



HEALING

A Portland bike traveler finds hope and *hanami* on a tour of Japan honoring her late mother

WATERS

STORY BY ELLEE THALHEIMER

PHOTOS BY MOMOKO SAUNDERS

In February 2009, Momoko Saunders carried a pail of water and walked with her sister Sakura past the gray memorials in Heiwa Park Cemetery in Akita, Japan. They had flown in from the U.S. for *haka-mairi*, the tradition of visiting the graves of loved ones. Seven years earlier, their Japanese mother, Masako Susukida, had died of a quickly progressing cancer, leaving Saunders without a mother at 20.

The sisters traipsed across the steep, snowy hillside. Lining the frozen ground were simple, polished concrete tombstones etched with family seals. Fog socked in the graveyard, blocking the view of the surrounding mountains. Momoko put the pail down, prayed, expressed her gratitude, and asked for guidance. Then, as tradition dictates, they poured the water little by little onto the tombstone to carefully wash it. They placed flowers at the site and left.

For Momoko, her feelings of grief for her beloved mother were complicated by memories of rejection, a subsequent eating disorder when she was a teenager, and depression. The best way to work through all that turned out to be churning the pedals of her Surly Cross-Check.

“I visited Japan to honor my mother,” said Momoko, an avid bike traveler from Portland, Oregon. “But I also really wanted to explore Japan on a bike. I didn’t realize at the time that I’d end up processing my mother’s death.”

After her sister Sakura flew home, Momoko spent the next month cycling 1,200 miles around Kitakyushu and the southern region of Honshu, the main Japanese island, an experience that was at times euphoric and unsettling but ultimately transformative.

Forged by volcanoes, this mountainous region is veined with rivers, surrounded by islands, and edged with spectacular coastline. On her first day, she pushed off from Tokyo. It took her an entire 70-mile day just to leave the lights, traffic, and chaos of the city.

She cycled the Shimanami Kaido, a 70-kilometer dedicated bike route from Onomichi City that hops six islands to Imabari City on Shikoku, the smallest of Japan’s main islands. Momoko glided over the glorious, bicycle- and pedestrian-dedicated suspension bridges spanning the indigo and turquoise waters of the Seto Inland Sea.

On her bike tour, Momoko felt the weight of the gaze of Japanese society, just as she had the gaze of her mother. Then, one day, the gods of bike travel threw her a bone.

Another day, she sprinted on her bike and barely made a ferry to the tiny island of Shodoshima. Once on the mountainous isle, she still had a monstrous ride to her campground. She arrived and, to her surprise, the campground had its own *onsen* — a Japanese bathhouse situated around a hot spring. So she spent the evening soaking in steaming water and looking over an exquisite bay from the onsen balcony.

Despite the good moments, something was disquieting about the trip. People around her were always polite, but Momoko noticed they would stare at her, then look away quickly, avoiding eye contact. It was a bag-clutching vibe. She felt ignored, unseen, excluded.

“Everyone thinks a Japanese girl should be beautiful, made up, and wearing the latest trends,” said Momoko, who spoke passable Japanese and wore bike shorts, knee-high wool socks, and combat boots while riding. “There was a lot of bad weather, and I looked like a wet rat a lot of the time. I didn’t smell great, and my clothes were getting holes from being worn over and over again.”

The feeling of rejection made her think about her relationship with her mother, which had been loving but not perfect. Momoko remembered visiting Japan with her mother and wearing a tank top that let her bra strap peek out. Everywhere they went, her mother apologized for her, saying it was an American style.

“She never accepted me,” said Momoko, who had sometimes tried to act and dress the way her mother wanted. “She wanted me to be neat and fastidious, and thinner. Japanese mothers are hard on their kids. It’s how they show they care.”

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Outside of Onomichi City, Momoko rode through the pouring rain on a terrifying sliver of a shoulder on a busy road. Trucks showered her with gutter water. She stopped for shelter at a mall. In the bathroom, she wrung out her clothes in the sink. People disapproved. She slogged through the mall, found a laundromat, and stripped down straight into the dryer, her hair

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The author during her tour of Japan.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BIKE TOURING AND MENTAL HEALTH

“Living with anxiety and depression is like living in a world filled with tall weeds that you can’t see over,” said Megan Moseley, physical therapist, Trauma Response Exercises (TRE) practitioner, and owner of Bodywise Physical Therapy in Portland, Oregon. “Activities like bike touring (extended physical exercise in nature) fills your world with flowers, reducing the amount of space the weeds take up.”

Moseley, who is an avid cyclist and a physical therapist annually on Cycle Oregon, works with clients dealing with panic, anxiety, depression, trauma, and pain. She thinks bike touring can be a powerful element in healing.

“The repetitive movement of pedaling and constant state of motion keep you connected to your body and not spinning your thoughts,” said Moseley. “Powering the machine of your bicycle forward provides a sense of accomplishment. A sense of beauty and connection to the outdoors restores you.”

In more scientific terms, exercise stimulates your brain’s reward center — the system of dopamine pathways that initiate feelings like hope, pleasure, and motivation — which can relieve depression. The scientific journal *Neuropsychopharmacology* published a study in 2015 that found eight weeks of exercise increased dopamine receptor availability in recovering drug addicts, reversing the damage to the reward center.

Some of the latest research, also published in *Neuropsychopharmacology* (2019), suggests that lactate, a metabolic byproduct of exercise, lowers anxiety and increases resilience to depression. And the *Lancet* (2018) published a study that found that people who cycled had 21.6 percent fewer poor mental health days than people who did not exercise.

To increase the therapeutic aspect of your bike tour, Moseley suggested not just having the experience but also “planting the experience.” So when you pass under a massive redwood tree, notice how it makes you feel awe. When you make it to the top of a pass, notice your gratitude and elation. Being mindful about what feels good is how you plant experiences (and dopamine receptors) like flowers.

matted and dirt on her face.

“I thought, ‘**%#\$ it,’” said Momoko. “I was so cold and wet, even scared from the ride.”

There, wet and wearing a skirt and tank top in the mall laundromat, she let go of caring what Japan thought. She let go of caring about being accepted. In that moment, she felt a rush of freedom. For a long time, Momoko had tried to be perfect for her mother. But she never had been, and she never would be. She began letting go of a deeply buried need for her mother’s approval.

In the laundromat, a woman approached Momoko. She expected a disapproving lecture, but instead the woman befriended her and ended up hosting her for the night. Looking back on the whole thing, Momoko wondered if she had been anticipating people’s criticism out of habit and expectation — and if that had affected her experience.

The trip continued. Momoko visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. She walked her bike along the ocean floor in the Kanmon Pedestrian Tunnel, a 780-meter-long underwater pedestrian passageway connecting Honshu with Kyushu. In Okayama, she snoozed at the base of the statue of Momotaro, the famous Japanese folklore hero and her namesake, who was said to be born from a peach. Dirty and cold, she pedaled up to the renowned Dōgo Onsen in Matsuyama. She soaked in its hot spring waters where people in Japan (including the imperial family) have bathed for over 1,000 years.

In the hip town of Fukuoka, Momoko rode to a park during *hanami* — the Japanese tradition of enjoying the transient beauty of flowers. The soft pinks and magentas of cherry blossoms cut against the brilliant blue sky. Saunders dawdled around clusters of picnickers. Music filled the air as did the smell of local food. Eventually a number of people asked her to join them on their tarps.

“The full sensory experience from the saddle — the smells, sense of space, sounds, and connecting with the culture — triggered memories of my



mother,” said Momoko, reflecting on how her trip began a healing process for her. “I was alone, and the riding put me into a meditative state with the hours of repetitive movement. For long periods of time, my mind was blank. So unconscious stuff bubbled up.”

Bike touring has always had healing powers for Momoko. Her first trip was a solo two-week trip in Europe on a 10-speed Schwinn with homemade panniers in 2007.

Along a local bike path in Holland, she cycled past backyards and smelled the vegetable gardens. She strolled around a market on the outskirts of Paris, far from tourists. As she rode through Nimes in southern France, she navigated the electric commotion around a bullfight. Just because she could, she rode through the night from The Hague to Amsterdam.

“It was weird that I liked touring,” said Momoko. “I poured sweat. I was so exhausted. I thought, ‘Why am I doing this?’ Simultaneously, I was smiling and having a blast.”

Momoko also didn’t expect that on the road she would find a different version of herself. Her body was no longer something to punish or ignore, but a means of bringing her to new places.

“I remember eating a chocolate bar at the end of my longest day, 80 miles,” said Momoko. “It was so good, and I felt good eating it. That was a completely new experience. Though I didn’t look

any different, I felt achieved, and balanced, like cycling had changed the chemical balance in my brain.

“Bike touring is my Prozac.”

In January 2020, Momoko quit her job as the general manager at Biketown, Portland’s top-notch bike-share program that organizes and maintains over 1,000 bikes around the city. Her departure was the capstone to five career-driven years.

“I’ve always struggled with depression, even now when I have a great career and an awesome husband,” she said. “The last five years, I’ve been very driven, which hasn’t helped, mentally or physically. Bike touring pushes away the fog of what everyone else wants me to be and reminds me of who I am. So I’m going to ride solo from New Orleans to Miami. To mend myself.”

Her plan after her trip to New Orleans? Possibly to start a family. Possibly to be a chief operating officer. That’s something she’ll try to sort out on tour.

“Thinking about my mom,” said Momoko, “I think she’d be embarrassed about me sleeping in parks and whatnot. But part of her would think, ‘My daughter is pretty cool.’ The mountains I’ve climbed, the people I’ve met, the things I’ve seen.” 

Ellee Thalheimer is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.