

TURNING JAPANESE

Chris saddles up for the Secrets of Japan tour.
He learns a few on the way too...





The Edelweiss tour group passing Yasaka-jinga temple, Kyoto.



The Edelweiss mob takes a lap with Japanese riders at Motegi Circuit.



Our man Christopher P Baker getting right into the local swing of things, wearing the traditional yukata.

STORY AND PHOTOS:
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I arrived to motorcycle Japan with a notion that its society was pretty uptight. To my delight, everyone was so jokey and smiley. The moment I went to the john, I understood why. Sensing my approach, the toilet cover automatically lifted and jets sprayed a mist of electrolysed water (to ensure that “dirt” wouldn’t stick). The über high-tech contraption was so intimidating I forgot why I’d sat down in the first place. The arm rest and wall-panel controls had more gizmos than a TV remote: a heat control for the seat; music options; a built-in massager “to help defecation”; a bum gun for cleaning the privates, including a “turbo wash” option; a button for “front washing” and another for “rear washing”. Plus a heated blow-dryer. The Japanese had turned the act of poop and pee into a hands-free, technologically enhanced pleasure ritual. No wonder the women were so giggly.

I’d signed up for a Secrets of Japan tour with Edelweiss Bike Travel which, appropriately, described the 16-day circumnavigation of Honshu — the main island — as “a mix of ancient traditions with modern technology, fantasy and creativity”.

Our group of 15 riders (plus eight pillions) spanned the antipodes: three Canadians, three yanks, three Aussies, a Greek couple, a Belgian-German-South African hybrid, and a sprinkling of Germans and Swiss. Tokyo’s Rental 819 supplied the bikes — mostly BMW 1200GSs, with a pair of Ducati Multistradas and Honda Africa Twins, plus a Suzuki V-Strom and Harley-Davidson Ultra in the mix.

We hightailed it out of the frenzied metropolis on the Yokohama Expressway and two hours later hit the coast at Kamakura. The palm-lined coast highway to Enoshima caused a “am I in Sausalito?” double-take. To my right, stylish homes and cafes with names like Pacific Drive-In and Aloha Beach Cafe. To my left, surfers rode the waves off a crème brûlée beach. This being Sunday, Tokyo’s friendly motorcycle fanatics were out in force. Packs of Harleys, Sports tourers galore. And *bōsōzoku* — a uniquely Japanese youth sub-culture — on a miscellany of ridiculously modified bikes.

Our lead guide, 50-year-old Angela de Haan, had first scouted this trip for Edelweiss two years before. This was her baby. She’d stitched together a superb route combining expressways, two-lane toll roads, and convoluted one-lane



Vermilion torii gates at Fushimi-Inari temple, Kyoto.

mountain roads called *tōge* that we devoured at high speed, as befitted the nimble GSs. The fun began on the racetrack-smooth Mazda Turnpike — the go-to road (dubbed “Japan’s Nurburgring”) for automotive press trials — as we spiralled up

eight miles of sweeping curves and tight coils to the Daikanzan Sky Lounge for lunch and a grandstand view of snow-capped Mt. Fuji. It was a great warm-up for more challenging, adrenalin-charged riding which, during the

“The Japanese — for whom ‘skinship’ promotes social bonding — have no inhibitions about being nude. Not even Speedos are permitted in onsen”

next two weeks, delivered us into Japan’s *tooi inaka* (deep country). Honshu measures 800 miles north to south, with astonishing diversity, from its rugged Mendocino-like coastline to the snowy, soul-soaring heights of the Japanese Alps.

“You’re free to ride off on your own,” Angela had informed us. But most road signs (and even gas station instructions) are written in Japanese script. And in the boondocks few locals speak English. Attempting to follow our designated route, even with the 1:200,000 map that Edelweiss supplied, would have been like trying to negotiate the Minotaur’s Maze. Except for two German couples who’d brought GPS and by the second week made solo forays, we ▶



How's your Japanese? Just do as the locals do and you can't go far wrong.

rode as two groups (the second led by Dutch Special Forces veteran Ted Goslinga) that departed each day about 15 minutes apart.

The rules were simple: No overtaking. No racing. No bottle and throttle until each day's riding was over.

"Irasshaimase! Irasshaimase!" The female staff were dressed in yukatas (lightweight kimonos) and they giggled as they bowed repetitively like bobblehead dolls. "Welcome! Welcome!" they intoned as we pulled up to the beachfront Hotel Imaiso Kawazu. It was

the same at every hotel, which varied nightly between western-style and traditional Japanese lodging. Despite its modern exterior, the Imaiso operated as a ryokan, with shoji-screened rooms.

We were issued yukatas (blue and white for the guys; gals each got a different floral pattern ... the younger the person, the brighter the colour). And slippers. I loved "going native"; why, I wondered, did most tour members resist? But there were rules. No shoes on straw-mat tatami floors. No house slippers outside the hotel. No toilet slippers — *yes, toilet slippers!* — outside your john. Which reminds me... why don't the Japanese use left- and right-foot slippers? And different sizes? The uni-foot slippers were three sizes too small. I felt like I'd had my feet bound as I tottered down to the onsen, the hotel's soothing hot spring baths.

Nothing was as relaxing and rejuvenating after a day's hard riding than a soak in a communal onsen. All our hotels outside Tokyo had these intimate, often sophisticated bath complexes, divided by sex. The Japanese — for whom "skinship" promotes social bonding — have no inhibitions about being nude. Not even Speedos are permitted in onsen. Nor tattoos. And Japanese patrons watch "gaijin" (foreigners) closely to ensure that



Serious local rider looks as cool as they come with Big Kwakka to match.

“I slept contentedly on a futon and rice-filled pillow spread out on a tatami floor”

before entering the water they sit on stools at mirrored public showers and soap every nook and cranny as if this was their wedding night.

Most nights we feasted on a traditional Japanese banquet. A taste for raw squiggly things was required. Every item came in its own ceramic platter, scalloped dish, or lotus-shaped bowl. Conga eel, clams, sashimi, miso soup, a salad of seaweed and octopus, a bubbling broth with mushrooms and vegetables, steaming rice with bamboo and radish, red bean-paste jelly dessert. And everything prepared with the fastidious care of a Japanese miniaturist. I slept contentedly on a futon and rice-filled pillow spread out on a tatami floor.

On day two we ascended Mount Fuji. A superb sunny day of almost endless twists and hairpins that transcended Fuji's barren treeline and began with a sensational highlight: The Kawazu-Nanadura loop bridge, a unique double spiral coiling into the mountains of the Izu peninsula like a DNA helix. Day three the kaleidoscope turned as we blazed and dipped and twined along forested mountain roads — tendril thin and hella fun — clinging to the mountainous contours of Shizuoka. Tea country, with steep hills and vales patterned in rows of dark-green corduroy. In a country of 127 million, you can't escape cities. We cascaded out of the mountains and crawled through a coastal conurbation to arrive at Hotel Irigo View, superbly situated atop Cape Irigo with dramatic sunset ocean vistas.

Our early-morning ferry across Ise Bay roiled beneath bruised, brooding clouds. Rain began falling as we were hauled off the ship. It didn't let up. That's life. We arrived at Nachikatsuura mid-afternoon sodden, the day's memories a gray blur. But memories of the Hotel Urashima Nagisa's six Zen-like onsen — two inside caves — will endure.

Speaking of Zen ... on day five we followed the Shingu River valley (shades of California's Russian River) to arrive in Hongū. The start point of the Kumano-kodo pilgrimage route, it also boasts Japan's largest torii — iconic shrine gates — soaring nearly 40m over rice paddies. The BMWs fairly sang with delight as we then climbed curlicue into the mountainous, pine-clad Kii Peninsula, passing one Shintō shrine after another to arrive at Kōya-san, with its scores of Buddhist temples and pagodas and air thick with incense. Finally, the spaghetti expressways of Kyoto, and a full rest day to ▶



It's not all modern and glitzy. Lovely rural hamlets are dotted all over Japan.



Tea bushes in the Shizuoka highlands.



Women in yokatas posing for selfies at Fushimi-Inari temple, Kyoto.



Edelweiss gang arriving at Motegi Circuit.



Edelweiss tour guide Ted Goslinga.



Gentle, contemplative running aboard a big bike. Nice.



Marcel Meier on a BMW 1200GS on the sands of Chirihama Nagias 'driveway'.

explore Japan's former imperial and cultural capital at will: Fushimi Inari shrine's endless arcades of vermilion torii, girls in kimonos like a flurry of cherry blossoms in spring, geishas scurrying to secret liaisons in the narrow back streets of Gion. For all its modernity, Kyoto immersed me in indelibly quintessential Japan.

This was late May. We'd missed the sakura — Japan's brief cherry blossom season — by a month. But day seven's sweeping downhill to Himeji Castle delivered classic Japanese scenery of lime-green bamboo and plum-purple maple and, in the valley bottoms, chartreuse rice paddies studded by quaint wooden machiya houses with elaborate gray tile roofs adorned with fish-like creatures to protect against fire.

We finally spilled out of the mountains next day to hit the Mendocino-like shores of the Sea of Japan after an exhilarating morning thrashing whiplash-sharp coils on pinched, gravel-strewn mountain roads.

"I should have rented a GS," moaned Greg from Perth, Australia, at dinner. "The Ultra isn't a bike for these kinds of roads. Anyone less experienced than me would have problems." How true! I'd ridden behind him for a while and was impressed at how he'd negotiated the writhing hairpins without spilling. Understandably, Greg opted out of next day's highlight: A beach ride along the solid-packed sands of Chirihama Nagisa Driveway.

I was excited to be heading, now, for the Japanese Alps via Gokayama, a hamlet of centuries-old, steep-roofed thatched farmhouses. By day 12 we were closing in on the highest traversable road in Japan. "When the weather plays along, this road provides some of the most stunning scenery in the country," Edelweiss' comprehensive tour



Mount Fuji from Daikanzan Observatory.



A tour member on a BMW 1200GS passes a Shinto shrine.

booklet stated. The weather didn't play along. We crossed in fog and rain. Still, there were windows when the clouds parted, hinting at vast alpine grandeur and giving brief glimpses of the road snaking to infinity far below. No chill could kill the warm fuzzy feeling of seeing eye-to-eye with onsen-loving snow monkeys — as red-faced as if sozzled on sake — at Jigokudani on Shirane's northern flank. And azaleas blazed like hot lava on the slopes of Mount Akagi volcano in a rare rain respite the next day, ending in Nikkō — a small mountain town where I spent our second rest day exploring the Toshō-gū temple complex.

The circle was almost complete. We turned south for Tokyo via the Twin Ring Motegi, Japan's premier race circuit and setting for the Japanese MotoGP. By chance we arrived

on a race day ... too early to see the races, but in time for Angela's group to take a pace-car-led round of the track.

Too soon I was on a whisper-quiet limousine bus (with white-gloved chauffeur) to Narita airport. As we departed, a uniformed girl stepped on with a sign reminding us to wear our seat belts, then a screen lit up: "Beware of noise leakage from headphones". She bowed at the driver as she stepped down. I was going to miss Japan's seamless efficiency, its orderly serenity. For two weeks I'd not heard the assault of reggaeton, nor seen any trash. I'd even forgotten how to use toilet paper. My last, fond memory of this bike-friendly country was a final "one-for-the-road" hands-free poop and pee, courtesy of Panasonic. **ARR**



Himeji castle, Himeji.