

## Cherry Blossom Cycling

Meredith Stephens

It all began when my partner Roland and I were offered contracts teaching English at a university on the island of Shikoku, the smallest of the four main islands in the Japanese archipelago. When I examined the map of Shikoku, I noticed that it bore a faint resemblance to the shape of Australia. The scale, of course, was in contrast, but the fact that Australia is nearly twenty times longer from west to east wasn't apparent when I looked at the map. I simply found the faint similarity in shape reassuring. We planned to stay for two years to work while refining our Japanese language skills, and then to return to Adelaide. Before long we became a family of four, with the arrival of first Heloise, and then Hannah. It never occurred to me that in twenty years I would be alone on the island of Shikoku. And I would not have believed that, alone in Shikoku, I would have a brush with the law.

Teaching English was all-consuming, and I needed to find refuge in a traditional Japanese world where English was irrelevant. I was able to escape from my role as purveyor of western culture through my discovery of traditional Japanese crafts such as porcelain, pottery, laquerware and kimono. In particular, I found myself captivated by the beautiful fabric to be found in the *obi*, the wide exquisitely woven belt that is used to hold kimonos in place. *Obi* are treasured by their owners, and they are worn on special occasions such as Coming-of-Age-Day at age twenty, weddings, or in the new year. They are often a gift from mother to daughter, so are considered to be prized possessions. They are difficult to clean oneself, and this must be left to a specialist kimono cleaner. Nor can the wearer don an *obi* by herself; without a series of training classes she must be assisted by a specialist kimono fitter on the day of the occasion. For most of the year when they are not in use, *obi* are stored flat in special wooden chests with narrowly spaced drawers.



Nevertheless, not everyone has the space to store these family heirlooms, and rather than selling their treasured kimonos and *obi* to a secondhand shop and receiving a pittance for their treasures, their owners consider it more dignified to donate them. Since I'd already been entranced by them for years and had learned about the craftsmanship of these exquisite pieces of fabric, I started to collect them. I took them back with me on my regular visits to Australia. At four metres long they were quite heavy, and I would use them to line the suitcase to protect more delicate items that were sandwiched in between. Over the years more and more of my friends asked me to bring them an *obi*. Eventually I even managed to establish a side business selling

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*obi* to Australian quilt makers. They were able to insert these wide panels of fabric into their quilts, and produce originals of an unparalleled quality.

Years of residence on the island of Shikoku in Japan enabled me to feel extremely comfortable in such a foreign culture, and our planned stint of two years gradually turned into one and then two decades. My daughters were educated in local schools on the island, and years later they made the transition back to Australia with Roland to finish their education. I planned to follow them, but I had become so tightly ensconced in Shikoku, that I couldn't tear myself away. My *obi* business was prospering, and I decided to maintain my base in Japan and return to Australia every holiday. I had come to Japan in my youth, and one day woke up to realise I had grown old in Japan.

One of the pleasures of living on the island was being able to use my bicycle instead of having to drive. The distances that I had to cover every day were much less than in Australia, and I could keep fit without even trying. I always chose to ride a *mamachari*, a mum's bicycle, with baskets for doing the daily shopping. I even managed to transport both of my daughters on my bike when they were small. I could fit one-year-old Hannah into the baby seat in between the handlebars, and four-year-old Heloise would clamber onto the backseat as I held the bicycle steady. I would take Heloise to kindergarten every day, and sometimes she would fall asleep on my back as I gingerly cycled along the narrow, unevenly paved backstreets.

I also used the bicycle as a business vehicle. I would cycle to the NPO store, acquire some *obi*, and carry them home on the child seat on the rear of the bike, which could be flipped over to form a basket. I would pack the *obi* into boxes, and cycle to the post office to send them to the quilt-making association in Australia.

In time Heloise and Hannah learnt to ride their own bicycles. They were not allowed to cycle to primary school, for safety reasons, but they were allowed to cycle to middle and high school. After they returned to Australia I kept their bicycles for them so they could use them when they visited me in Japan. Our carpark had turned into a bicycle park.

Rumour has it that the only items that Japanese will steal are umbrellas and bicycles. It is the inconvenience of lacking either of these in the moment of need that prompts the impulse to steal, rather than the need to make an acquisition. Being naturally forgetful, I stubbornly persisted in not locking my bicycle, because I considered the likelihood of losing my key when I was in a hurry to be greater than having my bicycle stolen. I ignored the pamphlets that were placed in my basket by the police warning me to lock my bicycle. One day I parked it in an inviting position outside the NPO store, and to my great consternation became a victim of bicycle theft. However, I didn't mind too much because I still had Heloise and Hannah's bikes at home. Heloise's was a luminescent pink and Hannah's a bright orange, which are common colours for schoolgirls' bicycles.

Because bicycle theft is so common, policemen and women often randomly stop cyclists as they go about their daily business. They will confirm that the registration number of the bicycle corresponds to the registered owner, ask you a few personal questions such as what country you are from (if you happen to look somewhat foreign), and what you do for a living. Once they have confirmed that you are the registered owner, they send you on your way.

I consider myself a law-abiding citizen – except when it comes to riding a bicycle while holding an umbrella. I know that this is illegal in Japan, and that you should instead wear a raincoat. However, I think it's much easier to grab an umbrella when leaving the house in the rain than to struggle into a confining raincoat, so I always choose the former option. I hope that as a foreigner I can feign ignorance or linguistic incompetence if a police officer accosts me, but the police do have a point. There are obvious risks involved in cycling with an umbrella, such as

braking with the left hand while holding the umbrella with the right, all the while riding along slippery footpaths. Sometimes, unable to brake with my left hand, I hurl my feet to the ground to slow myself.

Expatriates on the island naturally tend to gather together, often with their Japanese spouses. We gather for western occasions such as Christmas and Thanksgiving, and Japanese occasions such as cherry-blossom viewing afternoon picnic and drinking parties. Joel from New York traditionally hosted the annual cherry-blossom party, but because of the rain on this occasion, he decided to host it in his apartment. That was how I came to be cycling one Saturday afternoon on Heloise's battered pink school bicycle. It was early April, and the rain had deposited the cherry blossoms onto the ground, turning the grey footpaths into a pink spectacle. Peddling along the narrow petal-strewn footpath along the banks of the river, umbrella in hand, I heard a resounding *konnichiwa* behind me. A young policeman on his motorbike was trying not to scare me with his friendly greeting. He accelerated towards me, maintaining eye contact, and addressed me confidently. I was jolted at the realisation that I was the object of his attention.

'Why are you riding a high-schooler's bicycle?' he enquired politely, having noted the sticker identifying the high school on the rear bumper.

'This is my daughter's bicycle,' I explained. 'She went to high school here five years ago. My own bicycle was stolen, so now I am using hers.'

Was he suspecting me of having stolen an unfortunate local teenager's bicycle? The truth is, I really love riding comfortable Japanese bicycles. I love the generous saddle and the silence and ease of peddling. Nevertheless, I had not come all the way to Japan to steal bicycles. My passion for collecting *obi* was far greater than that for riding *mamachari*.

Apologising for keeping me waiting in the rain, he made the obligatory check of the bicycle registration number and we waited for confirmation to be sent through to his phone. My mind was whirling. How much would be the fine? Was it true that they served brown rice not white in prison? Was this going to be the first entry on my criminal record? How would it affect my *obi* export business?

'Where are you from?' he enquired. I've been asked this question thousands of times, but I assumed that his intentions were polite and that this was not yet an interrogation. Besides, I didn't want to be fined.

'Australia,' I answered.

'Oh, Australia! Australia has a great rugby team.'

Flattered that he held my country in such high esteem, I decided to continue with the friendly banter in the hope of getting favourable treatment. Not knowing much about rugby, because Australian Rules football is the preferred game in South Australia, I cast about for something intelligent to say, when thankfully he changed the topic. 'If your daughter was at high school five years ago, she must be close in age to me. How old is she?'

He was trying to build a connection with me, I realised. 'She's 21,' I told him.

'I'm 25.'

'Perhaps you were at the same school. Did you attend Joto High School too?'

'No, I'm from Naruto.'

We had little in common after all. Rain continued to pour down on us. I reflected on the embarrassment of having a record for the offence of cycling with an umbrella. Coming from a state where it hardly ever rained and where cycling was not really an established mode of transport for middle-aged people, I certainly had never seen anyone cycling while holding an umbrella but once I had learned it was possible to combine these activities, and how convenient it was, it had become a regular habit.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting,’ he apologized again. Finally he received confirmation on his phone and addressed me with a relieved smile. ‘You are indeed the owner of this bicycle. You may be on your way.’

‘Don’t you mind that I am cycling while holding an umbrella?’ I asked.

‘We don’t want you to get wet,’ he assured me. ‘But next time, please wear a raincoat.’

And with that, I cycled off in the rain to my cherry-blossom viewing party, umbrella aloft.