

# A wooden bridge that shares the history of a famous Japanese tea-making region

Horai-bashi Bridge over the Oi River in Shizuoka Prefecture was recognized by Guinness World Records in 1997 as the longest wooden pedestrian bridge in the world. You can enjoy the river's flow and the seasonal scenery as you stroll across the bridge, feeling the gentle wood underfoot. This is especially true in winter, when visitors enjoy a magnificent view of Mt. Fuji. We made a visit to Horai-bashi Bridge.

(Text: Morohashi Kumiko)

Photo: Shimada City Hall



The current pier length is 15 meters, 8 meters of which is buried in the ground to maintain strength.

**H**orai-bashi Bridge is a wooden pedestrian bridge measuring 897.4 meters in length and 2.4 meters in width that spans the lower reaches of the Oi River in Shimada City, Shizuoka Prefecture.

Shimada City is one of Japan's leading tea-growing areas. "The history of Japanese tea has much to do with the construction of Horai-bashi Bridge," says Takahashi Hiromichi from the Agriculture and Forestry Civil Engineering Section, Shimada City Agriculture and Forestry Development Division.

"Tea production in the Oi River basin began to flourish around 1540. In 1869, soon after the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the retainers who had guarded the last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, started growing tea in the Makinohara Heights on the river's right bank. As cultivation stabilized, people from Shimada, on the

left bank of the river, began asking to cultivate the land, and a method of crossing the river between the banks was considered. However, the Oi River at that time was famous for strong currents that made it impossible to build bridges over it."

At the Oi River, which was also known as the most difficult section of the Tokaido' road, the *kawagoshi* system<sup>2</sup> for crossing the river was established and developed by a group of operative laborers



Above: The Makinohara Tea Plantation, which accounts for 40% of Shizuoka's tea production and is currently the largest tea plantation in Japan

Below: Horai-bashi Bridge around 1960. The original height was tall in anticipation of water level increases.





Shimada Oigawa Sungan (‘Suruga Bank of the Oi River at Shimada’), an ukiyo-e painting by Utagawa Hiroshige from Tokaido Gojusantsugi (‘Fifty-three Stations on the Tokaido’) depicting kawagoshi  
Tokyo National Museum Collection

called *ninsoku* who had mastered the skills of crossing the river.

However, when the system was abolished in 1870, Shimada’s laborers were left jobless, and the tea plantation on the Makinohara Plateau became the perfect place to find new employment. On the other hand, the former shogunate retainers on the Makinohara Heights also used boats to go to and from Shimada to obtain everyday goods, but they couldn’t cross the river when the water level rose, and being unable to cross the Oi River freely at all times posed a major problem for them. Therefore, a Shimada City inn-keeper named Shimizu Eizo and others started up a movement to build a bridge over the Oi River.

“Shimizu Eizo and other representatives of Shimada’s reclaimed land cultivators’ association submitted an application to the Shizuoka prefectural governor for permission to build the bridge. And making the most of traditional wooden bridge-building techniques passed down over many years in Japan, Horai-bashi Bridge was built,” Takahashi explains.

At first, Horai-bashi Bridge was toll-free for tea farmers and other agricultural workers, but charged others a small fee as a *chintori-bashi*.<sup>3</sup>

However, due to typhoons, heavy rains and other

factors causing water levels to rise, the bridge was washed away and rebuilt several times. In 1966, a full-on disaster restoration project was completed. The wooden piers of the bridge were replaced with concrete ones and the bridge has remained unchanged to this day.

“Wooden bridges are easily damaged, and repairing damage wrought by typhoons is expensive, so they’re very difficult to maintain. But we appreciate the wishes of the local people who have been safeguarding the bridge since its creation, and we’ll continue trying to preserve Horai-bashi Bridge’s traditional appearance as much as possible.”

Wooden bridges are comfortable to walk across and ideal for enjoying a view. Sometimes Mount Fuji is also visible, and on many days in winter one can see it clearly and looming large. In addition, every May, the Bonbori Festival is held, where Japanese lights called *bonbori*<sup>4</sup> are displayed on the bridge parapets, and various events, including traditional dances and taiko drum performances, are held. The festival lets visitors sense the atmosphere of the time when the bridge was built.

Also popular these days are Horaibashi 897.4 Plaza on the left bank of the Oi River, where a market and events are held, and Horaibashi 897.4 Teahouse, a rest area with a shop that sells various goods.

“They sell take-out green tea, *matcha* soft serve, and other products unique to a place that’s famous for its tea. We’d love visitors to enjoy some Japanese tea on a tatami-mat bench and take their time for viewing the wooden Horai-bashi Bridge, which blends exquisitely with the surrounding scenery. 🍵



You can get a clear view of massive Mount Fuji from Horai-bashi Bridge, especially in winter, when the air is clear.

Photo:PIXTA



Above: The soft feel of the wood creates a nostalgic atmosphere at Horai-bashi Bridge

Below left: Mount Fuji as seen from Horai-bashi Bridge. If you’re lucky, you can also get beautiful a view of Fuji reflected on the river’s surface.

Below right: At the Bonbori Festival, visitors can enjoy traditional Japanese performing arts, including shamisen (three-stringed traditional Japanese musical instrument) and Japanese taiko drum performances.



Horaibashi 897.4 Teahouse, where you can buy local sweets and Shimada tea souvenirs.

Photo:Shimada City Hall

1. The Tokaido Road was an important arterial road for east-west traffic throughout ancient and medieval times. It is one of the Five Highways (see p.12-13), a traffic system fully developed and expanded in the 17th century.
2. A system of crossing a river on foot with a *rendai* (river palanquin) or on horses and so on. The system was strictly regulated, including the price of a ticket to hire *ninsoku* or use a *rendai* to cross the river. A unique culture developed around the system, but it was abolished in modern times.
3. A bridge over which a toll is charged for passage. The toll for the Horai-bashi Bridge today is 100 yen for adults and 10 yen for children (elementary school age and younger) (as of August 31, 2023).
4. Lighting equipment consisting of a candleholder with a long handle and a paper or silk cover. An *andon* (lantern) with an attached handle and a base attached below.