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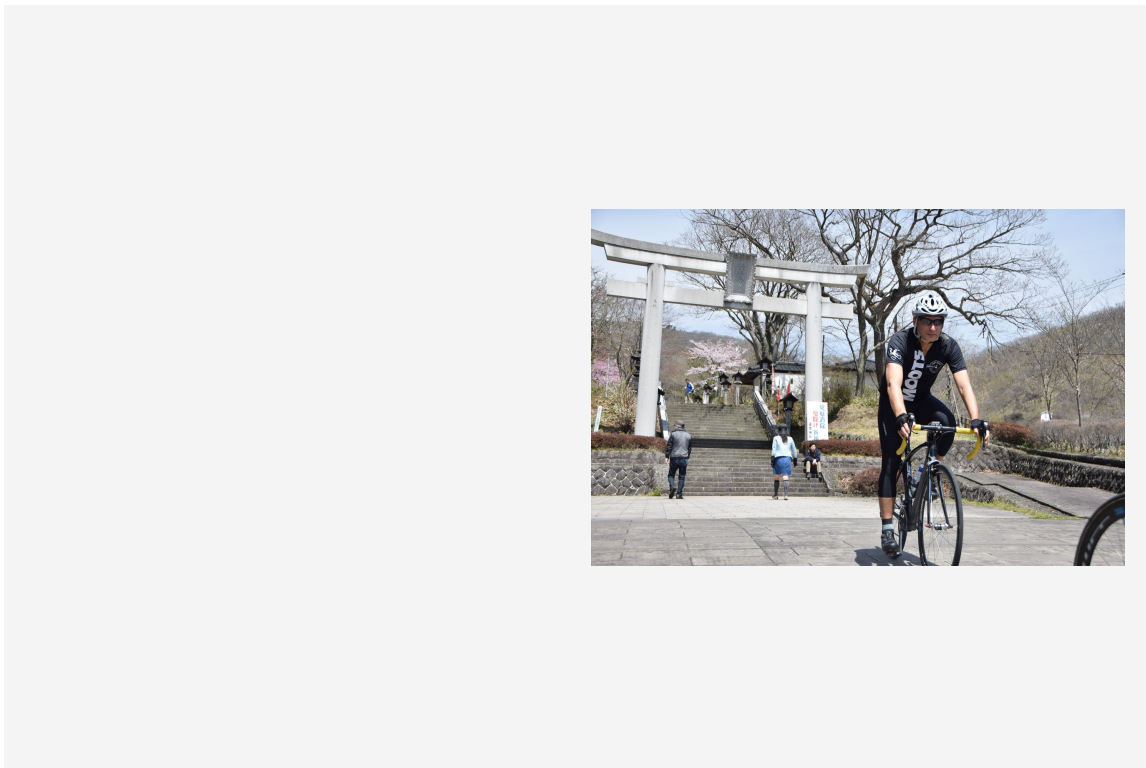
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The Luxe Cycling Tour in Japan That Will Make You a Better Rider

A posh resort in the foothills of Mount Nasu offers bike tours with a pro racer as a guide and plenty of pampering between rides



The author, James Sturz, riding by Nasu Yuzen Shrine. MAMI MATSUURA

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By James Sturz

Aug. 18, 2016 10:43 am ET

As I pedal past rice paddies, blooming camellias and dairy farms, a few last cherry blossoms speckle my arms and legs. But my eyes are on Atsuhito

Wakasugi's hands as I ride behind him through the mountainous forests and farms of Nasu in Japan's Tochigi Prefecture. While it's customary for a lead rider to point out cracks or fallen branches on the road, this 26-year-old former professional racer does it with such athletic grace—his wrist rotating languidly, each upturned finger wagging gently—that he might as well be sculpting a vase from clay. Never mind that we're hurtling downhill at 25 mph.

On a first trip to Japan last April, my wife and I visited the Niki Club resort, two hours by bullet train and private shuttle north of Tokyo. While she spent her days strolling the 34-acre grounds, indulging in its spa and investigating the complex's pottery and glassmaking studios, I went on its "Niki Ride." Introduced in 2012 by resident cyclist Mami Matsuura (who also teaches the resort's cooking classes), the program offers guided bike rides along some of the region's best country roads but goes well beyond simply sightseeing. The Niki Ride program is designed for cyclists of any level, covering everything from riding form to training methods and group cycling etiquette.

I met Mr. Wakasugi the first morning after breakfast (firefly squid, baby sardines, homemade tofu and honey-flavored pickled plums). When not leading rides, he's general manager of the local professional cycling team, Nasu Blasen. I'd requested a road bike instead of the hybrids the resort keeps, and the one he brought me was a beauty, a Japanese-made carbon-fiber Boma RS-I, the only brand his team races. After making preliminary adjustments to our bikes and stretching, we hit the road, as the songbirds cleared out of our path. There were just the two of us riding, with Ms. Matsuura and a driver trailing behind us in a support vehicle, a heavily decaded Subaru. (She joined us whenever we stopped.)

**We passed farmhouses,
towering cedar groves.
We pedaled by the
bullet-train tracks,
clocking in at 35 mph.**

Communication was strained; I quickly learned I was Niki Ride's first non-Japanese speaking customer. Ms. Matsuura spoke English fairly well, Mr. Wakasugi less so. But whatever was lost in translation was made up for by seeing this part of Japan with a pair of cyclists who seemed to know it inside out, made terrifically expressive

travel companions and brought an unusual amount of happiness to their job.

Mr. Wakasugi's happiness seemed especially evident each time we approached a hill. "Two-hundred meter climb! Eight-hundred meter climb!" he would call out. We passed farmhouses, wildflower-flecked fields, steep valley overlooks, towering cedar and bamboo groves and a Teddy Bear Museum (a sponsor of the team). "Two kilometers up, plus another kilometer really up!" Mr. Wakasugi would occasionally warn me before the road got even steeper.

The first morning, we rode for nearly four hours, covering 39 miles, stopping at a highway rest stop for some local delicacies (like "taiyaki," red snapper-shaped pastries filled with red-bean paste or cream). Then after lunch back at the resort

—pasta with firefly squid in a mustard-leaf sauce, and chocolate bicycles for dessert—we headed out again. This time, we stopped at a shrine where the 17th-century poet Matsuo Bashō had written haikus to willow leaves and at a bridge across a riverbed, where dozens of 50-foot-long flying carp wind socks dangled in the breeze. Then it was our chance to fly too, as we pedaled by the bullet-train tracks, clocking in at 35 mph.

THE LOWDOWN // TWO-WHEELING AROUND NASU, JAPAN



NIKI CLUB

PHOTO: NIKI CLUB

Getting There: The Shinkansen bullet train takes 69 minutes from Tokyo Station to Nasushiobara. A 30-minute taxi (*about \$61*) or the Niki Club's shuttle will take you to the resort.



THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Staying and Cycling There: The minimalist Niki Club resort has 44 rooms, including 24 mini-apartments designed by Terence Conran for extended stays and 14 suites by architect Takashi Sugimoto with heated red-pine floors and walls of glass (*from about \$376 a person, including breakfast and dinner, nikiclub.jp*). The neighboring Art Biotop glass and ceramic studio offers 20 simpler and less-expensive accommodations, and frequently hosts resident artists (*from about \$203 a person, nikiclub.jp*).

Back at the Niki Club I pulled off my cycling gear and eased into the hotel's onsen, glad to have stopped moving. The hot springs were another plus about cycling in Japan, especially once the forest's snow monkeys came to join me, scampering across the deck and leaping from tree to tree. Afterward, I indulged in a massage, plenty of sake at dinner and more bicycle-shaped desserts. (The other big bonus of cycling in Japan is that once you've finished riding and your nether parts are predictably sore, you can sit on a heated toilet seat to have the fully automated washlet soothe your bottom with any number of programmable sprays.)

The following morning, Ms. Matsuura offered me a choice: an easy "recovery ride," or a more difficult one to Mount Nasu's Chausu Peak. Warily, I chose the latter. "Eight and half miles up," Mr. Wakasugi said, smiling, as we got on our bikes. Maybe he meant kilometers, or even 850 meters? No, I already knew he was too precise for that kind of mistake, even with the language barriers. The ride was punishing, but Mr. Wakasugi kept encouraging me, while suggesting gear changes and different breathing patterns. We made some stops, at a public hot spring where the only thing that kept me from getting in was knowing how difficult it would be to continue after that. Then we passed some cemeteries, which suddenly seemed like good resting places.

The road kept rising, and then some more.

Niki Ride trips are individually geared to riders or to groups. Both road and hybrid bikes are available. Cycling coaches are all former or current professional racers with the local professional cycling team, Nasu Blasen. A bike tour targeted at foodies—and as such less focused on endurance and technique—samples local delicacies and area cafes. Package rates for the Niki Ride include accommodations, all meals, spa visits and accident insurance (*from about \$871 a person for two, and from about \$683 a person for three, nikiride.jp*).

But two hours after setting out, we made it to the top, after climbing more than 3,000 feet. Lunch was next, at a local restaurant where the bento boxes included eggs that had been boiled in that same hot spring we'd passed and were somehow delicious.

There was just a short downhill ride after that before we returned to Niki Club, where the eggless onsen beckoned me again. Ms. Matsuura, Mr. Wakasugi and I all hugged and bowed goodbye, a combination that felt

exactly right. That night, my wife and I forsook our bed and slept on the tatami in the room instead, and ate a few more firefly squid.

For two days, I'd felt like a local rider. Free from the usual pack of cycling tourists, I got to experience the quiet beauty of rural Nasu at just the right speed, with two people who know every crack on the roads, every nearby hot spring. And I became a better rider too.

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Appeared in the August 20, 2016, print edition as 'Joy Riding in Japan.'

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