

GIFU

Emerald greens and cedar browns abound in this rural sanctuary of Hida-Takayama

CYCLING IN HIDA-TAKAYAMA

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MANY visitors to Japan desire to catch a glimpse of a traditional way of life and experience the extensive history of this Far Eastern nation. An itinerary that only includes Tokyo makes it unlikely that one will be afforded the opportunity to see the farming villages, rolling Karst mountains or bamboo forests that make up the more beautiful face of Japan. Cycling in northern Gifu Prefecture - an area known as Hida-Takayama - offers just such rare glimpses into a way of country life that few travelers get to see.

The Hida-Takayama area is best known for its craft culture, rural traditions and the beauty of its carpentry, including the *gassho* farmhouses (thatched-

roof houses) that also make up the Shirakawa-go UNESCO world heritage site. The town of Takayama itself is known as an “Little Kyoto” since it is one of the few places in Japan that has preserved many of its wooden heritage buildings from the Tokugawa Era and earlier. But this area of Gifu Prefecture is probably best-known for the spectacular countryside, including the majestic Northern Alps, long-running green valleys and stunning pastoral views.

One way to experience the region is to take a cycling tour with Hida-Satoyama Cycling. Recipient of the top award offered by a worldwide travel website, Hida-Satoyama Cycling is headquartered in the town of Furukawa, just to the north of Takayama City. This puts

it in the middle of a region of forests, mountains and farming communities that make for splendid cycle touring. The company offers cycling routes that attempt to show the way of life of the Hida region while also giving participants a chance to try their hand at crafts and hiking.

Tours are either a half or full day and offer the option of lunch and side excursions. Of course weather is an important variable and cyclists must come prepared, but the summers in Hida are generally sunny and warm with only occasional rain. Operations run from spring to autumn (since the area experiences very heavy snowfall in the winter) and Hida-Satoyama is busy enough to make outings every day during the touring season.



Cycling in the countryside

The bikes offer a casual pace to take in the sights, sounds and scents of the Hida countryside



Several guides offer their tours in English and they are very knowledgeable about cycling, the history and geography of the area and guiding groups to show the best that Hida-Takayama has to offer. Both kids and adults are regular participants so activities are coordinated to have an appeal to all age groups, and the mountain bikes come in all sizes so as to accommodate everyone.

During the day, there are many opportunities to rest, stop to visit a temple or talk to the locals. The pace is relaxed so that riders can take in the tranquility of the area while also acquiring a sense of the way of life of the farming villages. The main routes follow the valleys to allow for splendid mountain vistas without having to do strenuous up-hill rides, making it possible for even the elderly to join along if they wish. As

stated by Mr. Kazuhisa Matsuo, our tour guide, “we do not really visit tourist sites, but rather show people what everyday life is like in the mountain villages of Hida-Takayama. For this reason, our tours aim to show a way of rural life and our guides do their best to interpret this experience for the cycling group. Thus, visitors can learn a lot of things while taking in the beautiful views.

“Hida Satoyama Cycling is just about to reach three years of being in business and, luckily, many travelers have been using our services. We feel



very confident that there is a strong demand for what we have to offer and in the future may look into starting similar cycling excursions in other regions of Japan.”

Hida-Takayama and North Gifu are not easy places to get to and the journey requires extensive preparation. But many would agree that the views and experience that this region has to offer make it well worth the effort. **I**