

Japan is a verdant wonderland of natural beauty, where the ancient is revered as the modern is embraced.

HONSHU BY HONDA

Japan is a bucket-list adventure, from packed-sand beaches to winding mountain roads.

> By **Christopher Baker**



IT'S RACE DAY

at Twin Ring Motegi, home to Japan's MotoGP. The parking lot is a visual feast of eclectic retro iron, from a BMW R1100S Boxer Cup Replica in Randy Mamola livery, to a Ducati 1199 Panigale, adorned Japanese-style with a doe-eyed anime character.

A Kawasaki KZ1300 pulls up. The middle-aged rider is wearing a flamboyant custom-made beige and blood-red Kadoya leather suit, with matching boots. His head is shaved bare down one side and he sports an unkempt Billy-goat beard. Beaming benignly, he

nod-bows repeatedly like a bobblehead doll, and could have stepped straight out of a Kurosawa movie.

You'd expect the country that makes more motorcycles than any other to have a huge bike culture. But like everything about this land of hand-free toilets and raked gravel gardens, its passion for tobai (motorcycles) is iconoclastic.

That's the appeal of riding Japan. It's endlessly fascinating and enigmatically, irresistibly foreign. Culture shock hits first-time visitors like a sumo wrestler body-slammng with full force.

Exiting Tokyo's Narita airport, a

whisper-quiet bus pulls up. A uniformed representative bows and ushers me aboard. Another young rep rushes up, bows and grabs my bags. The white-gloved chauffeur performs a mokurei (nod-bow). Then a uniformed girl with huge anime-style eyes (courtesy of contact lenses) holds up a sign reminding us to wear our seat belts and avoid noise-leakage from headphones, before leaving with a bow.

It is a study in Japan's orderly, respectful efficiency and bewilderingly complex coexistence of traditional and modern.

A 16-day tour included 14 other

riders (plus eight passengers) representing nine countries. Half selected a BMW R 1200 GS, and various Japanese bikes, two Ducatis and a Harley-Davidson Ultra Glide made up the mix.

I opted for a 2017 CRF1000L Africa Twin. Our tour leader, 50-year-old Angela de Haan, from Germany, divided us into two groups, departing 15 minutes apart. The second group was led by 56-year-old guide Ted Goslinga, an amiable and laid-back Dutch special forces veteran.

Our 1,950-mile route circled Hons-hu, via a lattice of two-lane toll roads, expressways and thrill-inducing tendril-thin mountain roads, called tōge. All are superbly maintained. The total absence of potholes and roadside garbage is striking, thanks to kaizen, the Japanese trait of seeking perfection. It is seen in everything from sushi preparation to highway maintenance.



TWO HOURS OUT of Tokyo's tumult we met the Pacific shore at Kamakura. It was lined with palms, modernist homes and a pink-colored beach. Japanese vacationers sunning on deck chairs, while surfers hang 10 offshore. Japan looked so Californian! This déjà-vu impression was as quickly dispelled by swarms of bosozoku, an in-your-face biker sub-

Majestic Mount Fuji was a prominent landmark for three days, its towering peak always somewhere in the distance.



The Yasaka-jinja in Kyoto is one of 400 ancient Shinto shrines and 1,600 Buddhist temples in the sacred city.





The roads along Mt. Nikko-Shirane in the Japanese Alps are fraught with serious switchbacks, carving through lush forests, kept green by frequent rain.

culture on weirdly bastardized chopper-meets-café-racer concoctions.

Soon enough, we were climbing the Mazda Turnpike, a thrilling, high-speed, coil-into-straightaway combo that delivered us to the mountaintop Dai-kanzan observatory, for a sensational lunchtime vista of snow-capped Mount Fuji. The iconic volcano would be our compass for three days.

Japanese sportbike riders flashed by, scraping knees through the bends, as we rode down the pay-to-play Izu Skyline. This super-smooth snaking mountain-crest route is also a proving ground for Toyo tires.

Far from the uptight, reserved society imagined, Japanese people are hospitable, friendly and far from prudish. Men laugh, women giggle. Dining takes some adjusting. Most nights included kaiseki, a healthy haute-cuisine Japanese banquet, otherwise known as death by a thousand dishes. Sushi and sashimi are part of the potlatch, ranging from udon (to be audibly slurped) to a gamut of

chewy and wriggly things, including live abalones squirming distressingly in their shells and cooked at our table.

The next day's route took us over the Izu Peninsula. Up and around Mount Fuji, and through the steep-faced mountains of Shizuoka, corduroyed with rows of dark green tea bushes.

Heaps lighter than a BMW 1200 GSA, the Africa Twin proves nimble as a darting gazelle as we zipped through relentless twisties and whiplash-sharp hairpins on one-lane backroads that clutched steep slopes and were strewn with pine needles and gravel.

DAY FIVE WAS a study in Japanese faith. The route over the peaks of the Kii Peninsula is scattered with Shinto shrines and scenic overlooks with roadside shimenawe idols made of rice straw and hemp rope, intended to guard against evil spirits. At Hong, we passed Japan's tallest torii (iconic Shinto shrine gate), towering 40 meters over chartreuse

rice paddies framed by elaborate wooden machiya houses, with dark-gray wave-form tile roofs.

At the mountaintop pilgrimage site of Koya-san, we explored Japan's largest Shingon Buddhist temple complex, with its contemplative and cryptic Zen gardens, peaked stones stupas and monks gliding silently by.

After the discombobulating expressways that lead to Kyoto, we ended the day in Japan's former imperial capital and most sacred city. Boasting 1,600 ancient Buddhist temples, 16 of them are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Next was a rest day, up with the dawn, for a kaleidoscopic immersion in quintessential Japanese scenes. Geishas alighting from rickshaws. Robed monks haloed in wafts of incense. Women in floral kimonos shaded by rice-paper umbrellas strolled Fushimi Inari Taisha's snaking arcades of vermilion torii.

Back on the bikes, we rode to Himeji, the most dramatic castle in all Japan.

Then along the shores of the Sea of Japan, the hard-packed sands of Chirihama Beach and finally, into the Japanese Alps. We'd been blessed with great weather, but a veil of rain and cold fog thickened around us while clawing our way along Japan's highest road over Mount Nikko-Shirane, an active strato-volcano. Fumaroles tainted the shroud with whiffs of sulfur.

The swirling clouds briefly parted, opening views of the road augering sharply down to Jigokudani, where we hiked a narrow valley in the rain to visit the famous snow monkeys. Japanese macaques are the most northerly of nonhuman primates, steeping in onsen hot springs in the cedar forest.

Next we headed over Mount Akagi volcano, carpeted with flame-red aza-

The tightly compacted sands of Chirihama Nagisa Driveway are in Ishikawa Prefecture.

leas brightening the slopes like red-hot lava. "The rules are simple," Angela informed us. "No racing, no overtaking, and no nose-to-tail riding!"

We adhered to the policy, riding in respectful formation as we climbed Mount Akagi. An endless ascent of constant sweepers and twisties.

Angela's pace was brisk, and the two groups had separated into faster and more sedate riders. Though riding with the Honda's power delivery on "full aggressive," the 998cc parallel-twin was limited by its mulish 88 ponies. Angela eased away as I sensed a Beemer a wheel-length behind, unnerving me as we raced through the bends.

As we hit a straight, he roared past, blaring his horn. An assertive Swiss yang, counterpoint to the yin of Japanese respectful politeness, modesty and self-control. Not kosher, not Zen, not

cool! Fortunately, we spent the next two nights in Nikko, a pocket-size mountain town and calming center of spirituality.

While returning the Honda, I saw a young couple walk by. His hair down over the shoulders and dress shirt worn stylishly outside his pants. She looked exquisite in a celadon-colored kimono and black geta sandals. This perfectly illustrates Japan's endearing and harmonious yin and yang duality: the ancient and the modern, hand in hand.

Observing and appreciating such complexity, paradox and cultural nuance made the trip to Japan quite rewarding.

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