



Fukuoka cycling

Our resident Japanophile explores a less visited part of Japan which is fantastic for cycling.

WORDS: TINA MCCARTHY

Fukuoka Prefecture lies in Kyushu, the furthest west of Japan's four main islands. Vastly different from the islands of the Shimanami, where I might usually be found cycling, Fukuoka Prefecture offers a little bit of everything ...coastal views across the Japan Sea, endless emerald rice fields, hills through hidden forests of sugi and bamboo, the 'inaka' (deep country) experience, and tea. Yes, there is more tea than you can drink in a day!

With inbound tourism growing rapidly in Japan, I find it endlessly frustrating to read the frequent articles about 'over-touristed' Japan; Kyoto streets are a shambles, with locals becoming increasingly frustrated at not even



being able to catch a bus to work. Or worse still, hearing about the limited experiences of tourists only touching on the 'golden tourist route' of Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto (and yes, I know that is all that is manageable at times). But there is so much more to Japan!

According to the Japan National Tourism Organisation, there were approximately 33 million visitors to Japan in 2024, contributing US\$292 billion to Japan's economy. Of that, two-thirds stick to the golden tourist route. That's a huge chunk of one gigantic pie headed to the same three locations, so it is any wonder that the more regional prefectures are wrangling for their share of the action. Even a small slice

of that lucrative pie can do wonders to increase economic outcomes for smaller prefectures. And thus, inbound cycle tourism is becoming an obvious choice in the age where sustainable tourism is front and centre for so many travellers.

Fukuoka is heading in the right direction and making serious moves to grab its slice of that inbound cycle tourism pie. There is so much to offer in Fukuoka as far as cycling adventures go. The local prefectural government is working hard to create a 'cycling-friendly' culture within local tourism establishments and encouraging cycle-friendly cafes, cycling hotels, bike repair stations, bike rental and cycling maps showing the most

The Tori gate on the hill climb to Koura Taisha shrine, Photo credit: William Liew.

popular courses, albeit mainly in Japanese as well as building specific transport capabilities that are bike friendly, such as buses and trains that allow bikes on-board.

Far from the 'golden tourist route', Fukuoka is Japan's fifth largest city, with all the drawcards of a big, flashy Japanese city. Neon lights, a seemingly all-hours open nightlife, designer shops, and dedicated shopping malls where you can let your credit card go wild. But venture not far beyond the flashing neon. You will be shrouded in the mystery of the samurai deep within forests, find torii standing silently on quiet beaches, be embraced by the quiet stands of giant 700-year-old sugi (cedar) trees and feel the fresh mountain waters of picturesque waterfalls or bathe in fresh spring waters in luxurious onsen towns. Oh, and let's not forget some of the most beautiful and serene temples that, in my opinion, absolutely give Kyoto a run for its money!

Japan has a serious problem for cyclists, though, and Fukuoka is not alone there! There are just too many darn places that are breathtakingly gorgeous, with quiet roads and sublime experiences, that it's almost impossible to choose where to start. Every whoosh around every corner provides a new chance for that gasp of 'wow...what a view', an opportunity to explore roads less travelled and delve deeper into the culture and mystery that is Japan.

Itoshima

As a speaker of Japanese, I've always wondered why on earth Itoshima is called Itoshima – 'Shima' literally meaning 'island'. Despite sitting on the Japan Sea coastline, Itoshima is well and truly attached to the mainland. Even the Japanese I have asked seem perplexed by the same conundrum. The Itoshima area lies west of Fukuoka city, and its long, beautiful climbs followed by verdant, endless rice field valleys provide serene and meditative cycling.

We were treated to views of forests with winding roads and little traffic ... we made our way up the hills and screamed down the descents through shaded roads and hardly a car in sight. The quiet whisper of bamboo forests kept us rolling, but the anticipation of a good waterfall was high on my 'mitai' (want to see) list. Shiraito Falls is small but spectacular, and the climb to the area is worth every puff and pant, especially knowing that a long descent on quiet roads back into town is soon to come. It is truly cycling magic!

Shikanoshima

Situated off the northern end of Fukuoka city and accessed by a fast ferry from Fukuoka Port, Shikanoshima provides views across the Japan Sea. Once reaching the Saitozaki ferry Terminal, the island is accessed via the Umino Nakamichi road, a narrow 'spit' with sandy beaches on either side and less than a kilometre long. It feels as though you are entering a small slice of seaside paradise!

The tarmac on the island's circuit course is exceptional in most places, but despite the smooth roll, the wind can be challenging on the wrong day! Look out for that north-easterly if you head clockwise! A sub-tropical feel, the island is graced with rocky outcrops and small torii gates on the shores welcoming the sea gods.

Venture further inland, and there are quiet roads that are far less 'tarmacked'! We climbed the route to Shiomi Park and felt the dappled light through the trees embrace us, laughing as we climbed. Roughly 3km long and averaging around 7-8%, the peak offers spectacular views in 360° directions. It is a special place, and the silence as we sat there watching the view was made even more moving as we watched the 'tobi' (black kite) take flight on the thermals above.

**"FUKUOKA IS WITHOUT DOUBT
A HIDDEN GEM IN JAPAN'S
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LEFT: Tina with the Yame tea fields in the background.

RIGHT: Entrance gate at Akizuki Castle ruins.

BELOW FAR

LEFT: Cycle path along the Yabe River from Ukiha to Yame. Photo credit: William Liew.

The island can be circumnavigated in about 30km. But a must-visit venue is the very cool Shika Shima Cycling cafe to check out their well-stocked offerings to cyclists: cold drinks, small cakes, plenty of pasta for the bike packing community and loads of other local foods for the journey. Complete with an upstairs lounge and 'relax' area for cyclists, it's a great example of a small business hoping to capitalise on the inbound tourism economy, offering rental bikes and maps of the island. It's a perfect stop for those wanting a shorter ride and on a time budget.

Asakura

Sitting north of the wide Chikugo River and south of Fukuoka city is the Asakura region, famed for its hot springs and onsen. However, head a little further north in the area and you will be immersed in the forests of sugi and long, dark bamboo groves. Heading towards Koishiwara Toho Village you can find a multitude of gorgeous pottery and earthenware manufacturers ... we even found a samples and seconds shop! Of course, Japanese pottery is well known for the 'wabi sabi' pottery (perfection in the imperfection); however, these might be a little harder to find in this area. But rest assured, there is so much on offer it's hard not to walk away with something small ... just remember you have to carry it on the bike!

Heading east towards the Koishiwara dam provides spectacular views across the water and the course provides some magical downhill sweeps but beware of the occasional logging truck. Further along the Asakura route are the

ruins of Akizuki Castle. Once home to the Akizuki feudal clan, the area is steeped in samurai history, but I couldn't help but feel the gods were watching us as we entered the castle ruins and the adjacent shrine. It seemed a fitting location when the thunderclap from above sent a shudder through all of us. Though we laughed at the timing, it did seem just a wee bit spooky ... the gods had spoken.

Yame

Our course towards Yame from Ukiha took us along an extensive bike path through canola fields and fruit orchards, where the combined scents were intoxicating. The path stretches for around 35km of car-free riding. It's a joy to ride the trail, particularly as we could see heavy trucks whooshing past on the adjacent road.

Turning off the main course, we decided to try the climb to Koura Taisha Shinto shrine. The climb is around 5km long and averages 8-9%. Hard work is paid off when you suddenly come across red torii hiding in the forest, hidden paths with ancient stone markers on the roadside, and of course, the unforgettable enveloping of the 'komorebi' experience ... dappled sunlight through trees. It was atmospheric, tranquil and remarkably beautiful as we felt the exhilaration of our climb towards the heavens. We were rewarded with stunning views across the Chikugo Valley area below.

But our main reason for visiting Yame was the tea. If you like Japanese tea, then this is the land of dreams! The tea fields grace the gentle slopes, and it is perfectly fine to ride among the fields as workers tend the crops. The roads are well-

35km

The amount of car-free riding to Yame

33mill

The number
of visitors
to Japan in
2024

travelled by local producers, so they seemed to be in great condition for cycling, but we couldn't help but stop often to capture the gorgeous vistas of the rows of tea and take in a taste of the amazing matcha soft serve and green 'monster cake'!

Famous for Yame-cha, the slightly sweet umami taste is refreshing and not too bitter after a long ride, and the fresh pale green colour just looks like it will soothe a thirst! The locals wanted me to try the famous and award-winning Gyokuro. Consistently rated as one of Japan's most refined teas, the name, meaning droplets of jewels, is synonymous with Yame tea production ... how could you ever go past drinking some droplets of jewels! Not to mention, a few bags of tea 'omiyage' (souvenirs) are easy to stash in the jersey pockets!

Away from the verdant hillside slopes is the old town of Yame, streets lined with traditional old buildings reminiscent of a movie set, and to be honest, one of the prettiest small villages we've seen in Japan. Whitewashed earthen walls with wood screens, intricate traditional woodwork, and interiors – you could almost expect a ninja to jump out any second (yes, I've watched too many old Japanese movies)! The town area isn't vast, but the old tea shops are so incredibly interesting, not just for their architecture but each with their own style of tea.

Fukuoka is without doubt a hidden gem in Japan's cycling playbook. So many options from island views, forest roads, samurai lands, tea fields and small traditional villages. The prefectural government is investing time and resources into making inbound cycle tourism in the area a real asset, and they have much to be excited about. Many paths are yet to be explored, and I'm sure the kami have given us



their thunderous welcome!

Special thanks to the Fukuoka Prefecture Tourism Association for their invitation.

More information about Tina's tours at wheelwomenaustralia.com.

PLACES TO STAY

- Fukuoka city has an extensive choice of large and small hotels to choose from and provides access by bicycle to Shikanoshima and Itoshima areas.
- Kurume is the largest city near both Asakura and Yame and provides large and small hotels and more traditional ryokan and onsen. Harazuru in Ukiha is an excellent onsen area.

BIKES

There are rental locations in the city, and there is plenty of choice for road bikes, flat bars, and e-bikes.

- My pick is the Specialized Vado SL flat bar e-road bike, which is lightweight and nimble. Available from the helpful staff at <https://itoshima-eco.jp/>
- Online guide for bike rental produced by Fukuoka Govt: <https://www.fukuoka-now.com/en/>

RESOURCES

- Visit Fukuoka contains loads of great cycling info as well as maps and routes: <https://www.crossroadfukuoka.jp/en/articles/cycle> **BA**

RIGHT: Shiraito Falls, Itoshima is small but spectacular.

BELOW: Yame traditional tea shop otherwise known as Yamecha Tea Konomi Honke Konomi Garden.

