

When I last wrote a journal for the center, I mentioned the Kazurabashi vine bridges that we visited in Shikoku. This was one of the most unique places that I got to visit in Shikoku, and probably in all of Japan! I didn't know much about the vine bridges before I went to Shikoku, but I saw them mentioned in a guidebook and thought it would be an interesting place to visit. To my surprise, my friend who is an ALT in Tokushima lives very close to these bridges in the Iya valley. After our trip, I did some research on this area because I was surprised that it was unknown to most of the people I had mentioned it to. I found out that Iya Valley is actually considered one of Japan's Three Hidden Regions*. I guess it's true!

There are three vine bridges in this area—one that is in a very tourist-y area, which boasts an extremely large concrete parking area that juts out from the mountainside, and two less-visited bridges nestled much deeper in the mountains. At my friend's suggestion, we took the extra time to drive to the further bridges and the scene was spectacular. These bridges are made of vines and wood, but these days have steel cables reinforcing the structure underneath the vines. A long time ago, these bridges were the only way to cross the river, and they could be conveniently cut to prevent enemy invaders from getting across. The two bridges that we visited were side-by-side and were well-worth the hour-long drive that it took us to find them. On the way there we were surprised at the small and windy mountain roads that we don't usually travel on in Mie. Seeing the small, traditional Japanese villages in the mountains along the way made this trip even more impressive and memorable.

When we got there, it had started raining, making the bridges slippery and surrounding the mountains and the river in a kind of mysterious mist. We were disappointed that it rained, but it turned out to make the experience even more memorable. There were hardly any other visitors, so we had a lot of time to enjoy the bridges and the view. I was really surprised that the spaces in between the wooden slats that made up the bridge were sometimes big enough for our feet to slip through. In a way, it seemed so dangerous to me. The bridges swayed as we walked across and I was surprised that such a place was open to tourists to freely cross. I wondered if anyone had ever slipped through the spaces and fallen to the river below.

By the time we left the bridges, we were pretty wet and tired. But this made our time at the vine bridges really unique. Unlike many tourist places in Japan, I didn't feel like I simply went and looked at a beautiful place like a temple. This time we really got to experience the tourist spot, which made a lasting impression on me. We never did get to see the other, more frequently visited bridge, but I have a feeling I didn't miss anything.

*The other two of the Three Hidden regions are Shiiba in Miyazaki, and interestingly enough, Shirakawa-go in Gifu, my favorite place in Japan.