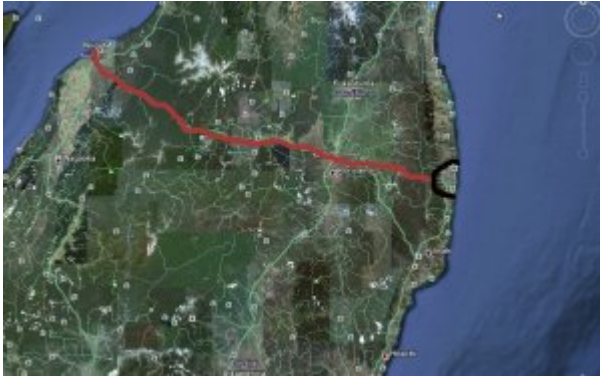


Attempt to hitchhike to the Fukushima Pacific coastline



An attempt to visit the damaged nuclear power plants in Fukushima, Japan.

July 31 hitchhike adventure from Aomori city



Women's Table Tennis
Coach Ohka Iwao

July 31: I was on my way back home from Aomori city to Niigata. I decided to take the Tohoku Expressway which passes through Sendai and Fukushima and the Banetsu Expressway from Fukushima to Niigata rather than the much slower Route 7 that runs along the Sea of Japan. Though the Tohoku / Banetsu route is 125 kilometers longer, it's faster because it's expressway and because most drivers are going longer distances.

I didn't have to walk to Aomori Chuo Expressway Interchange today like I did on July 18th. An off duty taxi cab driver saw me and offered me a ride which saved me an hour. But unlike July 18th, I had to wait over twice the time I waited before, 2.5 hours, to catch the next ride.

It was sunny but not too hot. After over an hour of rejections, I decided to stand at another traffic light. Most of the cars turning right at that traffic light were going on the expressway. This way I could walk past each of the drivers hoping for positive eye contact. Most of them ignored me. Some waved their hands in the Japanese manner that means, "NO!"

Two drivers offered me rides but both were going only as far as Hirosaki, only about 8% of the distance back home. I actually got into one of the cars but after thinking about it for a few seconds I decided I needed to look for "bigger fish." I consider hitchhiking to be akin of fishing. You don't have to take the small fish even if you catch one, you can return them back. Usually it takes longer to find a big fish, but when you do catch one, it's worth the wait. This is especially true when looking for cars going on an expressway. My first ride on the Tohoku expressway needed to take me at least 200 kilometers or 1/3 of the way toward home if I was to get home that day without having to resort to take a long train ride. When hitchhiking on a regular road, I'm happy for little fish that comes along no matter how short a distance the driver is going. But today via the expressway, I had to catch a fairly "big fish."

It was indeed worth the 2.5 hour wait for I finally caught one! At 11:30 a man who was going all the way to Sendai offered me a ride. His name is Mr. Ohka Iwao and he is a head coach of women's junior table tennis and one of the representatives of all of Japan in international tournaments! Mr. Ohka took me to Chojahara Service area, the largest one before Sendai, a distance of 304 kilometers and **over half of the way home!** I now knew for sure I would make it home by evening.

It's always great to ride with educated and influential people for the conversation is usually deep and interesting. In 1973, one year after China and Japan established diplomatic relations, Mr. Ohka took his team to China to compete with Chinese teams. He said his team never won even once though he made many subsequent trips. According to Mr. Ohka, the main reason the Chinese are so strong in table tennis is because good players can gain quite a bit of wealth. There's no money in table tennis in Japan, he says. During his first visit to China, Mr. Ohka met the Chinese premier Chou En-lai and was photographed with him.

Mr. Ohka's home is in the Shichigahama area of Sendai and close to the ocean. He was in Aomori city at the time of the earthquake and tsunami of March 11th. His wife witnessed the tsunami from the window of their home! Their house is on a hill and therefore was not hit by the tsunami, but she saw all the houses below swept away. For the next 3 weeks there was no electricity in Sendai. Mr. Ohka was unsure of road conditions, so rather than return home by car he took trains and buses in a circular route to get home carrying as much food with him that he could hold.



Sachi, Masako and Nozomi at
Chojahara SA.

I told Mr. Ohka that I would be fine at Chojahara Service Area. It was 3PM when we arrived and I've never experienced long waits for the next ride there. Three smiling young ladies, Sachi, Masako and Nozomi approached me and asked where I was heading. They all spoke some English (probably why they were interested in me) and said they would ask the driver of their van if he would take me. They all wanted to talk to me to practice their English. Unfortunately for both them and me, the driver said the van was too packed with luggage and there was no room for me to sit.

Almost immediately after the 3 girls left, a passing driver made eye contact with me and then stopped a few meters up the road. I walked cautiously to the vehicle not knowing for sure if the driver meant to pick me up or not. I've been wrong before. Sometimes drivers stop not far from me but with other intents in mind such as making a phone call. But this driver indicated he was stopping for me.

It was yet another sports coach, this time High School Soccer, Mr Shun. He took me as far as Kunimi SA in Fukushima Prefecture.

It was raining in Kunimi and so I decided to wait a bit hoping the rain would stop. After about 15 minutes and rain subsided and I walked out again to the parking area. After a few minutes, an older couple picked me up and took me to Adatarara Service Area. Their daughter is married to a man from the UK where she is now. I've often been picked up by parents whose son or daughter is married to a foreigner.

The Adatarara Service Area is always challenging for me. It's the closest point just before the Banetsu junction heading to Niigata, but the preponderance of the traffic is going a different direction toward the Kanto area, Tokyo and vicinity. This time in an effort to work around the problem, I held out an Aizu sign instead of the Niigata sign. The city of Aizuwakamatsu in the Aizu area is about 1/3 of the distance home from that point. I knew there were probably more cars going to Aizuwakamatsu than there would be to Niigata. This bore fruit. Within a relatively short time an older man picked me up. He took me to the Bandaisan Service Area which is just before the Aizuwakamatsu exit.

Now I was in an excellent situation indeed! The sky was clearer with no more threat of rain. A far higher percentage of cars were heading to Niigata from that point. After only a few minutes waiting, and just before sunset, a young married couple who were headed to Joetsu picked me up and took me to an expressway bus stop on the Banetsu expressway which is relatively close to home. From there it was a short 10 minute walk to the train station, and only 180 yen train ride 2 stations the rest of the way. I arrived home 8:50PM. □