

Boating Under Saruhashi

– the Monkey Bridge –

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Otsuki city, located in the eastern part of Yamanashi Prefecture 80km from Tokyo, might not be as well-known by overseas travelers as Fujiyoshida city where Mount Fuji stands, but it is home to a must-see National Place of Scenic Beauty – Saruhashi, the Monkey Bridge.

The 1,300-year-old wooden bridge crosses over the Katsura River, which flows between two high cliffs formed millions of years ago by the movement of tectonic plates—the Pacific Plate on one side, and the Philippine Plate on the other. Due to its origin, the two sides of the river have different geological formations, creating a fantastic and unique scenery.

Saruhashi is also famous for being selected as one of the Three Most Unusual Bridges in Japan for its ingenious cantilevered design. Although there are different stories about the origin of this unique design, the bridge was evidently named in accordance with a legend that the designer was inspired by the sight of monkeys holding hands to make a bridge to cross the river.

Deep valley with a river of limpid stream, precipitous cliffs with various plants, marvelously designed bridge... all these elements form a wonderful landscape. It was actually depicted as one of the works in the “One Hundred Famous Views of Edo”, a series by the famous ukiyo-e artist Utagawa Hiroshige, whose work had a marked influence

on European art towards the end of the 19th century as a part of the movement called Japonism.

Now we have the chance to enjoy the same view depicted by Utagawa Hiroshige in Edo times—boating on Katsura River. This idea was suggested by the former Japanese national cycling champion Ryohei Suzuki, who loves rafting and is fond of natural sceneries. “Boating Under Saruhashi allows you to better observe its smart and beautiful structure. You can understand what an amazing work it is when looking up at it from the deep canyon,” said Mr. Suzuki. After putting on rain boots, hats and life jackets, we followed Mr. Suzuki and got in a rubber boat. It fits up to eight people, and pets are also allowed to ride in it, which is good news for people traveling with their dogs. The boat moved slowly off the bank while Mr. Suzuki started paddling. The boat is mainly controlled by the staff, but visitors are also allowed to give it a try using the extra paddles provided on board.

It was a hot and humid day in July, but I soon felt pleasantly refreshed by the light breeze and the spray of water from the river. The water is so clear that you can see to the bottom; the cliffs are so tall that it is inconceivable how ancient people could construct the bridge without the help of any machine; you could feel that time stopped passing if a leaf didn't fall down onto the river...

Getting closer to the red bridge spanning verdant cliffs, I felt that I had entered the world drawn by Utagawa Hiroshige.

It takes 30 minutes to boat down and back, giving visitors enough time to enjoy Saruhashi from different distances. Mr. Suzuki and his team are also skilled photographers and can take nice pictures of your boat tour, which are perfect to be posted on social media. If you happen to be a sports enthusiast, I'm sure you'll also enjoy talking with the former cyclist to get more information about different sports that can be practiced in Yamanashi, some that are unfamiliar even to local people.

Back on the riverbank, we climbed stairs with hydrangea flowers on both sides. The best season to enjoy the sight of the more than 3,000 blooming hydrangea plants here is June to early July. Crossing the sea of hydrangea, we got to the entrance of Saruhashi. I took my first step cautiously, worrying that my weight would cause pain to the old wooden bridge, but I soon realized it was unnecessary as a crowd of children ran past me onto the bridge.

Saruhashi is a historical site, a work of art, a view of a famous painting; it is an ordinary path for local people as well. The past and the present are connected here, showcasing the wisdom and aesthetic tradition of Japanese. That is what drew me to Saruhashi, and why I recommend this experience to all visitors to Yamanashi.



Information

Reservation and more information about boating under Saruhashi can be found here:
<https://sites.google.com/site/saruhashiyuusuisa/>
