

Car Camping (車中泊, shachuuhaku) in Japan: Preliminary Findings of Research en Route

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Abstract

This working paper describes preliminary autoethnographic research on car camping, a leisure activity enjoying contemporary popularity in Japan. As an academic topic, there seems to be nothing available in English nor in Japanese on the topic at the time of this writing. Therefore, this essay is a preamble to a more extensive project that, as many anthropological projects do, emerged from everyday life and reflections thereon. My practice of car camping evolves from practical experience over the course of an ongoing research project on Pokémon decorated utility hole covers (Pokéfuta, see Occhi 2023) located in various tourist facilities across Japan. The necessity of travelling over distance to places not always easily reached by public transportation combined with the ongoing concerns brought by COVID-19 virus and a tight budget have encouraged me to join the ranks of Japanese automobile drivers who use their car as a sort of second home on the road. As I began to take this practice more seriously as a research topic in itself, I investigate media representations of and by these car campers who portrayed themselves as enjoying individualistic leisure in an era where tent camping has also enjoyed renewed popularity. Popular accounts of full-time and occasional campers abound in media that will be analyzed later. However, it is not enough to say that car camping is simply a carefree and cost saving way to conduct domestic travel. The practical necessity for creation of a camp-ready car as a personal disaster safety plan brings further understanding of what would otherwise be considered a leisure boom activity. This working paper describes my current state of understanding in this ongoing project of car camping based on four years' practice and inquiry.

In this paper I will define car camping as the act of sleeping overnight in one's passenger car, minivan, or van, which one has prepared specifically for that purpose in advance, not the use of

camper vehicles designed originally for camping that include built-in showers and toilets. Car camping preparation includes creation or exploitation of a flat surface in the car, some sort of privacy mechanism through window shades or curtains, and often a mobile battery, appliances, a water source, and food provisions. Countless videos on YouTube show automobile voyages and instruct the curious on how to assemble a suitable environment for car camping, and many printed materials¹ as well as blogs exist to help anyone who wishes to fit out their car in this way.

Car camping should be contextualized in light of the broader interest of Japanese car drivers in treating their cars as an expression of identity. Rigano's recent discussion of customizing vehicles in Japan describes it as an art, asserting that "cars have always been regarded as extensions of the personality and creativity of those who drive them (Outlier: 2023). There is history behind this assertion; the anthropologist David Plath described the Japanese family car in 1990 as "a Western parlor on wheels...decorated according to family taste" (Plath 1990: 236). Camping cars create a mobile third space: neither work nor home, but a place to relax in public that expresses the owner's needs and tastes. The rear area of the car is transformed into a multipurpose room that serves as parlor, kitchen, and bedroom.

How to car camp

The camping car itself may range from an unmodified vehicle whose portable accessories allow occasional camping to more drastic customizations such as seat removal, installation of infill framework, and even drilling into the interior metal walls of the car. The affordances of each style of car differ and control which kinds of modifications are possible.

The act of car camping is one step removed from the naps any driver may enjoy at roadside rests during extended travel. The potential for 'economy class syndrome' in which blood pools in lower extremities while sleeping sitting up encourages the driver to prepare a flat surface for overnight sleeping as best they can. Comfort is also encouraged by a blanket or sheet and privacy can be enhanced by easily available window shades. In cooler weather, aluminized plastic sheeting (a kind

¹ 531 titles come up in a book search for 車中泊 (car camping) on amazon.jp at the time of writing (Feb 2024); however, I have read none of them yet.

of small tarp known as *rejaa shiito* ‘leisure sheet’) can provide insulation along with pocket warmers (*kairo*), and even electric blankets or under pads used with portable batteries.

Any car can potentially be used for car camping, and its modification varies depending on the basic configuration as well as the owner’s budget and taste. Contemporary Japanese automobiles include many boxy shapes that lend themselves well to the preparation of a flat sleeping area. Bench seats that fold flat are easily modified to create a sleeping area. Bucket seats can be strategically cushioned to create a flat surface. Rear seats can also be removed, opening up more space for the car camper to modify and use. Cars used for camping range from small *kei*-cars (*kei* designates engine displacement >1000cc) and *kei*-vans with their exposed interior metal to midsize cars, minivans, and larger van cars. Proximity to food sources and personal preferences allow great variation in kitchen setups. More permanent infixes include bespoke sinks with grey water tanks while a portable tank and bucket serve for temporary use.

Ways of car camping

Here I will describe the relatively elaborate setup of a car camper I know well, T, and compare their situation to my own, to show a range of possibilities. T drives a Suzuki *Every* van, a *kei* van with an exposed metal interior. T has been car camping for several years for work as well as leisure. T’s occupation requires extensive construction and mechanical knowledge. Employing these skills, T created a custom wood-framed modification of the entire interior behind the front seat row, including an electrical setup powered by a roof mounted solar panel connected to a portable battery in the car via a hole T drilled and caulked. The wooden framework of his infill structure includes shelving that holds the battery and a water tank and is bolted to the interior metal of the car. Suspended wire shelving stows sleeping bags and blankets and provides a base for hanging lamps. T’s camping room includes a wood framed platform for sleeping with built in sub storage. This kind of configuration is popular among car campers one sees on monetized YouTube channels which I am exploring as data but have no conclusions to share as yet. One particularly unique aspect of this customization is the inclusion of long, shallow wooden drawers from an old kimono dresser that T received while doing reconstruction work in the neighboring prefecture of Kumamoto after the 2016 earthquake. T went as a volunteer soon after the earthquake to help

residents whose house roofs were damaged spread tarpaulins over their damaged roof tiles in order to protect home interiors and has since returned several times to work on various projects. Initially T's car and its solar panel powered battery with which T runs several low wattage appliances afforded a lifestyle much more comfortable than that of the earthquake affected people around them who had lost the use of public utilities. T cooks outside behind the car, pulling out a drawer to hold a portable gas canister stove while using the other drawer to hold utensils. T's set of handmade window shades allows privacy and custom screens afford airflow in the warmer seasons. T also uses this car to travel to other far away work sites after which they go camping in the woods before returning home. A large portable cooler box on wheels draws power from the solar powered battery to keep food fresh on those remote trips. T's sentiment that car campers say they like camping but are really doing disaster preparation is backed up by experience. T enjoys tweaking the camper modification and describing its enhanced capabilities as the project evolves.

Compared to T's custom work, my car has a very simple setup reflecting the differences in car configuration, skillsets, and opportunities to car camp. It was not my intention to car camp when I bought the car, so several of the affordances allowed by a boxy car with foldable bench seats such as T's are not possible. I have an older Honda *Freed* minivan with four bucket seats that does not have a completely square shape. (Newer *Freed* models have a flat-folding bench rear seat and options to extend the flat panel, showing Honda's recognition of the popularity of car camping through design and advertising.) My car is finished with plastic paneling on the inside that does not afford easy attachment of items nor lend well to drilling holes. Still, with practice, consultation with T and other car campers I met on the road, and exposure to the imagined community of car campers via media, I have created a workable setup that evolves over time. At first I simply used aluminized sheets and a blanket to sleep behind the second row of seats. The existing seat configuration required that I sleep on the diagonal, which was flat but not comfortable. In 2023 I increased sleeping area by removing one of the rear bucket seats. This also allows more living space and has significantly enhanced my experience. I am considering having the other seat removed as well to create more storage area, though that reduces the passenger capacity: the car camper's tradeoff. Over time my tool kit has expanded to make excursions more comfortable. A fully removable set of car camping goods includes a battery chargeable from the cigarette lighter port, a water tank, a hot

pot with some food utensils, a warm pad for cool nights, sleeping gear, a ceiling net for above head storage, lamps, and custom window shades. The bulk of these items were purchased online or in ¥100 shops, whose camping goods selection is on the increase as of this writing thanks to the concurrent camping boom. The downside of having removable goods is the lack of infix for storage; however, when it came time for the car's biannual inspection late in 2023, I only needed to replace the removed seat to recreate the original configuration. While I admire the built-in customization of T's and other car camper setups, the current car is sufficient to my current needs.

My car camping configuration also reflects the more occasional nature of my car camping compared to T. The fieldwork that inspired my car camping began in southern Kyushu and required travel on Fridays and weekends to tourist spots. This fieldwork took place under COVID-19 conditions of restricted travel, which at several points made travel outside Miyazaki prefecture impossible. Over time, those strictures relaxed, and I was able to visit more spots of interest. Having exhausted nearby locations, I undertook a weeklong trip to Shikoku in March 2023 to the Pokémon utility hole covers of Kagawa, visiting all but those on islands. Like T, I include visits to hot springs for bathing; however, I do not stay in one area for any extended period. Thus far I have not car camped in the midst of summertime, in remote areas, or in disaster affected zones as T does; these differences in our experience also affect our needs and expectations. I have been able to procure food easily and can get by with a cooler bag rather than a large cooler like T. I don't have a job site to stay at either, which brings my experience more in line with those of the YouTube car campers and requires discussion of our use of public space.

Social infrastructure and car camping: public/private space

Once the car has sufficient resources to allow car camping, the driver must find an appropriate space where overnight parking is allowed, preferably in a flat space with a toilet within reasonable distance. Car campers avail ourselves of free and paid parking areas; I have used free parking and paid parking lots. Paid areas also include campsites where camper vans and tent campers also go, which fall outside the bounds of my experience thus far. Japan's toll highways offer parking and service areas (PA/SA) at regular intervals, and a variety of roadside rest stations (*michi no eki* 道の駅) lie along public roads. These are both convenient way stations and touristic

resources in themselves; some drivers endeavor to collect stamps in a designated book or for occasional stamp rally promotions at SA and *michi no eki*. The PA at minimum offer toilets and vending machines; SA can also have restaurants, souvenir shops, and perhaps other enticements for the weary driver such as gardens, shower rooms, or even hot spring baths. Drivers are allowed to rest in their cars at PA/SA though lengthy camping stays are discouraged. T's outside stove setup would not be welcomed in these spaces, though using my hot pot inside the car remains unnoticed. Homeless car dwellers have been known to utilize PA/SA, though having only seen their plight on documentary television, it lies beyond the scope of this research at present. If I have car camped near homeless car campers, it was not apparent given the brevity of my stay in any one place.

Roadside rests are found along free roads and tend to be more elaborate than service areas. While their standard name is *michi no eki* literally 'road station', variations can reflect locality such as *taki no eki* 'waterfall station', *machi no eki* 'town station' and *minato no eki* 'harbor station'. These havens for the tired traveler typically offer toilets and vending machines as well as restaurants and shops specializing in local produce. The hungry are guaranteed to find something more interesting than convenience store fare, with various local and seasonal foods for sale or in restaurants. Until recently each roadside rest had its own unique ice cream flavor which I always anticipated tasting, including local fruits but even salted shrimp, soy sauce vanilla, or wakame and kombu seaweed flavors. This association of roadside rests with ice cream is reinforced by a discount offered to members of JAA, the Japanese Automobile Association. Despite the decrease in exotic ice cream flavors, roadside rests are promoters of local interest for travelers and often serve as local community spaces as well. As with SA/PA, drivers including car campers may sleep in these parking lots, though some places specify closing hours and disallow overnight rest. Camping in tents and outdoor cooking are also forbidden unless a separate, designated campsite exists. That said, car campers actively use roadside rests, and some YouTubers include that data in their videos.

Benefits of roadside rests for car campers include access to a toilet and vending machines 24/7; risks include the road noise from traffic and the constant flow of people. One may even encounter drivers with decorated cars who may occupy the rest area in late hours playing loud music and flashing multicolored lights from their custom cars, as I experienced one night in

Shikoku. There is also the issue of personal safety which comes most keenly to mind late at night when one must decide whether to leave one's car for the toilet. This potential safety threat can be mitigated by provision of portable toilet facilities such as those sold for disaster management, which include some configuration of a plastic bag and absorbent gel as well as paper or wet wipes. This question of personal safety and physical needs points to an aspect of car camping that goes unmentioned in the travel blogs and videos but is surely a motivator as T had alluded.

Disaster management and the promise of car camping for personal safety

The recent earthquake in the Noto peninsula in January 2024² encouraged me to include a unit on disaster management and mitigation of risks in my Japanese sociology class. In preparation I found documentation of safety issues including sexual harassment and violence towards women in disaster shelters in the aftermath of recent earthquakes (NHK 2022). The risk of staying in shelters would encourage car sleeping; however, news articles also provide compelling data showing that sleeping unprepared is also risky. One health risk, economy class syndrome, was documented in Kumamoto particularly among women subsequent to the earthquake there in 2016. Economy class syndrome is deep vein thrombosis, a problem of reduced blood flow that can cause clots in the legs and can lead to strokes or heart attacks. It is brought on by sleeping in an upright position and exacerbated by dehydration. Twenty-nine of thirty-five earthquake survivors diagnosed with economy class syndrome ten days after the Kumamoto quake were women (Mainichi 2016). Mitigating the risks of staying in a disaster shelter while avoiding possible damage to circulation by setting up a car camping alternative provides peace of mind in personal disaster planning management. Especially as public knowledge increases of sexual violence at disaster shelters, car camping can be reimagined as a safe alternative. It is also holds potential for pet owners whose animals would typically be unwelcome at disaster shelters.

Summary

As a project that evolved organically in tandem with other data collection, research on car camping is a project that I will continue into the foreseeable future. The three categories of

² At the time of this writing there are a reported 11,400 people still in shelters (Japan Times 2024)

extended work-related car camping as T does, occasional car camping as I do for research, and car camping as disaster planning management are all areas that deserve further study. Comparison of car camping versus camper vehicles or tent camping would also be interesting. Current plans for expansion of the topic also include deeper investigation into issues of temporary versus permanent infix of camping infrastructure into cars and the factors guiding those setups. It is also crucial to explore media representations in print which I have not examined, particularly in comparison to issues of gender and age I am currently analyzing in the car camping YouTube channels.

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