

The Bridges of the Shimanto River

Most of the bridges over the Shimanto River pass low over the surface of the water and are only wide enough for a single car to pass. They are built without balustrades and are designed to withstand the annual summer floods. During floods, water and driftwood flow over the bridges with minimal resistance. These bridges, *chinkabashi*, were first built in Kyushu, but they are found in other rural areas of western Japan. Some have been replaced by modern steel bridges that span the river above the highwater mark, but the *chinkabashi* remain a symbol of the Shimanto River and are preserved as part of the landscape.

Connecting communities

The 196-kilometer Shimanto River has 47 *chinkabashi*. They have a simple concrete form and low piers, which make them relatively inexpensive to construct. Many were built by the men and women of the local communities during the 1930s to 1950s, to connect the villages on either side of the river.

These bridges are still an integral part of the communities along the river. Standing on a *chinkabashi* offers an unobstructed view of the river and the eel and shrimp traps that are set in shallow water near the piers. Kayaks, canoes, and *yakatabune* pleasure boats glide below the bridges.

Iwama Chinkabashi

One of the most recognizable bridges in the area is Iwama Chinkabashi. The view of the bridge, cutting across a wide curve of the river with a white crescent of pebble beach in the foreground, is often featured in travel posters and sometimes television commercials. The bridge is about 30 kilometers northwest of Nakamura, the area's largest town. It is accessible by car and bus.

Sada Chinkabashi

This is the longest *chinkabashi* at 291.6 meters and the closest to the town of Nakamura, where the Shimanto River reaches the Pacific Ocean. The bridge is around 6 kilometers from the center of the town, and easy to reach by bicycle. Rental bicycles are available at Nakamura Station.

Nakamura's Red Bridge

Not all of the bridges over the Shimanto River are low-slung *chinkabashi*. The Shimanto River Bridge is a 500-meter-long two-lane steel bridge that spans the river and connects to the center of Nakamura. Its eight red trusses have earned it the nickname "Akatekkyo" (red iron bridge), and it is a notable landmark of Nakamura. Ferries forded the river before the bridge was constructed, but frequent flooding made the crossing dangerous. In 1918, a ferry carrying local students capsized, and 11 people died. Construction of the bridge commenced after the accident.