

*What Follows is a trip report from David Sheehan, the original "Descender". David recently took on a demanding job that requires significant international travel, which intrudes on his conditioning time. As you will discover in this report, Dave's determination to fit in bike riding into this Japanese business trip is a testament to his commitment to cycling.*

## **Echigo-Yuzawa, Japan**

### **David Sheehan**

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Our Japan sales team had their mid year meeting at the New Otani Resort in Echigo-Yuzawa. This is both a natural hot spring and ski area about 150 miles from Tokyo. The mountains in the area are between 1200 – 2400 m at the top. The sales meeting ended on Saturday at 1 pm. I went to the sports rental desk and got a bike. The bike was a low end, no suspension mountain bike. It had 21 gears which were sufficient, and a bell. The rear tire was badly out of true but not rubbing the brake that much. Wakai, the polite guy behind the desk spoke little English and apologized for the condition of the bikes. He also apologized that there were no helmets. I asked him to see if he could get one for Sunday.



Wakai either did not know any routes or could not communicate so I turned right out of the resort and started heading up. The grade was easy 5% but I was on the left side of the road because that is the way they drive in Japan. BIG adjustment. When I reached the top of the road (351) I hit a four lane road. I turned left and looked up and saw some bigger mountains. I decided to just keep going up as far as I could. Again very gradual grade 5-6% but steady. I noticed a small Inn to my right and the sound of multiple horned instruments playing at the same time but not the same song. I figured this was some type of school because there were many horns playing- there was a sign in Kanji. I followed the road for about 2 miles and it slowly started looping to the right. I noticed construction up above me and a switchback coming. I proceeded up and went by all the workers who were reinforcing the walls of the mountain with massive steel I beams. Every one of them had a hard hat with straps under their chin and a blue uniform. They are very organized.



As I climbed about another 1/10 mile I noticed a tunnel. Not good. Road narrows to two lanes, no shoulder and too long, 0.5 miles, so I could not make a run for it. As I approached I noticed a single lane road to the left of the tunnel. It went up so that was all I needed. I began climbing that road and came to switchback with a look back down the valley. I was high up from the town but realized it could not be that much as I had not been riding that long. I kept riding up and the growth became very thick with lots of trees and shade. This was 3 in the afternoon so the sun was high and it was a warm day and the shade was appreciated.

As I rode up I was amazed no one was on the road. I came up to some signs and took out the Japanese phone to snap some pictures. One sign had red letters so I figured it was a warning – I just hoped it did not say private road or keep out. The road was very gradual mostly 5-6% and as I rode I hit multiple switchbacks and could see there was still a lot of mountain to climb. I stopped and took out two electrolyte waters I bought (Aquarius brand- they are awesome). They were in my backpack and when I stopped to take off the pack I realized I was drenched with sweat. It could have been the heat and humidity or maybe the Japanese food- funky roots, vegetables and fish, I had been eating for the last 3 days - it could not be the mountain or could it? I continued to climb the single lane road looking for any road sign or landmark to figure out the name of the mountain. Nothing. The climb was about another 6-8 Miles (no bike computer) and for the most part it was steady 6% with a few pitches at 7-8%. There was thick underbrush, beautiful trees and much of the area seemed untouched. It did get cooler but I stayed drenched the whole way. The peak had a view of the city below and so I snapped a few pictures, including a self portrait (with my Descenders jersey on!) finished off the water and started the descent down. I had no helmet so I took it easy. I did have the thought – ok I tumble and get knocked out and I am found when? Get rid of those bad thoughts. When I was approaching the main road I came down right by the mouth of the tunnel. I am thinking – OK look to your left for oncoming traffic in the left lane as I knew I had to cross the road. I had looked right briefly and then a long look to the left- confirmed no cars, confirmed again and then started to accelerate when a loud horn hit me. I looked back to the right and a small car was coming right at me. I veered back to the right and drove on the shoulder a little. Remembering to look the opposite way and ride on the opposite side is like rewiring your brain after years of riding in the US. The rest of the ride was uneventful and got back to the rental place inside of two hours. I asked Wakai the name of the mountain and he guessed Omine based on my description. If it was Omine -it is just under 1200 m or 4000 ft. It was a fun ride, not super challenging but very remote and unspoiled.

I got up the next morning and did it again this time I went a little harder. Wakai had cleaned up the bike a bit and I was thankful he took pride in his work. I made the top in a little over an hour and it felt great. All in all a good make shift cycling adventure with all the vital ingredients: a bike, a mountain, and time to ride.

*David Sheehan*