

Kyushu Island Bicycle Tour

Expedition Report 2024



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Foreword

The destination of this expedition was the southernmost island of Japan, Kyushu. As of 2024, no Imperial Expeditions have taken place in Japan. We intended to explore this region over 20 days as bikepackers, immersing ourselves in Japanese culture, exploring the volcanic, mountainous landscape and increasing awareness of the Imperial Exploration board for female students.

Aim

Our aim was to complete a 500-mile loop of the island in 20 days, starting and finishing in the island's administrative capital, Fukuoka, as well as visit one of Japan's smaller southern islands, Yakushima. We planned to carry all our gear on our bikes and camp along each stage of the route.

It was important to us that our trip had minimal impact on the landscapes and communities we passed through. Thus, we followed practices designed to reduce environmental impact while camping, including those related to setting up camp, cooking and waste disposal.

General objectives:

- Record the unique landscapes, environment and wildlife of Kyushu through photography and writing
- Engage with locals, immerse ourselves in the rich Japanese culture and learn about the local way of life
- Challenge our physical limits safely
- Travel sustainably and leave-no-trace
- Promote bikepacking as a means of travel, especially for young women within Imperial

Expedition Members

The team was comprised of two postgraduate students at Imperial College. Both members had experience in bikepacking and camping.

Eimear Loughlin

Role: Expedition Leader

Age: 24

Course: MSc Ecology, Evolution and Conservation

Email: eimear.loughlin23@imperial.ac.uk



Prior Experience: In the past, my travel interests lay in hiking and long-distance walking. I have completed multiple sections of the Camino de Santiago and Via Francigena. In more recent years, I have taken up bike-touring / packing as a means of exploring vaster areas of land.

Prior to completing my first long distance bike tour I completed a series of winter bike tours in Ireland. Between March and August 2023, I completed a 6000km cross-continental cycle from my home in Dublin to Istanbul. The route passed through 18 countries and crossed various mountainous sections, including Snowdonia and the Alps. My partner and I carried all equipment on our bikes and camped for the vast majority of the trip. Through this trip, I learned how to make bike touring as safe and fun as possible. I learned vital skills required for bike touring such as bike maintenance, route planning, how to navigate difficult terrain, how to locate suitable locations for camping and budgeting. This knowledge and experience will undoubtedly serve as a foundation for overcoming challenges on the expedition and ensuring it runs as smoothly as possible.

Tatiana Dickins

Role: Treasurer

Age: 24

Course: MRes Ecosystems and Environmental Change

Email: t.dickins23@imperial.ac.uk



Prior Experience: I am a confident cyclist and experienced wild camper. In Scotland you are spoilt for wild camping opportunities and during my undergrad at St Andrews I frequently enjoyed carrying out long rides along the East Neuk of Fife, camping along the coastal path.

In February 2023 I organised and completed a solo trip to Mongolia, through which I developed safe planning and decision-making skills, as well as overcoming communication barriers. I was in Mongolia for one month, during which time I stayed with a nomadic family that spoke no English, living in a traditional yurt. I helped to look after their livestock (horses and dairy cows) and went trekking in the mountains. In September 2023, I completed the GR221 trail in the Serra de Tramuntana in Mallorca on foot- a diverse 119km trail through the mountains from Andratx to Pollenca, camping for 8 days.

The Completed Route



Note: Loop of Yakushima island also completed.

Elevation Profile

Start 304 km 608 km 911 km



1,100 m

0 m

DETAILS



0 m

↗ Uphill: 11,120 m

↘ Downhill: 11,120 m

△ Highest Point: 980 m

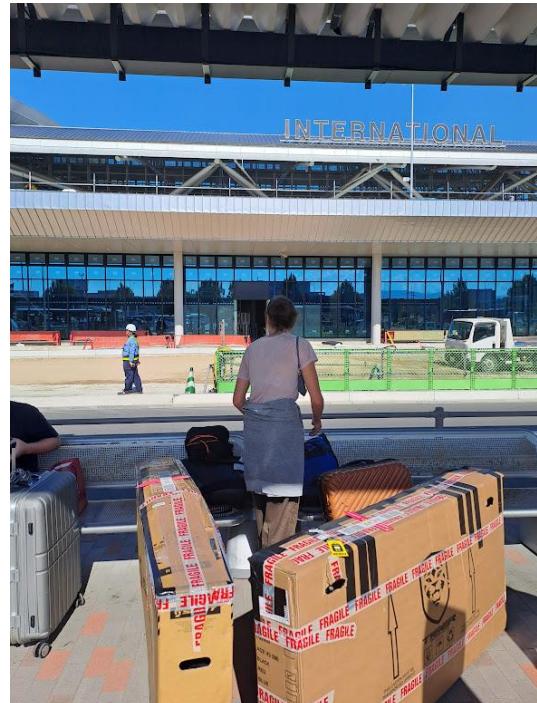
▽ Lowest Point: 0 m

∅ Estimated Average Speed: 15.5 km/h

Diary

Fukuoka

We arrived in Fukuoka on the 26th of September. It was hot and getting our bike boxes and luggage to the hostel was a mission. Some very kind pharmacists took pity on us and helped to carry our bikes all the way.



After lots of sleep we reassembled our bikes and ventured into the city...



False starts...on our third day, having planned to leave the city and cycle around Hakata Bay, we encountered multiple bike headaches which meant we had to stay in the city for another night. It was some comfort that Tatiana's bike was not for the skip having bought it on Gumtree prior to the trip, and that she had in fact put the

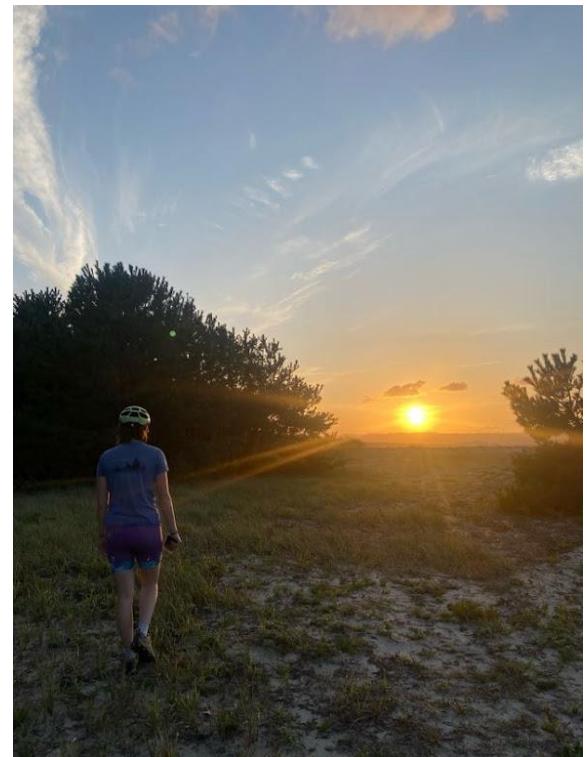
derailer on wrong. We had a very entertaining dinner in a local yatai next to the bike repair shop.



Karatsu Bay

Day 4

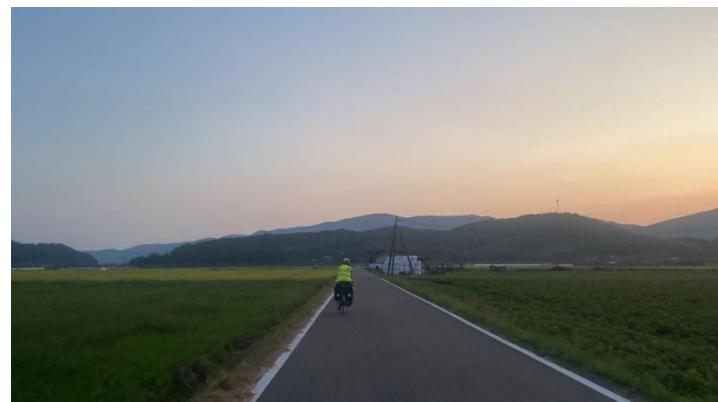
Our first few days of cycling were hot! Following the glittering coastline was surreal and we managed to stop for a swim or two.



Saga and Nagasaki Prefectures

Day 5

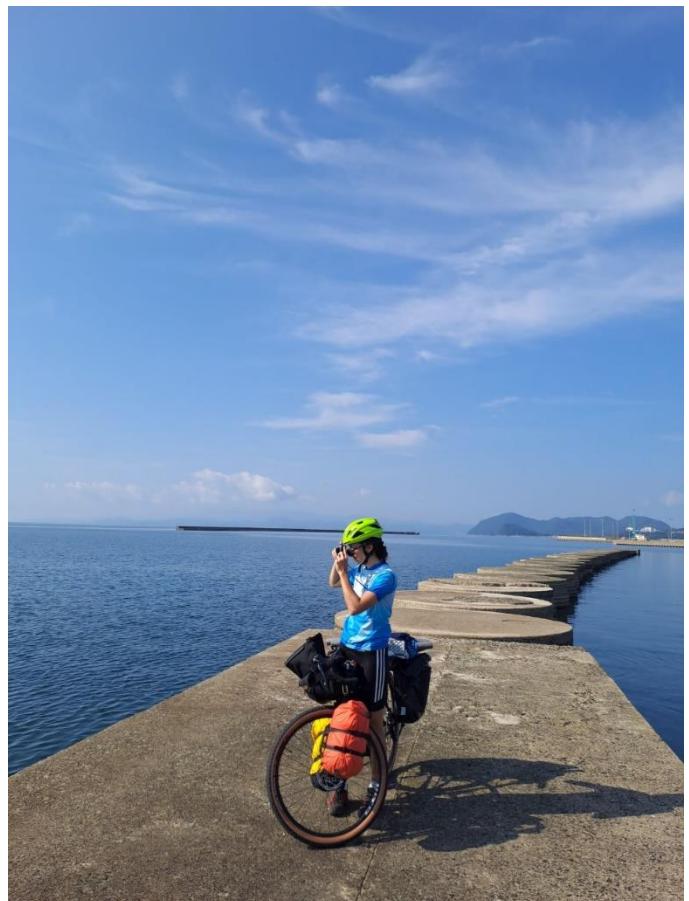
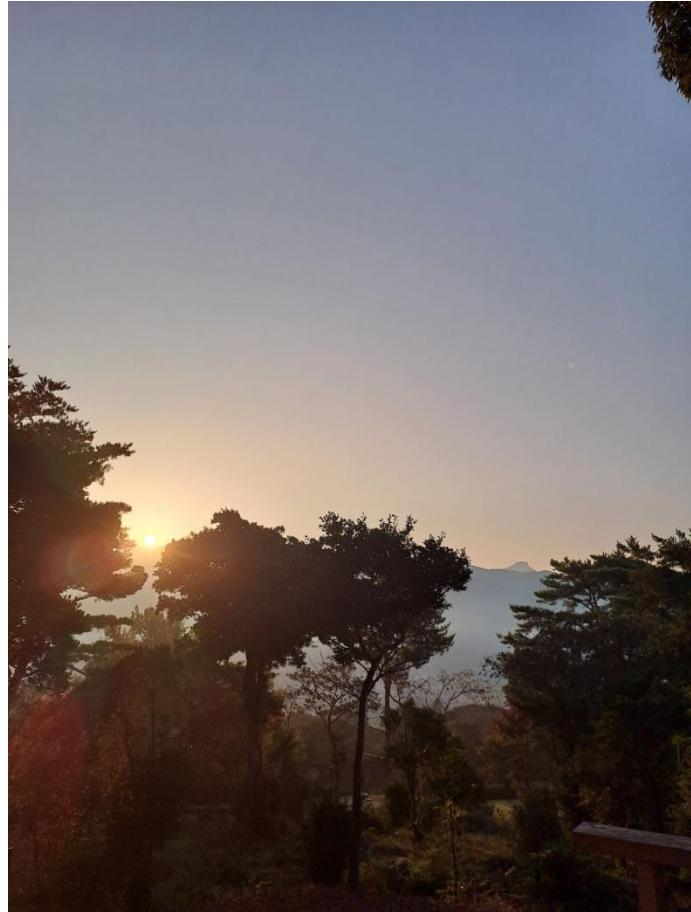
From beautiful pine forests to golden rice paddies through the Saga prefecture. It was a race against daylight to make it to a camping spot before it got dark.



Day 6

After an early start to get up and

out by sunrise, we cycled back to the seaside. Our lunch break at a sushi bar ended up being extended due to some curious locals eager to hear what we were doing in their remote little town. After lots of interesting conversations, photos and gifts, we headed on over some more hills and pitched up at a beach for the night. Again, we were met by a very kind local who gifted us an unbelievably large pear and bottle of sake.



Day 7

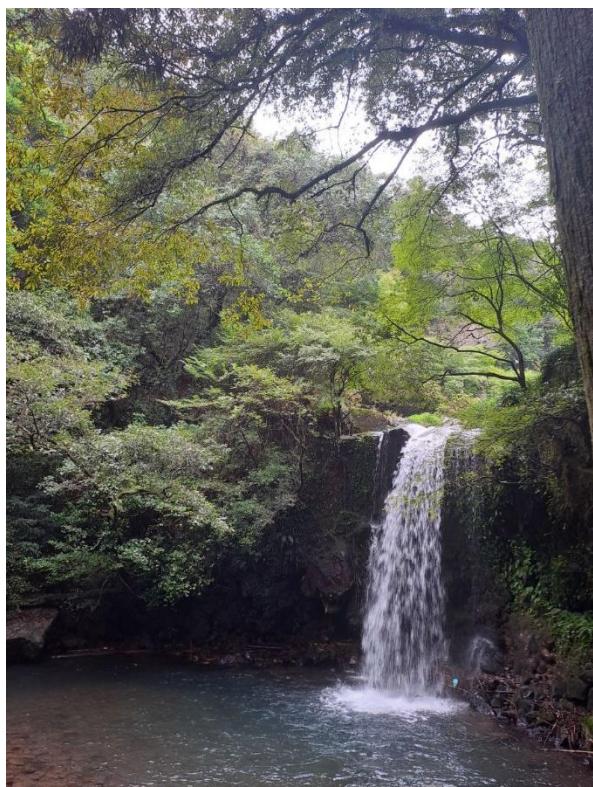


After a night of very heavy rain, we headed to Unzen, a mountainous national park region and a classic Japanese spa town. Due to the sulfurous vapors from the hot springs, it was hard to escape the smell of rotten eggs. We were happy to rest our weary bodies for the day.

Kumamoto Prefecture

Day 8

After some lovely downhills through the forest and stops at waterfalls along the way, we caught a ferry back to the mainland. The rest of the day's cycling was less enjoyable as we passed through sleepy, industrial villages. However, in a change from our usual tent, this night we were welcomed into the home of a local family from Warmshowers – an app where people offer their houses to fellow cyclists for the night. We had a wonderful evening



chatting with our hosts about all things Japan. It was lovely to be in a home for the night and to be treated to a home-cooked dinner.



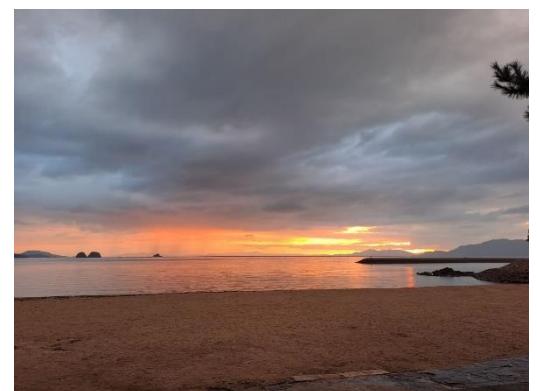
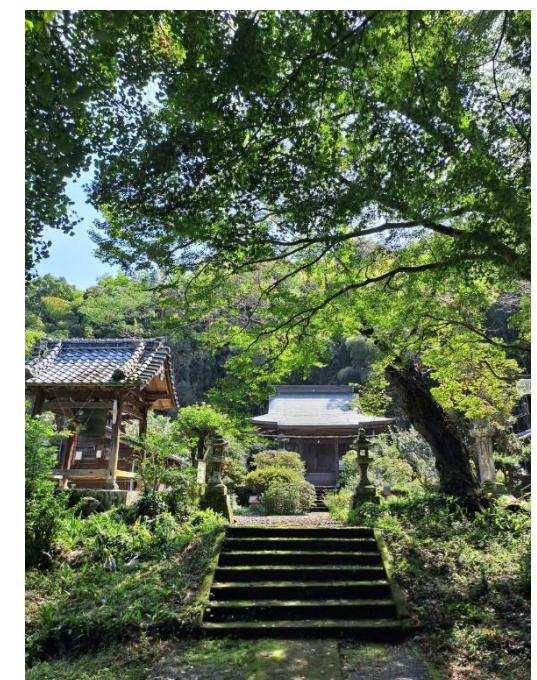
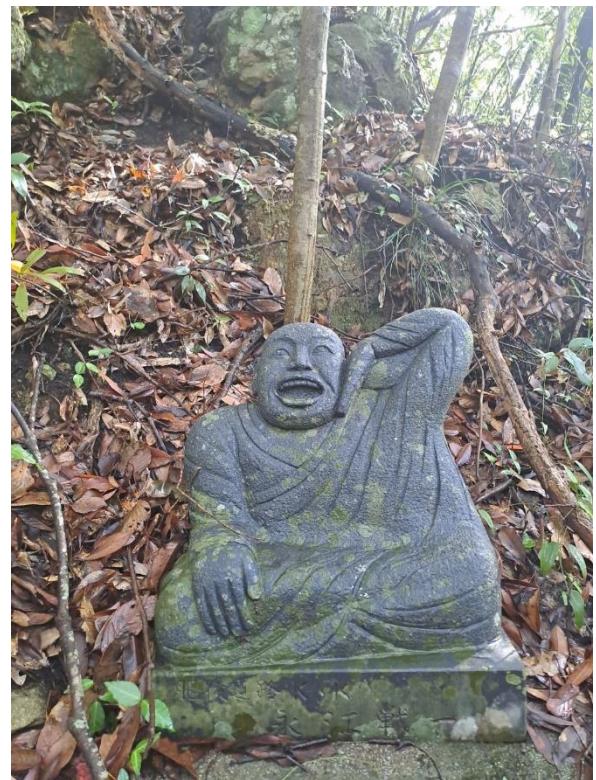
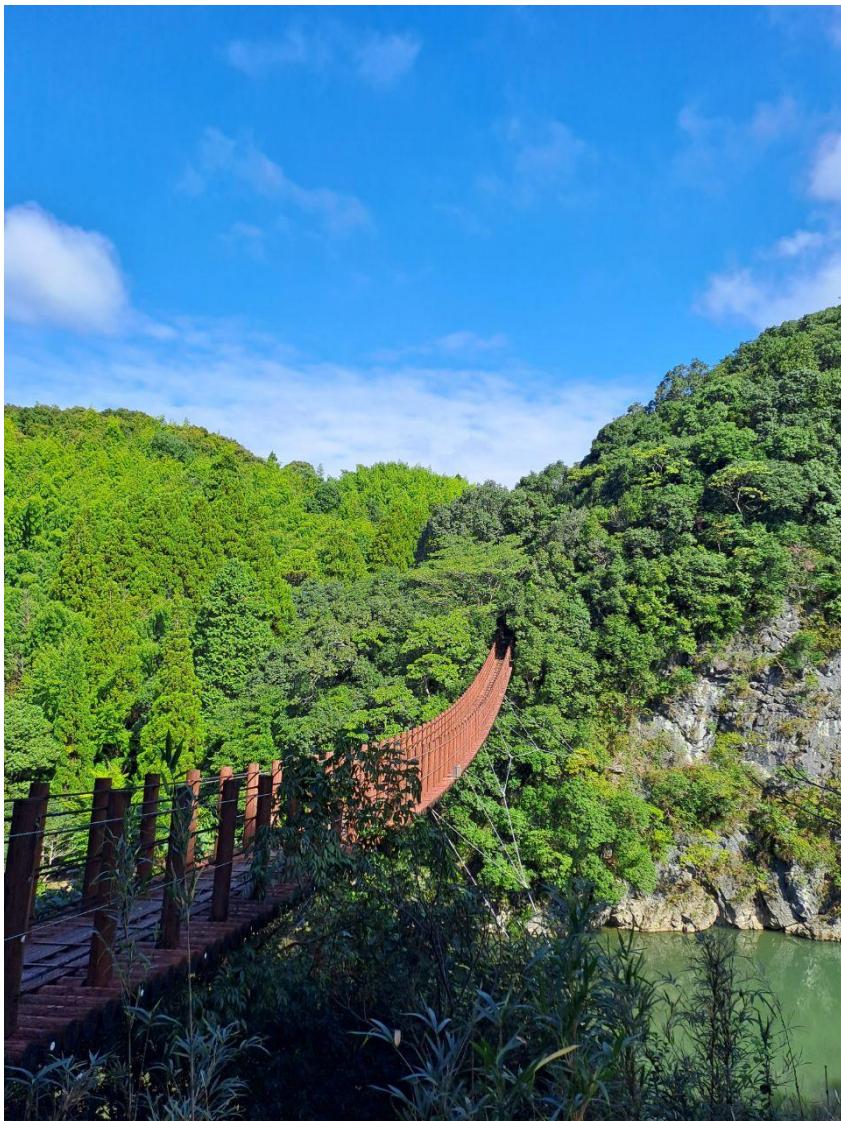
Day 9

Lots of socialising! After breakfast and board games with our lovely hosts, we cycled a short distance to a local bakery, where we were once again welcomed with open arms. We spent a few hours there chatting with the family – seeing as the family's granddaughter, Makato, spoke fluent English, it was a great opportunity for us to learn more about Japanese culture. We cycled back towards the coast, pitched up beside a river.



Day 10

A fantastic day – morning hike through the forest and a mountainous detour on the bikes. Spotted some wild boar along the way and stopped at lots of beautiful shrines. Made it back to the seaside by sunset and pitched up on a sandy beach.



Day 11

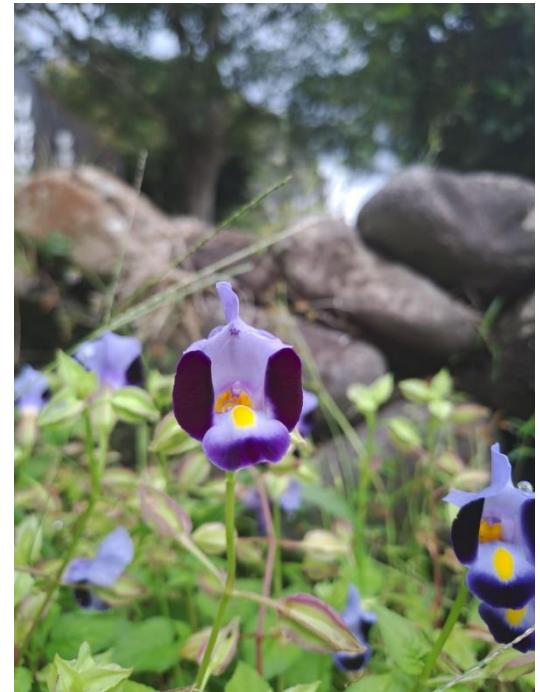
The day started sunny and hilly, and later became very wet and very hilly. But of course, with the hills come wonderful views, which we enjoyed immensely! We were stopped on the roadside by a very curious, enthusiastic family, who were so delighted to meet two female tourists cycling in Japan – so much so that they invited us back to their house, which just so happened to be where we were aiming to get to that day. We were so grateful to have shelter for the night with the terribly wet day. As was the case throughout our trip, we were welcomed with open arms and made feel at home straight away. We were treated to a delicious meal and had a wonderful evening chatting together through broken English and Google translate.



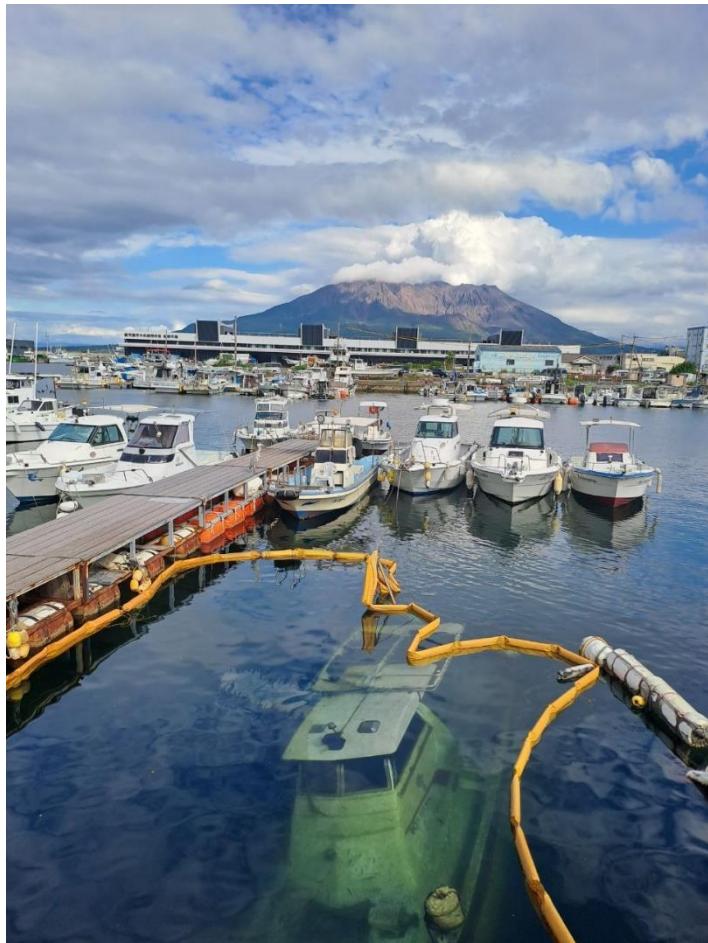
Kagoshima and Yakushima

Day 12

After a traditional Japanese breakfast with the family, we hit the road for more hills and rain. We enjoyed a visit to a Samurai residence and spent a bit too long snacking at a convenience store. Our bodies and minds were weary, so we checked into a hostel and explored Kagoshima for the evening.



Day 13



Time for a rest day! We enjoyed some relaxation and took a ferry across to Sakurajima – one of Japan’s most active volcanos. After some well-deserved muscle soothing in a natural onsen, we returned to Kagoshima and chatted to locals in a shochu bar for the night.



Day 14

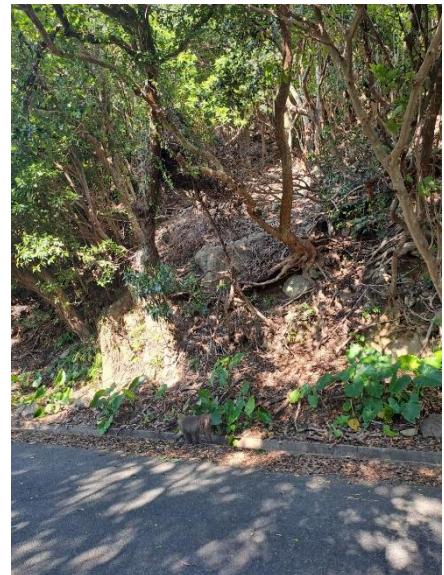
We set off in the morning to catch the ferry to Yakushima – a subtropical island off the southern coast of Kyushu. Given the island is renowned for its untouched forests and wildlife, this was a part of the trip that excited us both immensely. After reassembling our bikes upon arrival, we began cycling around the island, and were treated to some amazing sights, including an impressive banyan tree, a macaque and breathtaking waterfalls.



Day 15

This has to be one of our most intense yet enjoyable days of the trip. We woke to a beautiful day and an amazing view of the mountains in the middle of the island. We took a break at a seaside onsen where rockpools filled with sulfuric water. After that was the beginning of our route through the World Natural Heritage Site. It was amazing – lots of steep hills but incredible coastal views and surrounded by forest the whole way, as well as lots of encounters with macaques and deer. While investigating a beach to camp at around sunset, we were met by a lady who kindly invited us to stay at her house. We had a lovely evening getting to know her and playing with her baby.





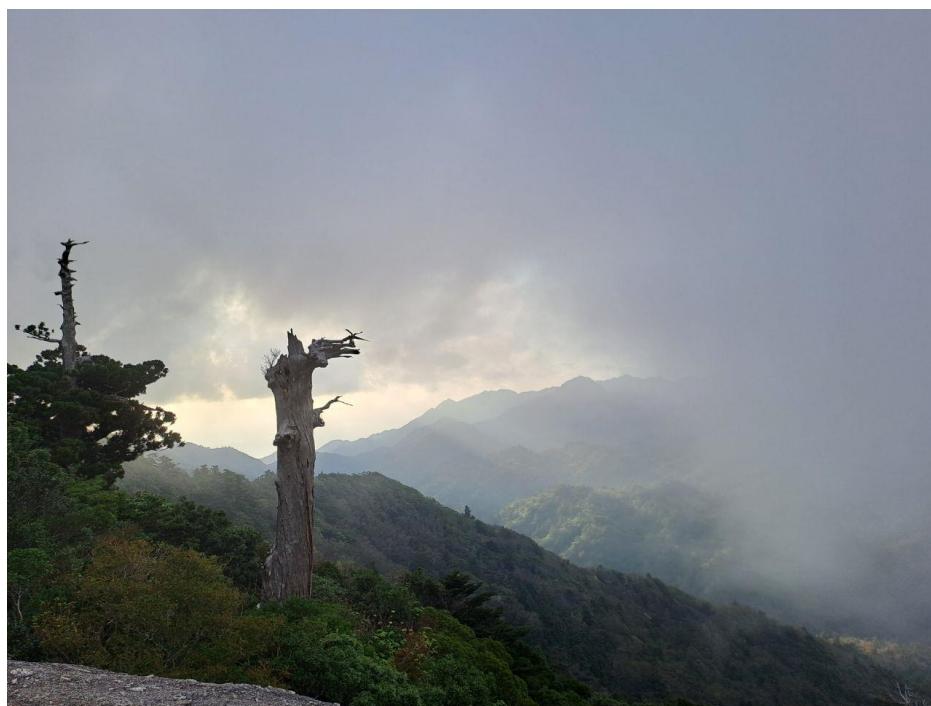
Day 16

Finished our cycle around the island and headed uphill into the middle to ditch the bikes for an overnight hike! After lots of hours climbing both on the bikes and on foot, we were exhausted by the time we made it to our free mountain hut for the night.



Day 17

Woke bright and early to finish our hike and make it back to the bikes to zoom down the hill and catch the ferry back to the mainland. Having decided to take a detour along the coast and with our bodies tired and time running low, we ended up catching a bus to Shibushi.





Cape Toi and Miyazaki Prefecture

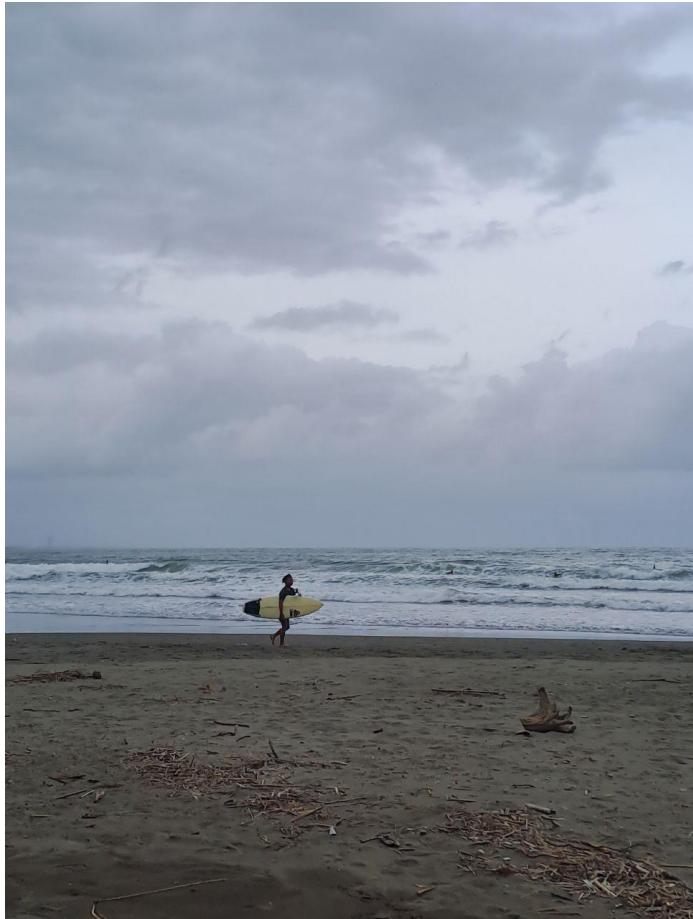
Day 18

Following some morning admin trying to sort Eimear a sim card, we hit the road. We enjoyed a brilliant day's cycling through Cape Toi National Park, with wild horses, lovely hills and beautiful views. Arrived at an observation deck to camp at in perfect time to avoid the evening downpour of rain.



Day 19

Followed a beautiful coastal road for the day with views of wild sea and incredible surf spots, and one incredible seaside shrine. Another big rain shower arrived just before sunset, so we quickly found a camp spot and took shelter for the night.



Day 20

Having arrived in the surfing town of Aoshima, we decided to take a day off the bikes to try surfing for the day! We rented boards for a few hours and had a great time, with the support of some very encouraging locals. While relaxing following our session, we met an Australian man living in the town who allowed us to camp on his land nearby for the night.



Aso-Kuju National Park

Day 21

We woke to an awful storm and had to opt to take the bus to our next destination – Aso. It ended up being a long day's travelling. We arrived by the evening and checked into a hostel.

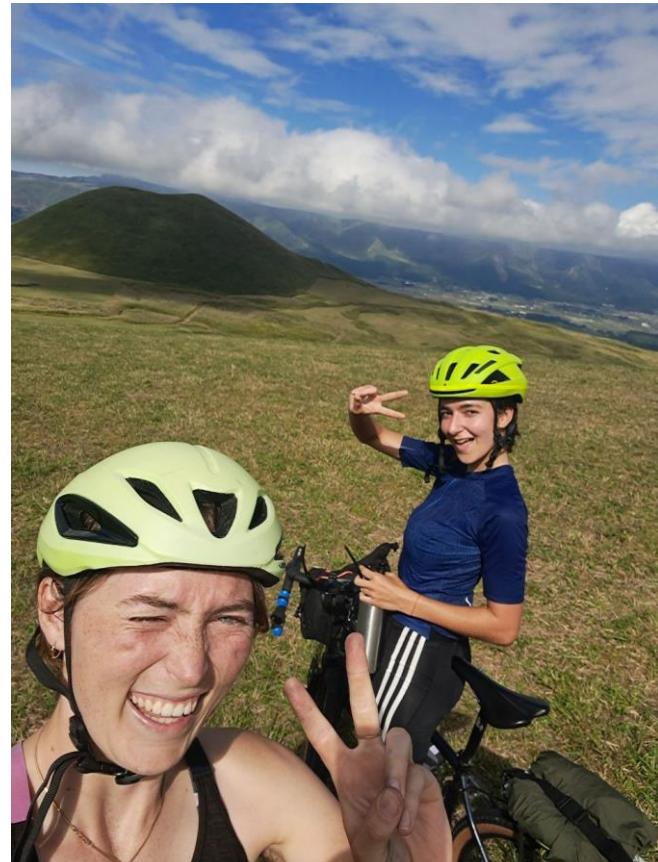


Day 22

Having researched some hiking routes in the National Park, we decided on the Nakadake Takadake loop. It was a very cloudy day, so the views weren't great, but it was an interesting 12km hike, surrounded by unusual volcanic landscapes, and views of the Mt. Aso crater – the largest active volcano in Japan. We spent the evening chatting with fellow travelers in the hostel.

Day 23

We awoke to a beautiful sunny morning, so we decided to cycle back up to where we started yesterday's hike from to appreciate Aso in all its glory! We were treated to beautiful views of the volcano, surrounding hills, and Kumamoto in the distance. Today was the first day we left something behind, with Eimear forgetting her shoes, so we ended up being slowed down a bit while she went to fetch them. Following that, we enjoyed cycling along the plateau until sunset.



Oita Prefecture

Day 24

Another day of big but breathtaking climbs through the National Park, and lots of rain. We pitched at a campsite with an onsen for the night and enjoyed giving our legs a rest.



Day 25

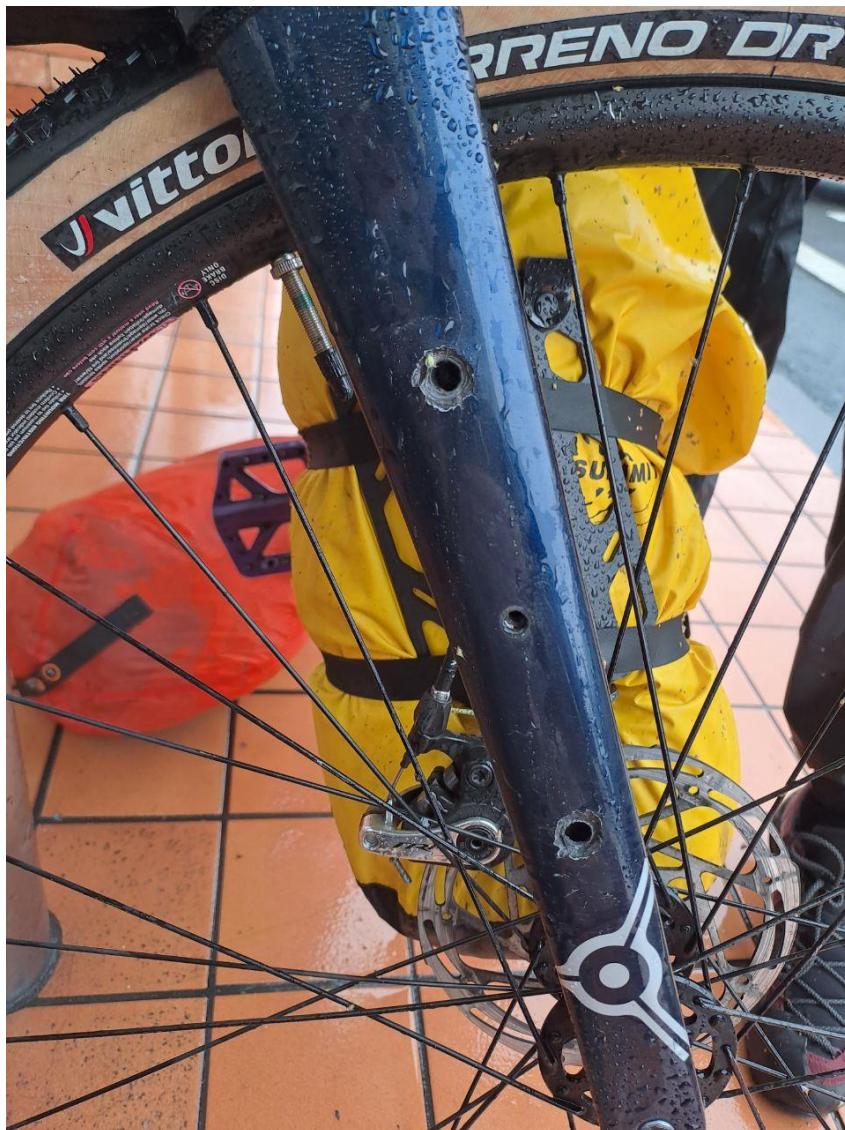
We started the day with a visit to a touristy town called Yufuin, and then carried on through the hills to Beppu – the hot spring capital of Japan. It was amazing to see all the geysers dotted around while zooming down into the town. We took a trip to an outdoor onsen and opted for a hostel for the night.



The end of cycling / Kyoto

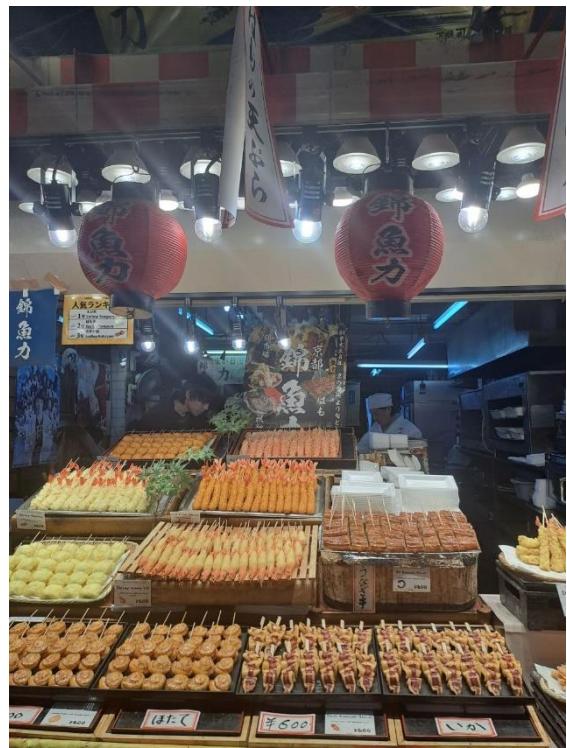
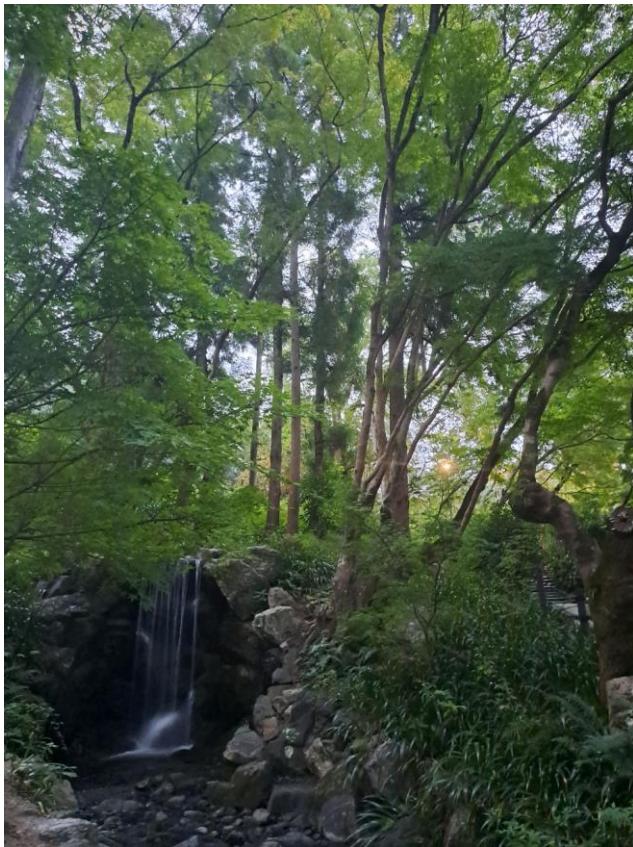
Day 26

It was a wet morning. Pathetic fallacy for the events that lay ahead. About 10km into our day, Tatiana's fork experienced some damage which meant it wasn't safe to continue with the weight the bike was carrying in case it snapped completely. We discussed potential plans for a while and decided to head to Kyoto for a few days. After a tiring day of lugging our bikes and bags through train stations, we arrived in Kyoto and headed for an evening stroll.



Day 27

We spent the day exploring the city. When evening came around, we took the tram to a nearby village for a Fire Festival that occurs once a year in celebration of the local shrine and its spirits. While it was overcrowded, it was interesting to observe the parade. We also ended up meeting a fellow cyclist who works as a tour guide in Kyoto, so we enjoyed chatting about all things cycling and Japan for the evening.



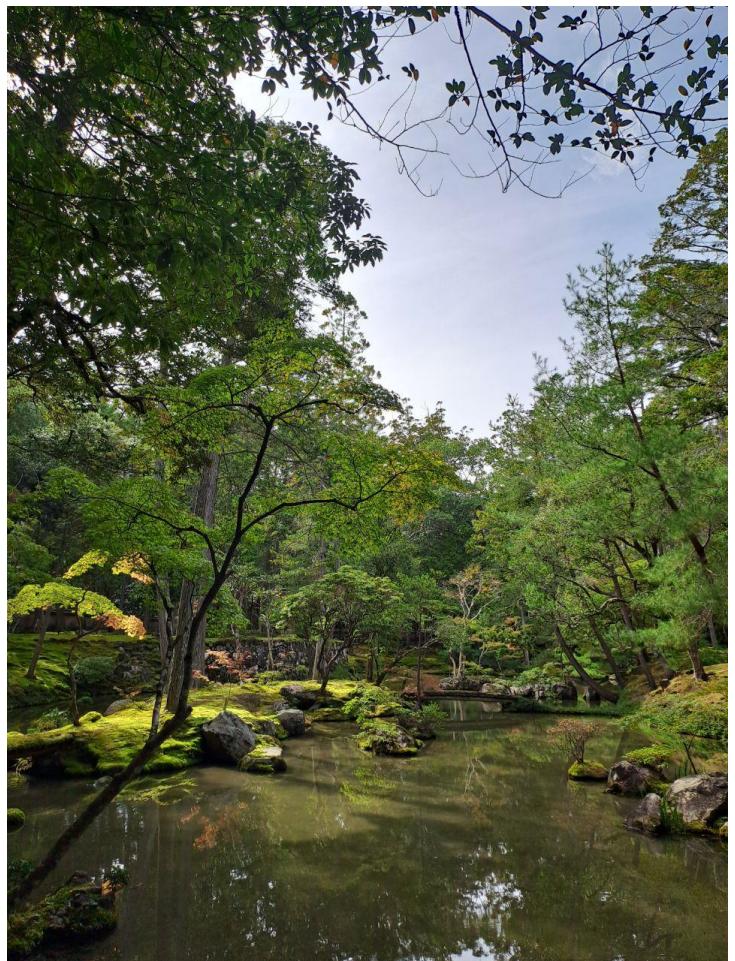
Day 28

We visited some famous attractions, such as the Kinkaku-ji temple and Nijo castle. In the evening, we enjoyed getting to know two restaurant owners, who have been running the establishment for over 50 years!



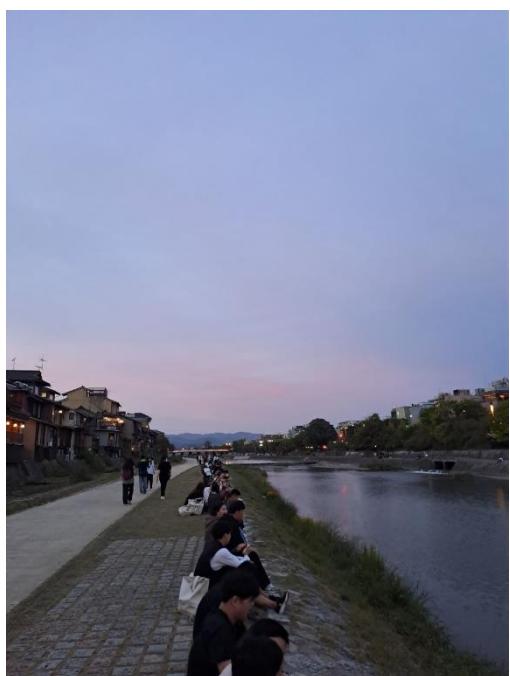
Day 29

We visited more attractions, including Jojakkoji and Saiho-ji temples, and Kinkaku-ji.

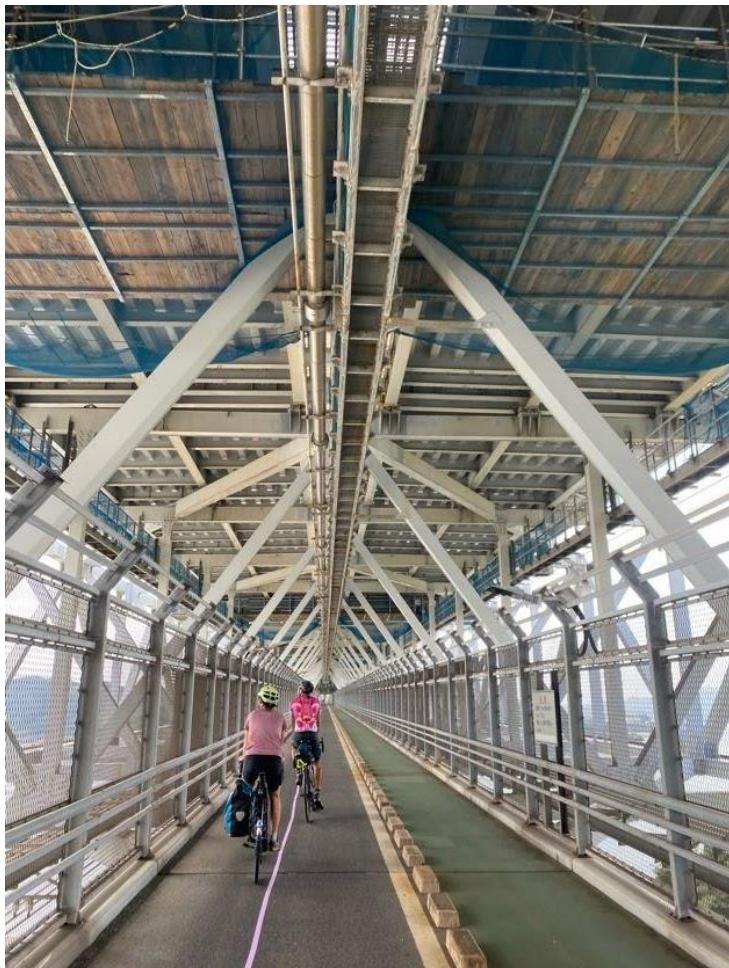


Day 30

Our final day in Kyoto. We took it easy, visited some more attractions and relaxed by the river for the evening.

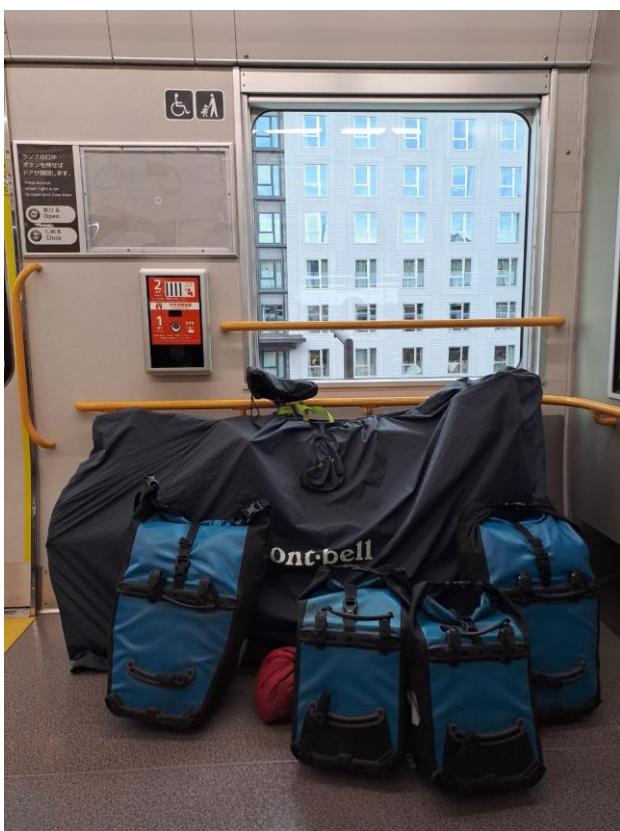
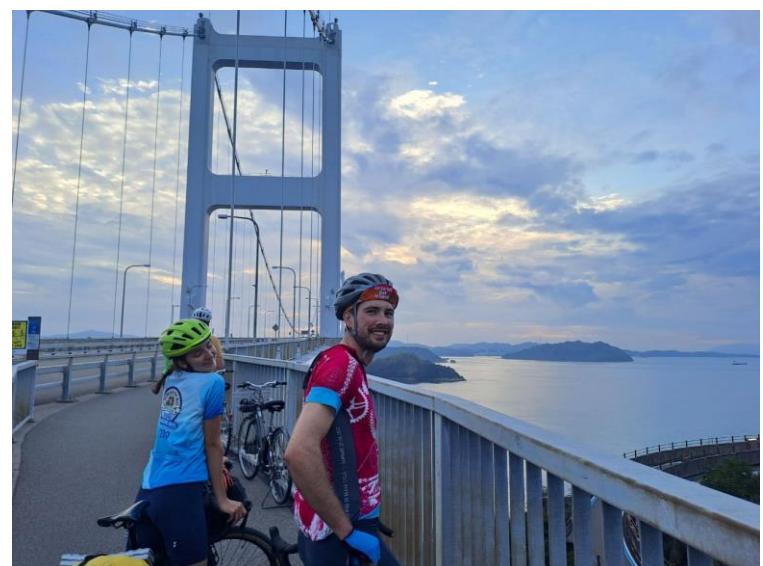


Shimanami Kaido



Day 31

We got up bright and early to catch some trains to the start of the Shimanami Kaido – a famous cycling route with lots of bridges connecting several islands. Our friend from the Fire Festival joined us for the day, and we enjoyed the 80km along lovely cycle lanes with magnificent views.



Fukuoka

Day 32

We returned to Fukuoka and spent the remaining day of the trip preparing for our journey home, which mainly involved finding bike boxes and disassembling our bikes.

Administration and Logistics

Training

We both maintained a good level of fitness throughout their studies. However, the trip began just two weeks after the end of term. This meant it was difficult to find time to train both separately together prior to undertaking the trip. Ideally, we would have undertaken a practice trip in the weeks leading up to our expedition, which would have helped us to iron out any potential issues or identify equipment we were lacking before departure. Nonetheless, fitness did not prove to be a challenge for us, as we built up our strength day by day. Also, the more mountainous and challenging sections of our trip came in the latter stages, which meant we were better prepared both physically and mentally. Additionally, we worked very well as a team and maintained solid communication throughout the trip.

Funding

We received a total of £900 from the Exploration Board and £700 from the RCSA. We both undertook outdoor first aid courses which were funded by the Exploration Board. The travel insurance was also covered by the Exploration Board. We borrowed the MSR Hubba Hubba NX 2 tent from the Exploration Board for this trip.

Travel

- Return flights to Fukuoka from London, via Shanghai
- Bus from Obama to Unzen
- Return ferry from Kagoshima to Yakushima
- Bus from Kagoshima to Shibushi
- Bus from Aoshima to Aso
- Train from Beppu to Kyoto
- Train from Kyoto to Fukuoka via Onomichi

We disassembled our bikes and placed them in cardboard boxes for our flights. We disposed of our boxes in Fukuoka after we assembled our bikes. For the return journey, we asked around local bike shops to find a bike box each. It took us each around 1 hour to unpack the bike and 2 hours to disassemble the bike.

For all trains and buses we took, we placed our bikes in rinko bags which we bought in Fukuoka. These are seen as a requirement for bringing bikes on public transport in Japan.

Visa

British and Irish citizens do not require a visa to enter Japan for tourism for up to 90 days.

Communication

We purchased data-only SIM cards upon arrival in Fukuoka. When these expired, Tatiana was able to obtain an e-SIM, while Eimear's phone was incompatible with these. It proved quite difficult to source

a new SIM card outside of tourist hotspots, and so Eimear ended up purchasing a roaming package from her provider in the UK.

Most areas we cycled through had decent phone signal, so communication was straightforward. The only time we were without phone signal for a significant period of time was while hiking in Yakushima. However, we ensured to bring a sufficient amount of warm clothing and food to ensure we would be prepared and safe for the night.

Accommodation

Our accommodation consisted of a combination of wild camping, campsites, hostels, and on a few occasions, people we met along the way welcoming us into their homes.

Environmental Impact Assessment

Of course, the environmental harm caused by emissions from our air travel were impossible to avoid given our destination was on the other side of the world. However, we remained mindful throughout our trip to reduce our impact on the environment.

We minimized our environmental impact by conforming to guidelines by Earth Watch International, the 'Leave no Trace' philosophy (www.int.org). Luckily, public toilets are commonplace in Japan. When necessary, solid and liquid human waste was disposed of by burying away from water sources. We used natural, eco-friendly cleaning agents and soaps to minimise environmental impact. Hazardous waste such as gas canisters for cooking were disposed of at suitable locations within towns and cities.

Due to the limited amount of luggage space we had, we could not buy large amounts of food at once and so visited the supermarket at least once a day. However, this also meant that we wasted very little food. Of course, some waste is unavoidable, and we made sure to dispose of this correctly at recycling facilities.

We cooked most of our meals on our camping stove. To minimise the risk of something catching fire while cooking, we always cooked on clear ground or solid surfaces, and remained beside the stove at all times.

Risk Assessment

Bike Related Hazards

Hazard	Consequences	Prevention	Response	Severity	Probability	Risk
Breakdown / theft of bike	Stranded with broken bike, unable to continue trip, left alone while other person finds help	Ensure each person has learned bike maintenance skills prior to the trip. Carry bike maintenance equipment at all times.	Attempt to repair bike. If this is not possible, locate the nearest bike shop and travel there by whatever means possible.	2	1	2
Accident / crash	Personal injury or damage to equipment	Attach small mirror to handlebars. Follow cycle lanes or quiet roads where possible. Avoid congested / fast roads. Do not overtake vehicles from the inside. Never cycle in the dark. During dawn and dusk, always wear reflective clothing and use bike lights.	Assess injury / damage extent. For bike damage, see above. For injury, follow first aid protocol. In the event of serious injury, seek medical attention from nearby medical centres or call the emergency services.	3	2	6

Environment-related Hazards

Hazard	Consequences	Prevention	Response	Severity	Probability	Risk
Landslides	Personal injury or damage to equipment, blocked roads, loss of direction	Check weather forecasts regularly to avoid travelling during heavy downpours	If there are signs of an imminent landslide, seek shelter in higher ground immediately and change route where possible. If	3	1	3

		which increase risk of landslides, be aware of areas prone to landslide along the route, avoid high-risk areas, stay on designated roads, never cycle in the dark. Be aware of alternative routes to follow in the event of landslide.	caught in landslide, move out of the path of debris to the side rather than up or downhill, protect your head, contact the emergency services.			
Sun / heat	Heat stroke, sun burn	Avoid cycling during hours of peak heat. Apply suncream regularly. Wear high UV rated clothing. Drink plenty of water.	Cover affected areas. Apply soothing cream / gel. Seek medical advice where necessary.	1	2	2
Rain	Slippery surfaces, potentially leading to falling off bike and injury. Hypothermia	High chance of rain in the region in September / October. Check the weather forecast regularly and avoid cycling during predicted downpours. Exercise	If necessary, stop and find shelter.	1	3	3

		caution when cycling on wet surfaces. Wear appropriate clothing .				
Strong winds	Risk of falling	Check weather forecast and avoid cycling during days of high wind speed. Be aware of wind direction, especially when in mountainous areas.	If necessary, stop and find shelter. Change route if necessary.	2	3	6
Typhoon	Torrential rainfall, flash-flooding, potential landslides and mudslides resulting in destruction of roads and property.	Keep up to date with weather reports and typhoon warnings.	If there is immediate risk of typhoon, keep away from coastal areas and seek indoor shelter. Avoid walking through flooded streets or places with swift-moving waters. Stay away from rivers, streams, and other water sources that may overflow	5	2	10
Storm / lightning	Struck by lightning / an object struck by lightning. May cause injury or death	Check weather forecast and do not cycle during thunderstorms. If end up in a storm, find shelter or an area of	If struck by lightning, follow emergency procedure and call the emergency services.	4	1	4

		low elevation and move away from tall objects.					
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Health Hazards

Hazard	Consequences	Prevention	Response	Severity	Probability	Risk
Serious injury	Unable to continue the trip	Always exercise caution when cycling. Reduce speed on downhill sections. Do not cycle when tired. Wear a helmet at all times. During dawn and dusk, wear reflective clothing and use bike lights. Consider alternative routes if problems arise. Always be within eyesight of one another.	Know what to do in case of an emergency. Where necessary, contact the emergency services.	5	1	5
Minor injury	Reduced mobility. Team required to slow down or stop trip.	Always exercise caution when cycling. Reduce speed on downhill sections. Do not cycle when tired. Wear a helmet at all times. During dawn and dusk, wear reflective clothing and use bike lights. Consider	Know what to do in case of an emergency. Where necessary, contact the emergency services.	2	2	4

		alternative routes if problems arise. Always be within eyesight of one another.					
Hypothermia	Shivering, cold and pale skin, numbness or tingling in extremities, fatigue and weakness, slurred speech, death.	Check weather forecast for temperature and wind chill. Dress appropriately. Change into dry clothes if wet. Camp in sheltered areas.	Set up camp immediately, get in the tent and change into dry, warm clothes. Drink warm liquid. Call the emergency services if necessary.	3	1	3	
Hyperthermia	Muscle cramps and spasms, sweating, pain and discomfort, weakness, dizziness, nausea or vomiting, headache, rapid heartbeat, elevated temperature.	Drink plenty of water, wear appropriate clothing, avoid cycling during the peak heat hours, acclimatise gradually, take regular breaks.	Move to a cooler environment and drink water to rehydrate. Cool the body by applying cold compresses or taking a cold shower. Remove excess clothing and rest. If symptoms persist, contact the emergency services.	3	1	3	
Dehydration	Headaches, dizziness, stumbling	Drink plenty of water and take regular breaks to drink water. Do not cycle during peak heat hours. Restock on water whenever possible. Carry a personal water filter so can drink water from natural sources.	Stop cycling. Drink plenty of water but not too quickly. Take isotonic tablets to replace lost salts.	2	1	2	

Navigation	Team gets lost or lose one another, change of route	Ensure both members have access to the route. Use GPS to follow location and avoid getting lost. Carry paper maps in case GPS fails.	Return to last known location and ask locals for help.	1	1	1
Wildlife	Injury, scratches, bites, infection	Be aware of potentially dangerous wildlife along the route. Do not camp in isolated areas and ask locals for advice on suitable locations. Hang food from trees to avoid attracting bears and other dangerous animals. Know how to behave if approached by bears.	Apply antihistamine cream to bites and disinfect scratches immediately. Cover wounds with bandages.	3	1	3

Useful Resources

- Police: 110
- Ambulance: 119
- Non-emergency medical: 7119
- Coast guard: 118
- Japan 24-hour helpline (+81(0)522998575) offers interpretation and support for emergencies and a variety of other day-to-day tasks that prove challenging to non-Japanese speakers, such as communicating with bank staff or help in sourcing important items.
- NHS overseas telephone number: +44 191 218 1999
- British Embassy in Japan: +81 (0) 3 5211 1100
- Adventure Cycling Association: <https://www.adventurecycling.org/blog/safety-tips-for-bicycle-touring/>

Note: The operator of emergency services lines will answer in Japanese and may only understand Japanese. However, additional languages are supported by connecting a 3rd-party interpreter to the call. Additionally, Tokyo Police have English-speaking officers available from Monday to Friday 08.30 – 17.15 at (03) 3501 0110.

Conclusion

Over the course of the trip we met so many kind and welcoming people who shared their love of Japan with us and made the experience always feel safe. We will certainly retain the zen attitudes we witnessed towards tending to the environment and appreciating the seasons. We were lucky that many of the national route roads had cycle lanes, although we quickly learnt that the mountain roads were the most rewarding. However, Komoot tended to continuously underestimate the elevation which put our endurance to the test. We would highly recommend bike touring to other students who want to be in closer contact with their surroundings, whilst also being able to cover more ground.

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