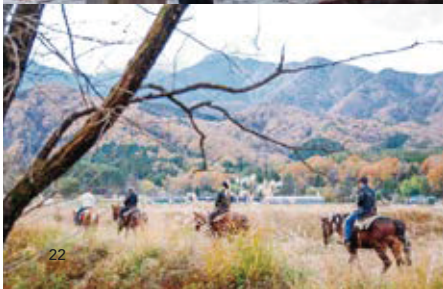


Celebrating the Legacy of Horseback Riding in Yamanashi

by : Igor Debossan (former Trainee from Minas Gerais, Brazil)

When it comes to visiting Japan, the first image that comes to mind is the Shibuya scramble crossing in Tokyo or historical sites and temples in Kyoto. If you are very into Japanese history and culture, you might think about Hiroshima or Nagasaki because of World War II, or Osaka, another big metropolis. However, beyond the guidebook path, there is so much more to explore in Japan.



Living in Japan, specifically in Yamanashi, made me realize that Japan is a synergy of untamable nature and unstoppable urbanization, so escaping the big cities to have an authentic countryside experience allows you to better connect to the country's history, people, and culture. In a ranking of Japanese cities in the countryside people most want to move to, Hokuto City, located in northwestern part of Yamanashi Prefecture, is ranked number one. That would be enough to make any visitor want to come to this city of 40,000 people to experience country life, but in the Yatsugatake area of Hokuto City where you can find the Yatsugatake mountain range, you can also get in touch with a unique culture: horse breeding and horseback riding.

Yamanashi Prefecture's connection with horses has a long history. Stories about the Kai horses date back to ancient times, and during the Warring States Period (1467-1600)—a period in Japanese history marked by constant military conflict—horses and refined military tactics used by mounted samurai were responsible for changing the balance of power between states.

Takeda Shingen was the famous warlord that ruled Kai Province (the old name for Yamanashi Prefecture) during the Warring States Period, and to celebrate his memory, every year in April Kofu city holds the Shingen-Ko Festival. A grand parade reenacting the battles is carried out in the festival, with more than a thousand people dressed as warriors. The well-known “Takeda cavalry” is also remembered and well-bred horses are especially brought

from Yatsugatake to take part in the parade.

Japan is actually home to eight native horse breeds, but despite their long history in the country, it is rare nowadays to spot one of them. Horses arrived from Mongolia around 250-538 and especially flourished in Hokkaido and Okinawa. Back in those days, Japanese horses were relatively small in size in comparison to western ones, but during the Meiji Period, Japanese horses were bred with western ones in order to create bigger animals to work as draft horses. Due to this, many Japanese breeds died out and now western breeds are the most commonly raised in Yatsugatake.

Geographically, Yamanashi is surrounded by mountains and has some plateau areas, making it the perfect environment for ranches and horse riding clubs. In the 1980s, one of Japan's largest equestrian stadiums was built in Yatsugatake, helping to boost the area's popularity among horse riders. After that, many competitions started being held every year, helping ranches attract more and more visitors.

One of these ranches is the White Saddle where my colleagues and I went to experience horseback riding. Access to the ranch from Tokyo takes two and a half hours by car. Another option is to take the express train from Shinjuku to Kofu (90 min), change to the local Chuo Line towards Kobuchizawa until Hinoharu Station (30 min), and then take a taxi for about 15 minutes.

White Saddle Guest Ranch is managed by Mr. Fukuda Satoshi, but the ranch was founded by his father more than 30 years ago, in 1988. On the day of our visit, he explained



that the temperature in Hokuto is perfect for horses, since even during the harsh Japanese summer the temperature is mild in that area.

The ranch takes care of 13 horses - most are used for trail riding lessons, but some horses are owned by people who use the ranch facilities to train for competitions. Both beginner and expert riders are welcome to join the trail ride and guests can choose from multiple tours tailored to their skill level.

Families and group of friends are the main visitors to White Saddle. Their horses are well trained, and since they do not bite or kick even families with kids can enjoy trail riding without any worries. However, there are some restrictions, and kids under 7 years or people weighing more than 85kg should refrain from riding, to ensure their own safety and reduce the burden on horses.

Horseback riding is an activity that can be done year-round, but depending on the weather, they advise that you wear comfortable and waterproof clothes. In autumn or winter you should wear layers and riding boots or sturdy shoes. Hiking boots and jeans are good options too.

We took this tour in November, so it was already cold in Yamanashi, especially in Hokuto city, but thanks to the sunny weather it wasn't as cold as we imagined, and was perfect for the ride. From the ranch, we could see the beautiful Yatsugatake mountains framing the scenery and the autumn colors.

For some of my colleagues, it was their first time riding a horse, but the ranch staff carefully taught us how to do it



step by step, giving advice all the time. Horseback riding can also be tough exercise. Maintaining the correct posture on the horse's back works muscles that are not used in a daily exercise routine at the gym or when running, and it can be great aerobic exercise.

I rode horses when I was a child, but after so long, it felt like it was my first time. It was my first time experiencing autumn abroad, and I could feel how beautiful this season is while riding, enjoying the pleasant sound of the horses and the wind, and the magnificent colorful landscape. The horse I got to ride was so kind and docile that I really formed a bond with her during the trail ride, making it one of my favorite memories from

this trip.

When I first came to Japan as a tourist in 2017 I was eager to find an experience like this one, but I was so busy visiting the most well-known spots in Japan that I didn't have the chance to explore a different side of the country. Yamanashi is such a special place for that. Here you can easily experience different activities, and horseback riding in Yatsugatake is just one example of a getaway that not only takes you out of the big city but also connects you with a living heritage of Japan, in this case the legacy of the ancient lords and the horse breeding culture.

I hope that those of you reading "The Yamanashi Grapevine" will have the chance to visit Yatsugatake and the White Saddle in the future to see its beautiful landscapes, feel connected to real Japan, and experience the horseback riding tradition of Yamanashi.

