

October 10, 2014 Hitchhike Adventure to Aomori



Mr. and Mrs. Suehiro who took me from Niigata Murakami City to Kisagata in Yamagata, a distance of 150 some kilometers

October 13, 2014: Today is the first day of a major change in my life. I returned home from my trip to Aomori prefecture to an empty house. My beloved spouse has gone to America to help her daughter's large family of 7 children. Our dog, Lady, was also not in the house but I retrieved her from the lady who is caring for her when I am not home, Yoneko san, whose business is to care for dogs when their master is out of town.

Now that I find myself with more time on my hands, I hope to be more regular in writing about my experiences hitchhiking in Japan. I need to travel nearly every weekend some 400 kilometers up north.

October 10, 2014: It's was a cool Autumn day with a cloudy sky when I arrived at Majima Station on the Ouetsu Line at 7:40 a.m. The station is just 100 meters from Route 345, the road that runs along the Sea of Japan in Niigata Prefecture. The traffic is sparse. The drivers see the paper A4 size sign I am holding and drive on by. The sign says, TSURUOKA, nearly 100 kilometers further up the road, the next major city in Yamagata prefecture which is the neighboring prefecture just to the north of Niigata. Fukushima prefecture happens to be Niigata prefecture's neighbor to the east! FYI most of Fukushima is NOT the nuclear wasteland some people portray it to be. I have passed **many times** pass through Fukushima prefecture since the March 11, 2011, tsumami and nuclear power plant disaster. It's interesting that suddenly a large area of Japan named Fukushima gets the stigma of being a nuclear catastrophe like Chernobyl. Some people, even from the alternative media have called it, "worse than Chernobyl." How can the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster be worse than Chernobyl when you consider only one person that

worked at the Fukushima power plant after the disaster has died? And whether or not that person died as a result of nuclear radiation has *not* been validated!

I know without doubt the drivers of the vehicles passing by me take notice of both me and the paper sign I am holding. They all veer toward the middle of the road as if avoiding to hit me. Even if they didn't veer they wouldn't hit me because I am standing far enough away out of their path. The Japanese are taught to veer away from pedestrians when attending course in driver's school. The Japanese law has zero tolerance for drivers hitting pedestrians. That means even if a pedestrian purposely jumps in front of a vehicle, the driver is still at fault! You can now understand why a driver would take no chances. I wish they would implement such a law in Russia. The most dangerous thing to do in Russia is to walk across a road. The drivers won't even slow down and actually expect you to jump out of their way! I lived in Russia from March 1994 to October 1997 and know what I'm talking about.

It's sometimes a long wait to catch the first ride on Route 345. I have a beautiful view of the ocean which is on my right when turned around facing traffic. Seagulls often fly over my head to keep me entertained. The waves are sometimes choppy and water splashes from time to time all the way to the road where I stand. There is no traffic light to stop the cars but because the road is a lonely one I know from experience that drivers from other areas of Japan will stop for me when they see they are going as far as the sign says I want to go.

Today was such a case. After only a short 10 minute wait, Mr. & Mrs. Suehiro from Kanagawa Prefecture (the prefecture just southwest of Tokyo) stopped for me. They were going all the way to Akita Prefecture! This meant that they would be going past Tsuruoka in Yamagata prefecture and I would be able to skip Yamagata Prefecture entirely! They took me to the Kisagata road station in Akita.

After waiting 20 some minutes at Kisagata, Mr. Saitoh stopped for me. He said he would go to Akita City, a good distance up the road of at least 60 kilometers. Unfortunately he let me off right in the middle of town, a place not well suited for hitchhiking. The traffic was heavy but most of the drivers are not going very far. I have experienced hitchhiking there before and knew I might not catch a ride at such a place, and so I walked backwards pulling my suitcase with wheels and held out the sign of my next destination, NOSHIRO, some 60 kilometer further up the road.

The time was now 12:30 p.m. There was a train leaving at 1:43 from from a train station, Tsuchizaki, which was few kilometers away. I thought I might have time to catch that train if I started walking to the station immediately, but after an hour walk I realized I wouldn't make it. I often walked backward with my thumb out hoping to catch a car, but it was fruitless. The traffic was going by too fast with not much room on the shoulder of the road for them to stop.

At 1:40 p.m. I arrived at the closest point to Tsuchizaki station though still standing next to Route 7. A teenage boy approached me asking if I have a

problem.

“No problem,” I replied, “I’m hitchhiking on my way to Aomori City.”

“You don’t have any money?” he inquired.

“I do.”

I reached into my bag and handed him a Gospel tract which he received, and I shook his hand. Handshaking was not part of Japanese custom until fairly recently, say within the last 20 or so years. When I first came to Japan in 1972, I didn’t like to shake hands with a Japanese person because they just didn’t know how to do a good firm handshake. They do better now.

Though I missed the 1:43 p.m. train, I knew there would be another one around 2:30. I had plenty of time to catch it because the train station was now only a 10 minute walk. Around 2:00 a lady stopped for me and saved me the trouble of walking any further.



Mrs. Hanga

Her name is Mrs. Hanga. She is now the president of a construction company since her husband passed away a few years ago. Mrs. Hanga saw my sign that said NOSHIRO and told me she was going only part way, but it turned out that because she was going all the way to Takanosu which is past Noshiro by a different route, I told her I would be delighted if she would take me to Takenosu! It’s much further down the road than I had hoped for.

As we approach Takenosu Mrs. Hanga pointed out the buildings that her company made. That included large stores.

100 Kilometer Cycling Adventure



Mt. Yahiko and Mt. Kakuda from a distance of 20 kilometers.

I enjoy taking long bicycle trips from time to time. I thought it would be a good day's challenge to circle two famous mountains of Niigata, Mt. Kakuda and Mt. Yahiko, and return home before nightfall. Mt. Kakuda and Mt. Yahiko are not famous for their height. Mt. Yahiko is only 600 some meters high. They are famous for being the only mountains smack dab on the coast of the Sea of Japan in the midst of the flat rice fields that Niigata is famous for. Click the photo to see an enlargement.

Niigata has some of the flattest areas in all of Japan. One reason it's so flat is that much of Niigata (Japanese meaning "new lagoon") was reclaimed from the ocean. All of the rice growing area between the Shinano and Agano rivers, meaning the area you see in the photo below, used to be underwater.

It took me a little over two hours to cycle 30 kilometers to Kakudahama which is the northern base of Mt. Kakuda. I didn't know the roads but followed what I thought was the closest route by line of sight. It turned out that I probably zigzagged back and forth on the roads between the rice fields a lot more than I needed to.

From Kakudahama I took the only road that runs along the coast of the Sea of Japan, a road over rolling hills and through several tunnels. The traffic was light and therefore a bit safer for a cyclist than on a normal highway. I needed to ride as far as the lowest point past Mt. Yahiko. I knew I reached it when I arrived at the mouth of Bunsui, a river that is a tributary of the Shinano river, the longest river in Japan. There is a road running parallel to it going in the direction I needed to go, and I knew it would be therefore flat.

I could add photos to this post. If you want to see them, please say so in a comment.