

Hitchhike Adventure During Golden Week



Another oldie goldie adventure from my old website I am reposting.

On April 30, 2004, I hitchhiked 500 kilometers from Niigata city to Nagoya, the 3rd largest metropolis in Japan. It was the second day of "Golden Week." Below is a brief description of what Golden week is all about:

The Golden Week is a collection of several national holidays within seven days in the end of April and beginning of May. It consists of four national holidays: Green Day (Midori no hi) on April 29, Constitution Day (Kenpo kinenbi) on May 3, "Between Day" (Kokumin no kyujitsu) on May 4 and the Boy's Festival (Kodomo no hi) on May 5. (Taken from <http://www.japan-guide.com/topic/0005.html>)



Tetsunori

The most interesting person who picked me up on the way was a 24 year old Buddhist monk by the name of Tetsunori. He said he sat down in mediation for two weeks straight in a cross legged position without sleeping on 3 different occasions! He was not allowed to sleep nor move during this time! I asked him how it went. "My legs hurt" he replied. I told Tetsunori all about Jesus and my life as a missionary and he told me all about his life as a monk. I was surprised to learn that he is allowed to listen to any kind of music he likes or watch any type of trashy Hollywood film. I would think they would have more separation from the world. But Japanese Buddhists have much more freedom than other Asian countries. They are allowed to marry and have children which is not allowed in Thailand or Tibet. Tetsunori says that he is the 17th generation of Buddhist monks that have been responsible for the care of a temple he lives in. I pray that the Lord used me to plant some seed of the Word of God into his heart. Buddhism is another "works religion". Only the Blood of Jesus Christ can save us! I told Tetsunori that Jesus' Message is simple enough that a young child can understand. We both agreed that if only

highly intellectual people can attain to knowledge of salvation, not many would be saved. I know I wouldn't be. I couldn't even spell the word "intellectual" correctly and had to look it up! ☐

In the Nagoya area I stayed with my Brazilian friend Paulo and his family. He took me to a typical Japanese Golden Week festival.



Paulo with his youngest son,
Enoki



Brazilian children dancing



The flags in the shape of Japanese carp are called Koinobori in Japanese. They are flown every year from April till the end of Golden Week.



Booth of the Brazilian school in Okazaki, Aichi Prefecture.

"Koinobori. Carp streamers, called *koinobori* in Japanese, decorate the landscape from April through early May in honor of Children's Day on May 5. In Japanese culture, the carp symbolizes courage and strength because of its ability to swim up a waterfall. Since these are traits desired in boys, families traditionally flew koinobori from their homes to honor their sons. Ranging in size from about a foot to several meters in length, the koinobori resemble jewel-toned sea beasts swimming through the watery, azure skies. May, 1998." (Taken from <http://www.hardfocus.net/stevie/koinobori.htm>)

On May 3rd. I left downtown Nagoya at 1:30 PM to start back home. This is rather late to hitchhike another 500 kilometers, but I couldn't leave any earlier. It was absolutely imperative for me to be back home sometime this evening in order to perform a Christian style marriage ceremony the very next day! I opt to hitchhike at least part way to save some money.

Though I like to be cheap on myself, in order to save some time to get out of the busy city center, I took a 20 minute train ride to Tajimi, a small town that is close to the Chuo Expressway. This expressway passes through Nagano Prefecture which is on the way to Niigata. It is also a tried and proven route I have traveled many times and the same route I used to travel to Nagoya.

The entrance to the Chuo Expressway is about 3 kilometers distance from the train station, a bit too far to walk because I am pressed for time, so I caught a ride from a kind man going that way. I arrived at the expressway entrance about 2:30 PM. So far so good!

I was not surprised to find most of the traffic heading back the opposite direction to Nagoya. I know that at least SOME drivers would be headed to Nagano, but after waiting more than 30 minutes I was getting a bit discouraged. The drivers that were heading the direction I wanted to go ignored me, but others offered me a ride going back to Nagoya. I knew there is a fairly large parking area called Utsutsutoge only 5 minutes down the road toward Nagoya, so I decided to take up the next offer going that direction (the opposite way I intended to go) thinking that I could find my way on foot to the other side of the parking area which heads back in the right direction. I have done this from time to time when I thought it was necessary. To date there hasn't been a single parking area I haven't figured out how to get to the opposite side. Some have a foot bridge to cross over but most have access roads which run parallel to the expressway with a tunnel going under the expressway. But the Utsutsutoge parking area is the *very first* expressway parking area to have neither! It is situated in mountains with no access road running parallel to the expressway. There was no way I could get to the opposite side going in the right direction unless I would attempt to cross the expressway on foot – something extremely dangerous if not illegal! Cars were whizzing past as fast as 140 KM per hour. That means to give myself at least 5 seconds to cross safely both the East bound and West bound lanes, I would had to wait for both directions to clear for a distance of at least 200 meters or about the length of two football fields. That was not going to happen. It was heavy traffic during "Golden Week" which is vacation holiday time in Japan when folks travel long distances to see their relatives or go sightseeing. Back in 1998 I did the cross the same expressway in this manner, but it was in a area far from the big city with few cars passing that time of day. Happily I wasn't spotted by the police.

All was not lost, however. I knew that though I had to keep heading the opposite direction from what I originally planned, I still had a few more options. One was to travel as far as Maibara from where I could catch a ride on the Hokuriku expressway which would take me to Niigata. But this route is much longer. It would add another 150 KM to my journey. Another possibility was to try a new expressway route that I had never traveled on before. It's

called the “Tokkai-Hokuriku”. This also heads toward the Hokuriku expressway which would take me to Niigata, but cuts the distance in half. The reason I never attempted to travel this route before is because the expressway is not completed in the middle (at that time). There is a stretch of 35 kilometers of normal road connecting both ends. My third option was to travel to a point I could get off the expressway I was on now and hitchhike back the opposite way.

The driver who picked me up at Utsutsutoge suggested that the Tokkai-Hokuriku route may be the best one for me. He said he traveled it only very recently toward Toyama. I knew if I could get as far as Toyama, it would be a piece of cake the rest of the way – or so I thought! More about that later.



On the map the blue line represents the route to Nagoya. The red line was my return trip. The green line was a possible alternate route which though much more out of my way, is a route I had traveled much before. The part of the red line that crosses Honshu toward the Sea of Japan and connects two points of the green line ending at Toyama (name not listed on the map) is the Tokkai-Hokuriku, a new route I had never used before.

After a 40 minute wait, a car with 2 men and a women took me half way to Toyama. Their names were Mitsuru (the driver), Yoshinori and Rie, all friends employed at the same company. We traveled though some of the most beautiful mountain areas of Japan with lots of lakes, rivers and even a waterfall.



(Left to Right) Mitsuru,
Yoshinori, Rie and me



One of the many lakes along the
way

They couldn't take me as far as I would have liked but dropped me off at a tourist area with other parked cars and a constant flow of traffic. It took me at least a half hour to get my next ride, a married couple by the names of Hiroshi and Masayo. I had something in common with them. They both spent a year living in Moscow and could speak Russian! We exchanged a few sentences

in Russian. There are not many Japanese people interested in Russia. Only a very small percentage of the population is interested in visiting, and only a very tiny percentage who learn the Russian language.



With Hiroshi and Masayo

It was 7:30 in the evening by the time we arrived in Toyama on the Hokuriku Expressway. I still have some 250 kilometers left in my journey! The winds were blowing very strong along the Hokuriku which runs close to the Sea of Japan. So strong in fact that the cars and trucks were swayed sideways by heavy gusts! So though I originally told Hiroshi and Masayo that I would get off as soon as we arrived at Toyama to hitchhike further, because of the wind and the lateness of time, I lost confidence and turned to "the arm of the flesh" and decided to take the train the rest of the way. They themselves encouraged me to do the same. We thought there would still be trains going to Niigata at 8PM. We were wrong!

As it turned out, I missed the last train by about a half hour. There was no way I could get home by train that night! So Hiroshi and Masayo offered to take me back to the expressway entrance. I lost 45 minutes of precious time because I didn't have faith to continue hitchhiking, and now I was forced to hitchhike like it or not!

I was desperate! It is now completely dark, about 8:15 PM. Hitchhiking is much more difficult at night. A few cars with Niigata license plates seemed to slow down for me. I ran up to them in excitement thinking the driver would offer me a ride. This only caused the driver to become afraid of me and he fled away! One man stopped and I asked him a pleading tone of voice to take me at least part way home. He refused. So I realized that I needed to calm down and have more faith that God would come through for me. A pleading and desperate sounding tone of voice was working against me.

After about 45 minutes a man offered to take me as far as Arisomi – a large parking area a good distance down the road. I knew from experience that it was a very good place to get my next ride.

Most of the people ignored both me and the paper sign I was holding:  – Niigata.

At the parking area I tried to talk to the few who made eye contact. One man seemed to be willing to take me but his wife was not! She had a look of apprehension in her eyes. So I politely excused myself and left.

I don't like to make the Japanese people feel they must do anything for me. I try to leave it up to them. I know that God's sheep are always around somewhere. Sometimes they seem to be only 1 in a thousand. It was now 9:30PM and the cold attitude most people had was understandable. Why was I so dumb to get myself into such a situation anyhow?

After many rejections I decided to step away from the crowd and stand near the expressway entrance. This way more drivers would see me. But as I turned to go, one couple I had asked only a few minutes before approached me. The wife began chiding me for letting myself get in such a fix! I just smiled and calmly said that I had misjudged the time and had hoped to get a train, but there were no more trains. She softened her voice and said if it was all right with me, they would take me as far as Nagaoka – about 90% of the rest of the way! Of course I was very glad to accept their offer.

Throughout the journey they were both talkative and asked me many questions about my life. The wife asked me what I teach. I told them about Jesus and why He was killed on a cross. Most Japanese don't know or realize the meaning of the cross. They don't know that crucifixion was the preferred method of executing criminals during the reign of the Roman Empire. And so I make it a good history lesson for them. Japanese people tend to be very indifferent toward religion in general, but because they like to learn history, I try to approach them from this angle.

About half way into our trip the couple conferred with each other and decided to take me the rest of the way home – an extra distance way out of their way of at least 100 kilometers! And half of that is by low road. I refused their offer at first but the husband insisted several times. So I left it at that. It was my final answer to prayer to be home that night! Though it was after midnight when I finally arrived home, there was still plenty of time to get a good night sleep in preparation for the next day. I had to be on a train at 8:02 that morning to travel a 100 kilometers back in the direction I came!