

Golden Kochi

Ryan Monahan

I have been teaching English in Imabari for almost a year now, and like most foreign English teachers in Imabari, Kris Toryu has asked me to write for I-News in the past. In my first article, I wrote about my experiences in a group tour of Imabari's Henro temples with other Ehime foreigners. This article is, in a sense, a "sequel" to that article. During this past Golden Week I travelled from Ehime to Tokushima, visiting the Henro temples along Kochi's seacoast. In seven days I cycled about 620 kilometers, visited 24 temples in three prefectures, and experienced truly unforgettable experiences.

I knew Golden Week to be a popular travel week for Japan, so I purchased a one-person tent to avoid the stress of booking busy hotels or hostels. I cycled alone all week, stopping each night at campsites or public parks to sleep and rest my weary legs. Travelling alone provided me an incredible opportunity to reflect and meditate, which, for me, is the entire point of visiting the eighty-eight Shikoku temples. What's more, my meditation didn't stop at the gate of each temple; Kochi's quiet roads and breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean aided my silent reflections, and all week I felt refreshed and at peace despite cycling every day.

A few months ago, when visiting temples in Kagawa, I met a man who had previously completed the pilgrimage. I remember him sharing with me how his most valuable memories from the pilgrimage were the many wonderful people he met along the way. I found the same to be true for my Kochi trip. Almost every day I met people who were enthused to meet me, and I them. Among others, I remember the cyclist I met at a campsite who shared his dinner and his breakfast with me. I remember the foreign pilgrim I met at a temple who I later learned is pictured in the Henro guidebook I have, credited with assisting in the translation. I remember the two families of surfers from Osaka at a campsite on the ocean who invited me to join their barbeque and fed me until I couldn't eat any more. I am inspired by the kindness and goodwill I experienced from strangers along my journey, and though I don't remember the names of the friends I made, I'll never forget who they are.

One particular person I met stands out among everyone. As I was cycling out of Kochi city, heavy, cold rain and strong winds made cycling dangerous. It was all I could do to cycle the 15 kilometers to the nearest road station where I could stop for the night with enough shelter to dry myself and my belongings. After dinner, I sat on a bench and contemplated my options. Although the rain had stopped, a sign prohibiting tents limited my options considerably; I could sleep on the bench I was on, or visit the nearby train station to sleep on a bench there. As I was pondering what to do, an elderly gentleman stepped out of a nearby parked van holding a bottle of sake and two glasses. Sitting down next to me, he poured a glass for each of us. Although I couldn't understand much of our conversation with my limited Japanese and his limited English, we talked and drank for the next hour or so, and he asked where I would sleep. When I told him "here," he shook his head and showed me back seats of his van, where he had set up a sizable bed with blankets and pillows. It looked incredibly inviting after the difficult day I had had, and I was lucky enough to be welcomed in for the night. He even dried my shoes with the car's heater, and hung up my still-damp (and probably smelly) clothes inside. After polishing off the sake, we retired to his van, and I enjoyed a dry, warm, comfortable sleep next to my new friend. In the morning I woke up, went to the nearby bathroom to

brush my teeth, and when I came back outside he and his van were gone.

It could have been a dream had I not been so well-rested. This stranger from Kyushu saved me from a very difficult night, which would have no doubt seriously impacted my next day of cycling. Everyone I met during my golden week adventure showed me kindness and generosity, but this man went above and beyond by saving me from a potentially disastrous, or at least severely uncomfortable, situation. Whoever this man is, I still feel indebted to him, and I can only hope to pay his kindness forward in the future.

