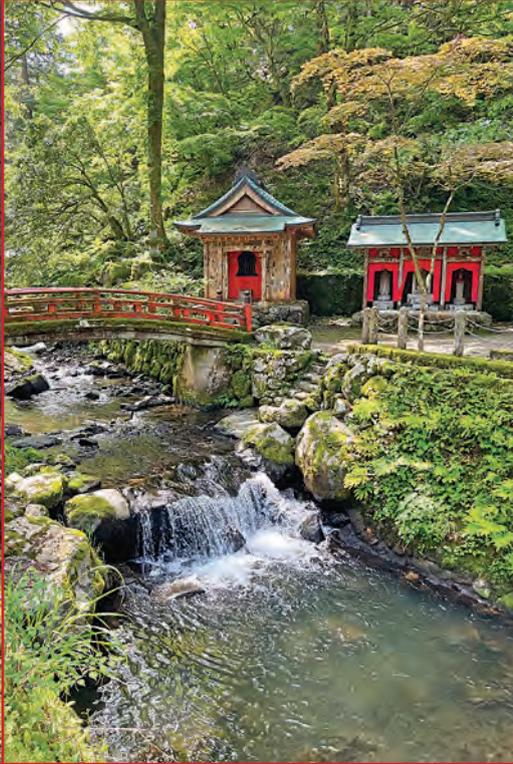
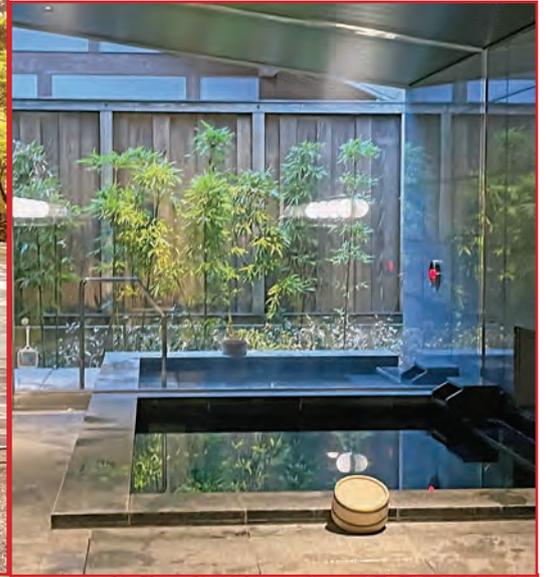
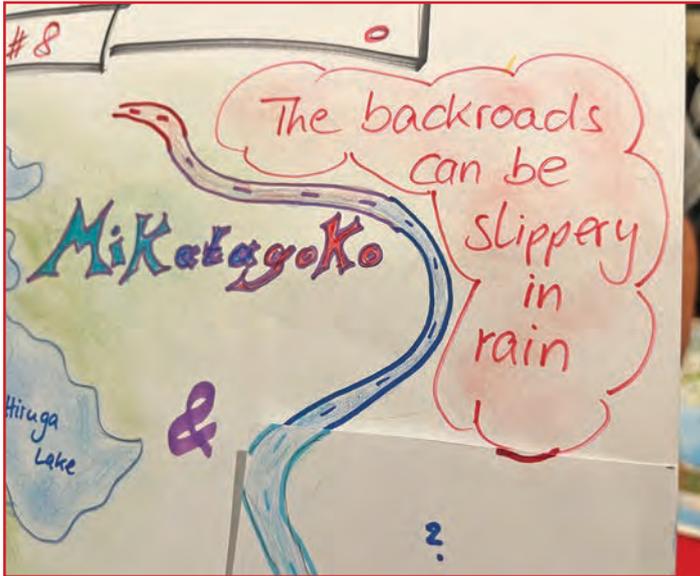
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Line Summit Park, atop Mount Bojo, was a great stop, even if the pesky clouds kept us from ascending higher on the chair lift.

Our afternoon ride brought us back into the mountains and to the town of Eihei-ji, home of the Temple of Eternal Peace, created in 1244 by Zen Master Dōgen. Eihei-ji is not just a tourist spot. Since 1244 and up to this very day, its halls have been filled with the sincere atmosphere of Zen practitioners unceasingly carrying out the Buddha's teachings as they were transmitted by Zen Master Dōgen. Our hotel, Hakujukan, was not far from the temple and was a most remarkable inn, with a true Zen-like feel, a marvelous multi-course meal (vegetarian, of course), and a well-kept Onsen. That night the running waters, and quiet calls of the birds and creatures, made for a most refreshing sleep.

Eihei-ji to Shirakawa-Go

Who knew our prettier publisher was part Ninja Turtle, and that she'd have an entire ancient Japanese Mountain Village named for her?

But before we got there, we had an early morning walk to the Eihei-ji Temple Complex. Peaceful and visually stunning in that soft Japanese way, it truly was a Temple of Peace. Some of our group rose pre-dawn to accompany the practitioners to the Temple for their morning prayers and perhaps enhance and expand their feeling of Zen.

The road that day continued north, and through another dozen or so tunnels, some short, others kilometers long. This northwestern part of Honshu was so pretty, and very different, with some of the peaks still wearing a

shroud of snow, even in mid-May. We rode along more forest Cato roads, mimicking the shorelines of the many lakes, and lightly around the mountains with a sweepy and easy manner of ride.

Shirakawa-Go is an ancient town that lies along a valley in the Shogawa River Valley – with its mighty flow and deep green waters running from the melting snowpack high above. The town is filled with traditional gassho-zukuri farmhouses, constructed like “Hands in Prayer,” with deep, very thick, and strongly pitched thatched roofs. It snows heavily in this part of Japan and there are signs throughout the village to beware of falling snow tumbling off the roofs. These roofs cover enormous multi-level attics, that were used for centuries in the cultivating of silkworms.

Shira loves her town, bought a shirt and a sticker for a keepsake, and soon we were back on the Ducati and the backroads of northwest Honshu, arriving at our hotel just in time for dinner.

Shirakawa-Go to Hirayu

We had a rather short ride this day, but it was big mountain-wise, with the peaks of Hida, the northern Japanese Alps, seemingly getting tighter and more and more snow-covered at higher elevations, well over 9,000 feet tall. Only Fuji-san is taller. The two-lane roads slithered like a long and angered Japanese dragon, along hard-flowing rivers, through many more tunnels, and across steel bridges.

Dragons did actually live in this part of Japan, as the Fukui region has unearthed more dinosaur remains than any other part of Japan – making it



the Japanese Dino epicenter. Along the road, there are dozens of dinosaurs, and it seems every business wants one of their own, and the local dinosaur museum is one of the best on the planet.

We stopped to visit Gujo-Hachiman, that had become famed for a rather odd profession. Throughout Japan you will see enticing and very real-looking plastic food replicas, and they look good enough to eat. This skill started as a joke between a husband and wife, but it has now become legendary in Nippon.

We spent some time at one of the shops, and these replica food items – sushi, ice cream, crab - were stunning. They had a small multi-room museum full of Japonicana (their version of Americana), with a look at modern culture, say from the post-war on. They had Astro Boy, and hundreds of pieces of memorabilia... including a Mach 5.

It was all very cool.

Our preplanned route got snafu'd, and we took a Plan B, which would eventually bring us up the mountains, on very tight pavement (made a bit tighter in my mind by the riding on the left) and towards the Chubusangu National Park and Miyamaouan, a very nice hotel done in Japanese-style with an Onsen fed by Mount Yake – an active volcano.

This would be our stop for two night, and a special one, as Shira and I were married on this date 35 years back...

Kekkon kinenbi omedetō.



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Free Day in Chubusangaku National Park

Some took off for a full day's ride, and I rode out solo, with Holger and Stuart, one of the Aussies, for a spirited ride around the mountains and valleys, bagging a few passes, and a tank full of fuel on Cato roads, which seemed even more unpredictable this day, with Macaque monkeys dodging through the bikes, or minivans full of Chinese tourists appearing in the middle of the turn, like Cato popping out of a refrigerator on Clouseau.

The last thing I wanted was to hear...

"Why, that was a pristine Ducati... Not anymore."

I got back in time for a late lunch with Shira (who had ditched me for Clive and Dirk), and a laid back rest of the afternoon with a book and a massage.



ers that were sprinkled through these mountains. We headed north and then into a wide valley, and the fairly rural Azumino City, near Matsumoto, that is home to Daio, one of Japan's largest wasabi farms. If you have ever eaten sushi, then you are aware of wasabi, the potent and sometimes dan-



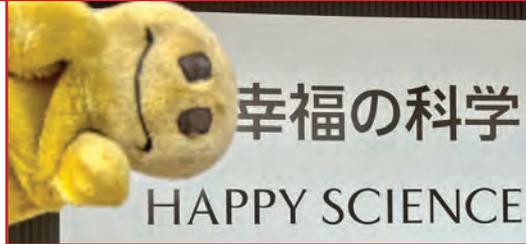
gerous green paste that can give Japanese food a powerful kick. Within the farm stands the Daio Shrine, which enshrines the spirit of an ancient local hero, Hachimen Daio, after which the farm has been named and who is considered the farm's protector. Nearby the shrine is also a small cave related to the local hero's legend. They had wasabi ice cream. How could Shira resist?



Secret of Japan:

Toilets - 'Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.'

The only other time we have mentioned toilets was when it was bad, very bad. But, in Japan, it is very, very good! Almost all, even at fuel stations, have bidet and are impeccably spotless. Do your business, and walk away refreshed.



Hirayu to Kuasatu

We had to reverse our way out of the mountains this day, and fought a bit of touristy bus traffic that reminded me of Italy, with two big buses taking up room for just one. We were patient and eventually got into the sweep-



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This day would also be a special one for Shira's pal Pepe, as we rode up the mountain, and through a very dense road, packed tight with the surrounding forest, half of which seemingly was on the bombed-out pavement. It was magical.

Atop the mountain, we parked and walked up to the hot springs that are home to Japan's famed Snow Monkeys at Jigokudani Park.

You could see why Pepe was pumped.

The Japanese macaque, also known as the snow monkey, is a primate species that is native only to Japan. Colloquially, they are referred to as "snow monkeys" because some live in areas where snow covers the ground for months each year - no other non-human primate lives farther north, nor in a colder climate.

The setting was stupendous and the macaques were everywhere, and basically in control of the hot springs that were simply bubbling from the ground, and nearly 150 degrees and more.

Pepe and Happy got a few images with them (Careful not to get too close - we didn't need another Marabou

stork incident), and it was truly extraordinary to see how these monkeys interacted, especially the mothers with tiny balls of fur with faces clinging to them.

They will get very close and seem to have no fear, but you would have to be nuts to be nothing but respectful to these creatures.

Everybody loved the snow monkeys, but we had miles to cover and were going to ride over Mount Norikura, at 8,865 feet, the highest roadway in Japan. The locals called it the Echo Line, I call it fantastic. Truly amazing, and breathtaking, as we rode higher and higher, tree lines fading to be replaced by snow that was still many feet deep, even in late May. It was a spirited ride, and we stopped at the summit for a photo op, and then headed down, in that same sporty fashion.

This road was another dragon, and the far side of Norikura smelled like it too, as this is an active volcano, with the air of



sulfur wafting through the helmets, the waterfalls were throwing steam, yet snow was still dominating the top that was shrouded in a deep fog that ran along the cliffs and through the bikes. Then we rode the far side which had exploded years back, and now seemed like the road through Hades. It was unexpected and almost supernatural.

It was one of those riding days you were glad to get in, yet sad that it had ended, as we arrived at a very neat, modern and motorcycle-friendly hotel by evening. It was surely the best day's ride, of a trip full of great days of riding.

The only thing that added a cream topping and a cherry was karaoke that night. This is as Jap-

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anese as it gets and we nailed Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love*, Aerosmith's *Sweet Emotion*, and Prince's *Let's Go Crazy*.
 The next day we really began to head east and back towards Tokyo, and so the next two days were going to be important... as the end of this wild tour was heading our way, and it is rare that you get such a great crew of riders from around the globe that seem to fit well, enjoy each others company; even after two weeks, and - really important - reveled in the ride.

Secret of Japan:

Bullet Trains: We spotted the famed Japanese Bullet Train a few times during this trip, the last as it flashed by as we rode under the trestle. They are almost as fast as, well, a bullet.

Kusatsu to Nikko

Before leaving the region we took a quick ride around the town of Kusatsu's center, viewing the Yubatake, which emits a constant flow of steaming hot, mineral-rich water that is the source of the town's fame Onsens. This near-boiling water is so hot that it traditionally was stirred by the town's women, with a wooden paddle, to cool it without diluting its mineral content. The method, called yumomi, is a rhythmic performance, accompanied by traditional folk songs.



Today, the center of town has a series of wooden baffles that do the job, but the tradition remains many times each day.

This entire region was sitting on some serious volcanoes, and the tang of brimstone greeted us for miles.



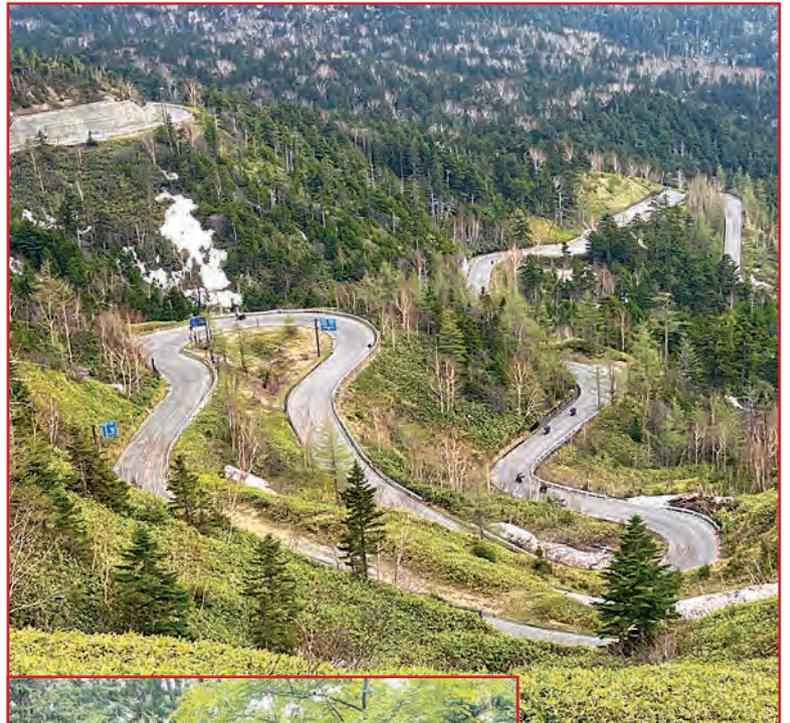
We stopped for coffee at Lake Haranu, sitting at nearly 4,000 feet in the caldera of one of the sleeping giants.

The roads, like the day before, were a constant series of sweepers, some long, but most tight and unforgiving. We'd pick our tight left lane line and stick to it. One giant mountain road led to an-

other lake, and so on. One long day of twists and turns.

By mid-afternoon, we arrived in Nikko, after running down the last mountain that had 48 hairpins leading to the small city. I began to call it Japandelstelvio.

Nikko is a testament to one of the most important figures in Ja-



pan's history. Tokugawa Ieyasu (ruling from 1603 to 1605) was the first Shogun of the Tokugawa Shogunate and is credited with bringing 300 years of peace and stability to the country after a long period of regional conflict. We walked 207 steps to his tomb, and to pay our respects to this mighty Shogun. Another odd find in this temple was the famed Three Wise Monkeys. The proverb "hear no evil, see no



evil, speak no evil" originated in Japan during the 17th century. It's a Japanese proverb that became popularized as a pictorial Shinto maxim. The Three Wise Monkeys are part of a carving at the Tōshō-gū Shrine here in Nikko. We had seen many temples and shrines in Japan so far, but this was very, very special, and a great way to remember Japan.

Secret of Japan:

Honda was Inspired by the Temples: The Dream C70 was the first motorcycle to fully embody the appeal of Honda's creativity in everything from the engine to the styling. The unique style, called the "Buddhist temple" style, came into being under Soichiro Honda's personal direction after he was inspired by the temples of Kyoto.



Nikko to Tokyo

We had been to so many temples, but today there was one more...

The Temple of Speed at Motegi. The Mobility Resort Motegi was conceived by Honda as a facility to promote motorsports in Japan and to serve as a testing ground for their vehicles. Its original name "Twin Ring" comes from its unique design, featuring two separate tracks: a 1.549-mile oval track and a 2.983-mile road course. This dual configuration made it one of the few circuits in the world to have both an oval and a road course.

It became the home of the Indy Japan 300, an event in the Indy-Car Series that brought American-style open-wheel racing to Japan. The road course also hosted a variety of international and domestic events, including MotoGP, the premier class of motorcycle racing since 1999.

That day there were some local sport cars racing, and the feel and vibe was far more Speed Racer than Days of Thunder; especially with the VERY exuberant young female announcer.



Tagging another MotoGP Track was great, but we had really come to see the Honda Collection Hall that can be found here.

This wonderfully kept building houses some of the most important machines from Honda's illustrious and successful history.

From Soichiro Honda's earliest engine-powered bicycles, to their F1 and MotoGP machines, Honda's automotive dynasty to the Honda jet and ASIMO, Honda's famous robot – the Honda Collection Hall is a 'bucket list' stop for all who have watched and been enthralled by the brand for the last half a century. It was truly amazing.

Not all that surprisingly, Edelweiss brought us from Motegi to the main road into Tokyo on one last Cato road (really?), but then we had a couple hours heading towards one of the busiest metropolitan areas on the planet.



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22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

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As Tokyo came into view I was truly stunned by its immensity. Tokyo is friggin huge, and it took a bit of doing to head back to Odaiba and the hotel we had started from two weeks earlier. That evening Tokyo had a giant firework show, probably given in our honor, and we had a last farewell Japanese dinner. The next day would see flights spreading out across the globe bringing our groups back to their homes – certainly with stories to tell and memories to cherish.

Bodhisattva,
would you take me by the hand?
Can you show me the shine of your Japan
Can you show me, Bodhisattva?
~ Steely Dan

I had some reservations before leaving on this long trip halfway around the planet, but would not trade our Japanese journey and memories for the other half of the world. Edelweiss Bike Travel ran a really superb tour, especially considering the logistics, the riders from around the planet, and a culture so far different than the West.

We found Japan to be an amazing country, with a look, feel, and attitude so familiar, yet so different than here in the United States. I dare say we could borrow some of their ways, and perhaps become a more polite and caring society. I really want their toilets.

The riding was awesome, the roads fantastic (even the Cato Roads), and the Japanese people were so gracious to us.

Like the Vapors – I feel I'm turning Japanese, I really think so. *Kanpai*



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