

Rise and drive: the early birds of Hakone

16/05/2025 British photographer and author Mark Riccioni is deeply rooted in Japanese car culture. On his latest visit, he meets up with a special group of Porsche enthusiasts southwest of Tokyo: the Early Morning Hakone Runners. They regularly get together early in the mornings in their sports cars and drive to the mountainous region of Hakone to enjoy the empty serpentine roads – and the spectacular backdrop.

For a city that famously never sleeps, Tokyo certainly seems to be taking a nap right now at 2:45 a.m., its eerily quiet streets still bathed in artificial light. The only people active at this hour drive taxis or work on nighttime construction sites. And while they're counting down the minutes until knock-off time, I head for the city of Hiratsuka, about an hour south of the capital, where I'm meeting up with a small group of Porsche enthusiasts intent on enjoying this peace and quiet in the early hours.

As I pull into the parking lot at 3:45 a.m., still feeling somewhat groggy, I can already see them off in the distance. Eleven colorful sports cars and their owners are raring to go and kick off the day in an extraordinary way. That's because the Early Morning Hakone Runners pursue a special hobby: They

regularly explore the region at sunrise, which offers some of the most breathtaking routes in the country.

Steeped in spiritual significance, the Hakone region in Kanagawa Prefecture boasts spectacular scenery, which will soon rise before us at the foot of Mount Fuji. With its iconic red torii – the traditional Japanese gate built on the shoreline – Lake Ashi has been a holy site of Shinto worship for more than a thousand years. But today, the region is also popular for something else: its winding and varied roads that make the heart of every driver beat faster.

The fascination of Japan

But this particular story doesn't start this morning. I first caught a glimpse of the Porsche group back in 2021 – and was immediately electrified. Through a little bit of luck, a few messages on social media, and a mutual friend, I get to meet them in person today for the first time. With my photography equipment in tow, I join the convoy brimming with anticipation – even if only in a rented 600 cc "kei car," a Japanese minicompact vehicle.

The island state in the Pacific has long been a fascination of mine – way before I'd ever picked up a camera or stepped on a plane to travel east. In the mid-1990s, racing games like *Gran Turismo* and *Need for Speed* sparked my passion for Japanese car culture. But as I grew older, that fascination soon became more of an obsession. The Japanese term *Otaku* refers to a young person who is so obsessed with a particular aspect of popular culture that they devote themself heart and soul to it. A term that I can identify with after all my visits to Japan – and that makes even the most die-hard car fans feel a little more normal.

And there's no shortage of those in Japan. With nine million vehicles produced annually, Japan is not only the third largest producer of vehicles globally, but its economy remains absolutely dependent on cars. The automotive sector accounts for nearly 90 percent of Japan's manufacturing industry and employs around 5.5 million people. And that doesn't even include the countless specialized workshops, car tuners, and racing teams in the country. With such a universal appreciation of the motor vehicle, it'll come as no surprise to learn that Japan is also home to some of the most passionate Porsche enthusiasts the world over. Individuals like Mauana Ishida, the proud owner of a Porsche 911 (930) Turbo he dubbed the "72 Outlaw" – and the real reason I'm standing in the Hiratsuka PA parking lot at 3:45 on a Saturday morning.

A fateful encounter

I first saw Ishida's 911 Turbo back in 2021. Japan was still locked down amid COVID, and any visitors required a visa to enter – something I'd gained through working at Fuji Speedway. Early one morning, just before sunrise, I was driving through the area of Hakone, expecting to be the only person far and wide, when Ishida blasted past in his striking light-yellow Turbo. Behind it was a train of other Porsche

models: 911 cars of the 964 and 991 generations, 718 Spyder and Boxster models, and even a 911 SC (G-Series).

Before I could stop and grab my camera, the group had disappeared. And it was only months later that I'd spot Ishida's Turbo again – this time in a photo of an event in Yokohama on a friend's Instagram page. But for me, it was more destiny than coincidence. How likely are you to come across this dream car in the deserted Hakone region in the middle of the night and then see it again through a mutual friend?

I came to a decision. If I had the opportunity to get in touch through my friend, I would meet up with the group and their vehicles in person. And I was lucky! My friend quickly connected me with Ishida. And so I find myself today in the Hakone region's spectacular nature, surrounded by fascinating vehicles and people who welcome me with unbelievable warmth.

Ishida's group consists of people with mostly time-consuming and responsible jobs, many of them parents. Free time is a scarce commodity for all of them. Early-morning drives are therefore ideal for the Porsche enthusiasts. What first spawned as an idea off the back of COVID restrictions has now evolved into a group tradition throughout the summer months. "As you get older, it's difficult to make regular plans with friends due to responsibilities," says Ishida. "But if you can start in the middle of the night, drive with a beautiful sunrise, and already be home again in the morning, it allows many more people to join in." As a father of two small children with a burning passion for cars, but very little time to drive, I find this concept to be more than fascinating.

Driving Japan's Nürburgring

What makes the Hakone region so special? Aside from its spiritual connection, this landscape lends itself to breathtaking views and offers some of the best winding roads anywhere in the world. These aren't just monotonous switchbacks either. There's gradient, camber, sweeping bends, and tightening curves as each piece of asphalt carves through the mountains, allowing you to experience an array of challenging routes within a short period of time. From the infamous Hakone Turnpike (often nicknamed Japan's Nürburgring) to the twisting Hakone Nanamagari road made famous by Japan's *Initial D* comic series. Though its roots may be spiritual, the Hakone region now attracts people from all over the world who are eager to drive the extraordinary routes.

"For us car fans in Japan, Hakone is looked upon as a bit of a Mecca," raves Ishida. "You have the Alps with their countless mountain passes in Europe and areas like Angeles Crest Highway in the USA. All amazing roads, but Japan is my home." After passing their driving test, many new drivers would come to Hakone for an amazing experience. "I first drove the roads nearly 35 years ago. When you create those memories as a young adult, they stay with you as you grow older."

Ishida's love for driving is only surpassed by his passion for Porsche. For the past 35 years, he's always owned at least one model from Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen, including a 911 for the past 27 years. This

passion even led to Ishida creating his own Porsche event in 2007, dubbed the Exciting Porsche Show. All of the Early Morning Hakone Runners will be there, of course, when the Porsche event is held in Kobe, Japan, on March 30, 2025. “We all became friends through the Exciting Porsche event,” says Ishida. “First through our passion for driving, but now we meet regularly outside of the event.”

As we drive toward the infamous Hakone Turnpike, Fuji provides the most awesome backdrop for the sun to slowly rise at nearly 5:00 a.m. A magical sight with special significance. The name for Japan in Japanese – *Nihon* or *Nippon* – translates to “sun origin,” which is why the country is often referred to as the Land of the Rising Sun. I feel very close to the sun’s origin here at the foot of the snowless peak, as we enjoy the scenery in our convoy of eleven Porsche models. All of the drivers take turns leading with an obligatory flyby. There’s almost no traffic, no pedestrians, and no distractions. Everyone enjoys the feeling of boundless freedom that knows no age.

No one understands this better than Ryo Suda. His Porsche 911 SC 3.0 (G-Series) is one of those cars that just oozes energy. It seems right at home on these kinds of roads – light, nimble, and perfectly sized to master every corner. Suda has only owned this particular Porsche since 2021, but it represents his return to the brand. “After I gave up my 911 T (original 911) and then my Carrera 3.2 (G-Series), I began feeling lethargic and no longer enjoyed driving,” he says. “When I thought about what used to make me feel good, it was the feeling of driving an air-cooled Porsche.” And so he returned to the brand so near and dear to his heart.

Suda’s enthusiasm has only continued to grow since he first saw Porsche in motorsport. “With your own Porsche, you can experience a feeling very close to racing,” he adds. The best thing about driving Hakone is the changing landscape and scenery depending on the season. “There’s always a different feeling, and when we’re running, the mix of cars adds to the excitement.”

The feeling of total freedom

During the drive, I find myself wondering what particular Porsche I’d want to be driving right now. For the highways down through Tokyo, Satoshi Higashi’s 911 Carrera (991) would be the perfect choice. On the winding Hakone Turnpike, Aoi Kodama’s 911 (964) – with Cup wheels, sports suspension, and other upgrades – looks like it was designed for this exact road. With the sun now bathing Hakone in warmth, a Carmine Red 718 Boxster GTS zooms past and captures my attention.

Behind the wheel is Yasuyo Terakawa. Unlike Mauana Ishida and Ryo Suda, she has only been the owner of a Porsche for a short time – and she’s already hooked. “In Tokyo, I’d often see various generations of Porsche. It made me wonder why so many people here were driving cars of this brand?” says Terakawa. “To see what all the interest was about, I purchased a Boxster for myself. The combination of practicality and fun has changed my view of driving forever.”

Terakawa now jumps on any opportunity to lower the roof and enjoy the feeling of total freedom. And after attending Ishida’s Exciting Porsche event, she quickly became friends with other enthusiasts. “The

thing with Porsche is it can handle any situation, whether it's city driving, mountain passes, or long distances," she explains. "Hakone is very cold and snowy in winter. So many roads are closed. But that doesn't mean my GTS has to sit in the garage waiting. Driving the Boxster while listening to the sports exhaust is always exhilarating – there are suitable routes in and around Tokyo even at this time of year."

It's now almost 8:00 a.m. and the sun sits proudly in the sky. The sound of other drivers embarking on their own Hakone drive in the distance is our cue to pack up and head back toward Tokyo. For Ishida and his friends, it's the perfect start to a weekend, a reminder of why they all love Porsche and love driving, and an opportunity to leave the stress and responsibilities from the working week behind them for a few hours. "I don't think it's a coincidence that those who enjoy driving Porsche also enjoy driving Hakone," says Ishida with a laugh. "For us, it's more than just about having a sporty car. It's a love for driving and a love for the brand that makes it feel so exciting. No matter how busy the world becomes, we will always find time to drive."

Info

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Consumption data

911 Turbo (Predecessor model)

*Further information on the official fuel consumption and the official specific CO_2 emissions of new passenger cars can be found in the "Leitfaden über den Kraftstoffverbrauch, die CO_2-Emissionen und den Stromverbrauch neuer Personenkraftwagen" (Fuel Consumption, CO_2Emissions and Electricity Consumption Guide for New Passenger Cars), which is available free of charge at all sales outlets and from DAT (Deutsche Automobil Treuhand GmbH, Helmuth-Hirth-Str. 1, 73760 Ostfildern-Scharnhausen, www.dat.de).

Image Sublines

Path: Rise and drive: the early birds of Hakone/Images/img_1.jpg
Title: 718 Spyder, Hakone, Japan, 2025, Porsche AG
Subline: Beautiful backdrop: Rising further off in the distance, Mount Fuji guides them in the right direction.The Hakone region offers extraordinary views and winding, largely empty roads.

Path: Rise and drive: the early birds of Hakone/Images/img_2.jpg
Title: 911 (964), Mauana Ishida, Hakone, Japan, 2025, Porsche AG
Subline: Passion that unites: A friendship has developed between Mauana Ishida.

Path: Rise and drive: the early birds of Hakone/Images/img_3.jpg
Title: 911 (964), 911 (991), 718 Spyder, Boxster, 911 (G Series), Hakone, Japan, 2025, Porsche AG
Subline: Free rein: At sunrise, the group has the roads in the Hakone area all to themselves.

Path: Rise and drive: the early birds of Hakone/Images/img_4.jpg
Title: Boxster GTS, Hakone, Japan, 2025, Porsche AG
Subline: Check-in at dawn: The experience kicks off for the group just behind the Hakone Turnpike toll station. They drive this route on a regular basis to leave the hustle and bustle of everyday life behind – and, for just a few hours, enjoy the feeling of total freedom.

Path: Rise and drive: the early birds of Hakone/Images/img_5.jpg
Title: Hakone Runners, Hakone, Japan, 2025, Porsche AG
Subline: The Hakone Runners are always a striking sight on the roads.

Path: Rise and drive: the early birds of Hakone/Images/img_6.jpg
Title: 911 (G Series), Ryo Suda, Hakone, Japan, 2025, Porsche AG
Subline: Perfectly relaxed: Ryo Suda with his green 911 SC 3.0 (G-Series).

Path: Rise and drive: the early birds of Hakone/Images/img_7.jpg
Title: Hakone Runners, Hakone, Japan, 2025, Porsche AG
Subline: Finish line: When they begin to hear the sound of other engines, it's time for the Early Morning Hakone Runners to set off on their drive back to Tokyo. After their last break together, they make their way back to everyday life.

Link Collection

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