

## See Japan Up Close – On Two Wheels!

A government / private sector initiative aims to boost cycling tourism

It is quite easy these days for visitors to Japan to move around between the major cities and tourist attractions. The super-efficient railway network is very accessible, with English signage and announcements on most trains and at many stations.

But until recently, relatively few overseas tourists came here to enjoy their favorite outdoor sport or activity. Winter sports have been a notable exception, with some mountain resorts in Japan now regularly welcoming thousands of skiers and snowboarders from other countries every year.

The success of attracting winter sports enthusiasts to Japan was the result of collaboration between the government and the private sector. So it's no surprise that the country is taking a similar approach to revitalizing other rural areas, many of which have seen their populations decline, as increasing numbers of younger people move to cities in search of employment.

Many of these areas boast breathtaking scenery – mountain ranges, valleys, lakes and coastlines; ideal terrain for visitors who are prepared to get off the beaten track... or on their bikes. Which is why the government is now focusing on promoting and supporting cycling as a tourist activity in Japan.



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Cycling tourism is a fantastic way to explore the country, with tours ranging from quick jaunts around popular hotspots to long-distance, multi-day journeys. Holidays on two wheels offer visitors the chance to explore their destinations more thoroughly and take in more of the scenery than they ever could on a coach trip.

While the scenery provides an attractive backdrop, infrastructure is needed to make the overall cycling experience an enjoyable one. The best scenic routes will be of no use if they come to an unexpected end or there is nowhere for riders to rest or stay overnight. Routes need to be of a certain standard and well signposted, they should ideally include dedicated cycling lanes or paths, and easily accessible accommodation options need to be provided along the way.

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure & Transport is working with local authorities and private companies to help ensure this infrastructure is in place in towns and cities across Japan, encouraging the provision of dedicated cycling lanes and off-street parking facilities for bikes, particularly near train stations.

The government also plans to use the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of the Olympic Games taking place this summer to promote the attractions of cycling in Japan to a vast overseas audience. Unlike in previous summer Olympics, where cycling road events were held in and around the host city, the Tokyo 2020 route will trace a 150-kilometer path to the foothills of Mount Fuji, approximately a two-hour drive from the capital city.

Along the way, the cyclists will race against some picturesque backdrops, including the stunning vistas of Lake Yamanaka, the largest of the five lakes surrounding Mount Fuji, giving viewers in other countries a preview of what they will experience if they come to Japan on a cycling holiday.

A further initiative is the National Cycle Route scheme, whereby the government is designating safe and attractive routes that meet certain standards, offer key facilities, and showcase the best of Japan. The scheme aims to help revitalize regional areas across the country by promoting cycling routes that pass through them, thereby encouraging more tourists to visit.

The routes certified by the scheme should include the following facilities:

- 'Gateways' that allow cyclists to transfer from public transport to cycling routes
- Bike rental and repair services
- Rest facilities at regular intervals
- Alternative transport options along the route that allow cyclists to transit with their bicycles
- Overnight accommodation facilities
- Facilities and programs that help cyclists discover and enjoy the attractions of the region
- Facilities offering support in an emergency



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To date, three routes have been certified under the National Cycle Route scheme, and three more are being added shortly. The existing three are:

### **1. The Shimanami Kaido Route**

This 70km route traverses some of the smaller islands dotted across the Inland Sea of Japan between the main islands of Honshu and Shikoku. Much of the route contains dedicated cycling paths, some of them incorporated into the impressive bridges linking the islands.

The Inland Sea was an important strategic waterway in Japan's feudal past, fought over by competing shogunates and their armies. A number of historical monuments and heritage sites acknowledge its turbulent past.

A number of ferry services are available, allowing cyclists wanting a more leisurely experience to break their journey and explore some of the region's highlights. Many of them are equipped with special berths for bicycles. On a clear day, the views are spectacular.

The stretch of the Shimanami Kaido along the coast between Setoda and the impressive 1.5km Tatara Bridge is one of the prettiest along the route.

Featuring a dedicated bike path, some of it under palm trees, it is also one of the easiest sections to ride and therefore perfect for less experienced riders or families.

### **2. Biwaichi**

Biwaichi is a 200km cycling course that circumnavigates Lake Biwa, Japan's largest lake, located in the center of Honshu close to Kyoto. It is particularly convenient for those who may be flying into or out of Kansai International Airport.

The areas around the lake are full of sites of historical and cultural significance. These include the monasteries that flourished at the foot of Mount Hiei and the ruins of historical Azuchi Castle, built by Oda Nobunaga, a Japanese *daimyo* lord and head of the powerful Oda clan, which launched a war against other clans to unify Japan in the 1560s.

Lake Biwa has a road or bicycle/pedestrian path along most of the shoreline. The terrain is mostly flat except for the mountainous northern part. More experienced cyclists can cover this distance in a day, but it is recommended to ride Biwaichi over two or three days, which will allow riders to enjoy sightseeing and delicious local food along the way.

A railway line runs along the eastern side of the lake and cyclists are allowed to take their bikes on the train. There is additionally a bicycle rental facility at Maibara station, at the end of the line.

Cyclists can download a Biwaichi cycling navigation app to their smartphones; this allows them to plan and navigate their route and provides information about places of interest around the lake and surrounding areas.

### **3. Tsukuba-Kasumigaura Ring-Ring Road**

Located in the southern part of Ibaraki prefecture, which stretches from the east side of Tokyo to the Pacific Ocean, Tsukuba-Kasumigaura Ring-Ring Road connects a former railway cycling path with a bayside path to form an unbroken 180km cycling course within a national park.

At the northwest edge of the bay, in the city of Tsuchiura, you will find one of Japan's largest facilities dedicated to cycling, offering everything a road warrior might need, from a change of clothes or bicycle maintenance to a place to rest offering meals and accommodation. Cycling gear and bikes can be reserved online in advance.

Old station buildings along the course have been turned into rest stops making this the perfect course for beginners. An alternative route includes the 25 km Mount Tsukuba hill climb, meaning this course truly offers something for everyone!

The region features a diverse range of natural landscapes, from the rivers and wetlands of the Lake Kasumigaura area to Mount Tsukuba and the surrounding hills, as well as historical and cultural sites such as Kashima Shrine.

Easily accessible from Tokyo, the Tsukuba-Kasumigaura Ring-Ring Road is ideal for those visiting Japan on a tight schedule, while offering sufficient attractions to inspire a two- or three-day ride.

### **The Path Ahead**

Cycling is already a popular pastime in Japan and a relatively safe one. Car drivers are usually quite cautious when encountering cyclists and typically give them a wide berth when overtaking. It's not unusual for local people to call out a greeting to those on two wheels as they pass through their villages. Local *ryokans* and guest houses are particularly welcoming.

In addition, there are few better ways to work up an appetite than a bike ride, with the hot bath at the end of the ride a soothing conclusion to the day's pedaling. Over the evening meal riders can view photos of the scenery they passed during the day and make plans for the following day's ride. Accommodation hosts will gladly share their local knowledge and provide tips on places to visit.

In partnership with local authorities and the private sector, the government will continue with its efforts to promote cycling as a safe and enjoyable leisure pursuit, ensuring that routes and facilities across Japan are accessible and welcoming to cyclists.

It's time for overseas visitors to get on their bikes and see Japan up close!

*The photos and images featuring in this article are available for download at the Japan Online Media Center website at <https://business.jnto.go.jp/resource/>*