

AJET

CONNECT

News & Events, Arts & Culture, Lifestyle, Community

FEBRUARY
2017

Closeted: A CIR's take on being out in Japan

Valentine's Day Guide: What makes a great Valentine's Day date? Love, that's what

What a Musical World: AJET Charity Musical Spotlight

Fear Factor: Nabe style - Yeah you can actually eat this stuff

Saga International Balloon Festival: As sensational and uplifting as the balloons she was watching



The Japanese Lifestyle & Culture
Magazine Written by the International
Community in Japan

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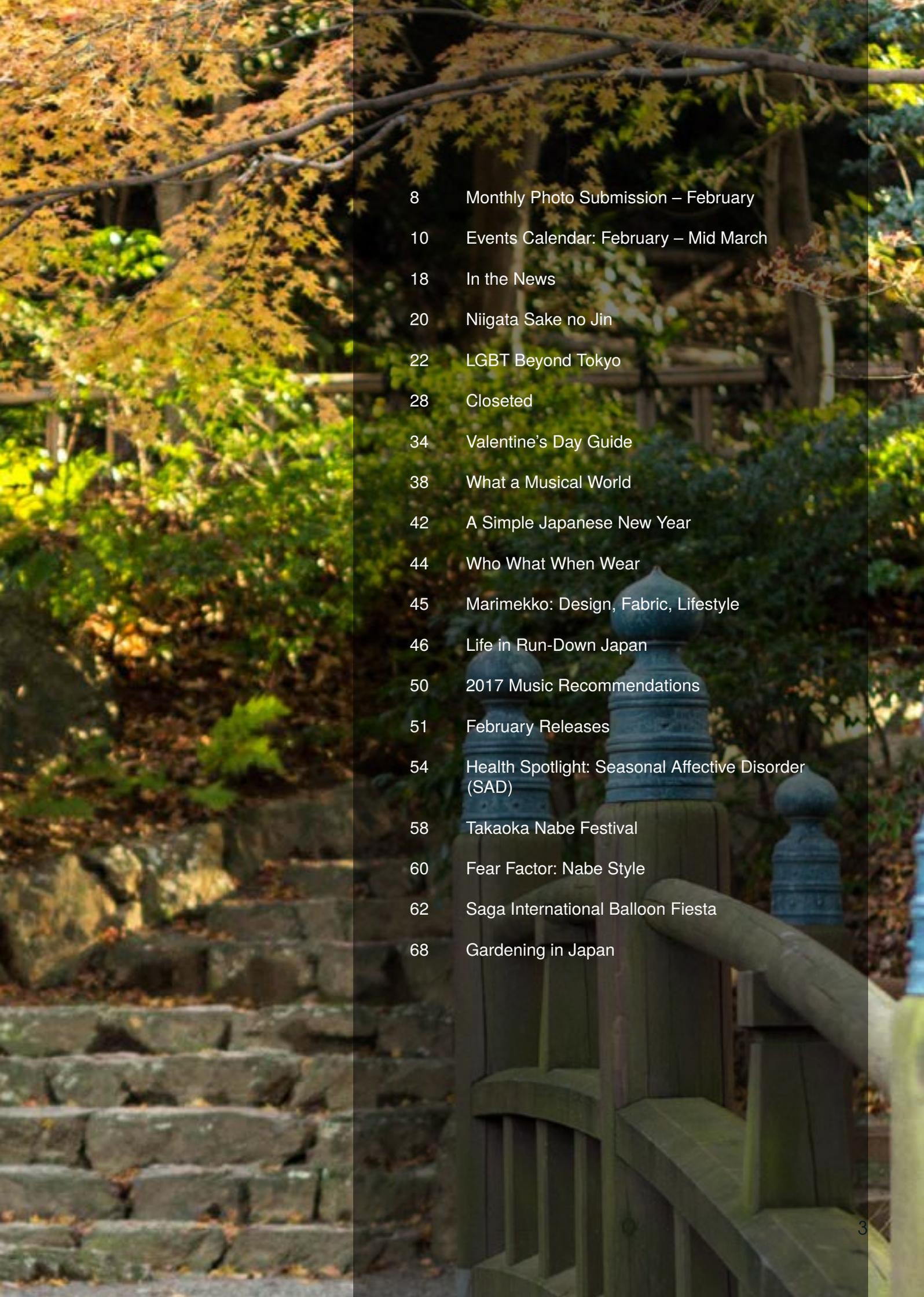
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

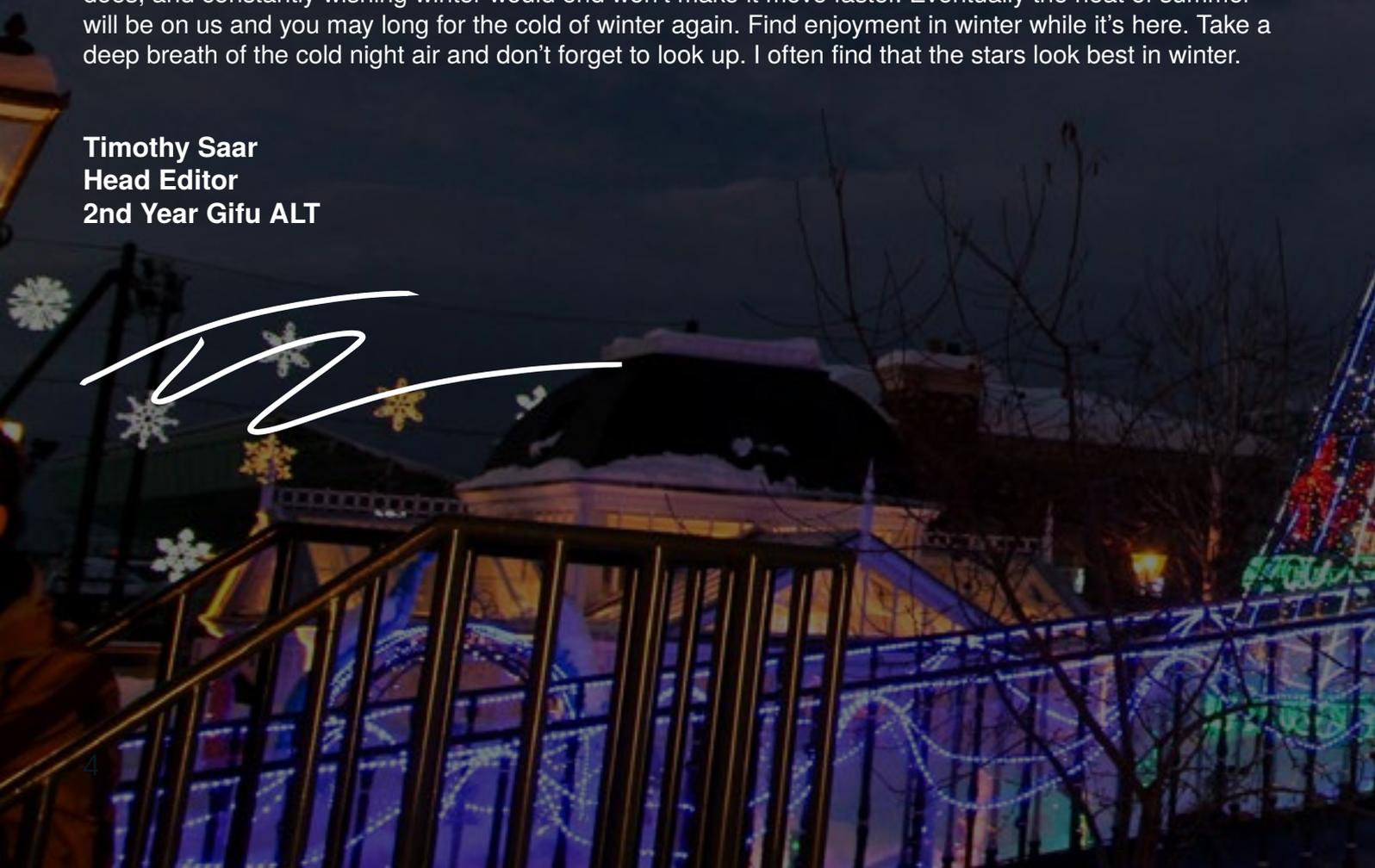
This is it — the coldest of the cold. Here in Gifu Prefecture snow has been on the ground for weeks now, driving is nerve-wracking, and my *kotatsu* is working overtime. On the other hand, I really like scarves, sweaters, and gloves, so this is the best time of the year for my limited fashion sense.

If it happens to be that you are a JET not recontracting this year, isn't it a great feeling to know that you still have one more spring coming in Japan after this winter? Spring really is Japan's season. I personally can't wait for picnics under cherry blossoms, and Golden Week plans are already buzzing around the *enkai* table.

But I'm getting way ahead of myself. The thought of spring sustains me through the coldest parts of winter, but that's not to say there aren't parts of winter I love. Hot cocoa under a *kotatsu* just isn't the same unless it's pouring snow outside. There's something special about eating piping hot *oden* at a festival (shoutout to the *nabe* article you can find in this issue) while your hands suck warmth from the bowl, cheeks red and glasses fogging up every time you take a bite. My students get a reprieve as well, as my constant "How are you?" English sneak attacks can be answered universally by, "I'm cold!" My walk to school is watched over by an army of waist-high snowmen, and I get embroiled in the occasional, brief snowball war.

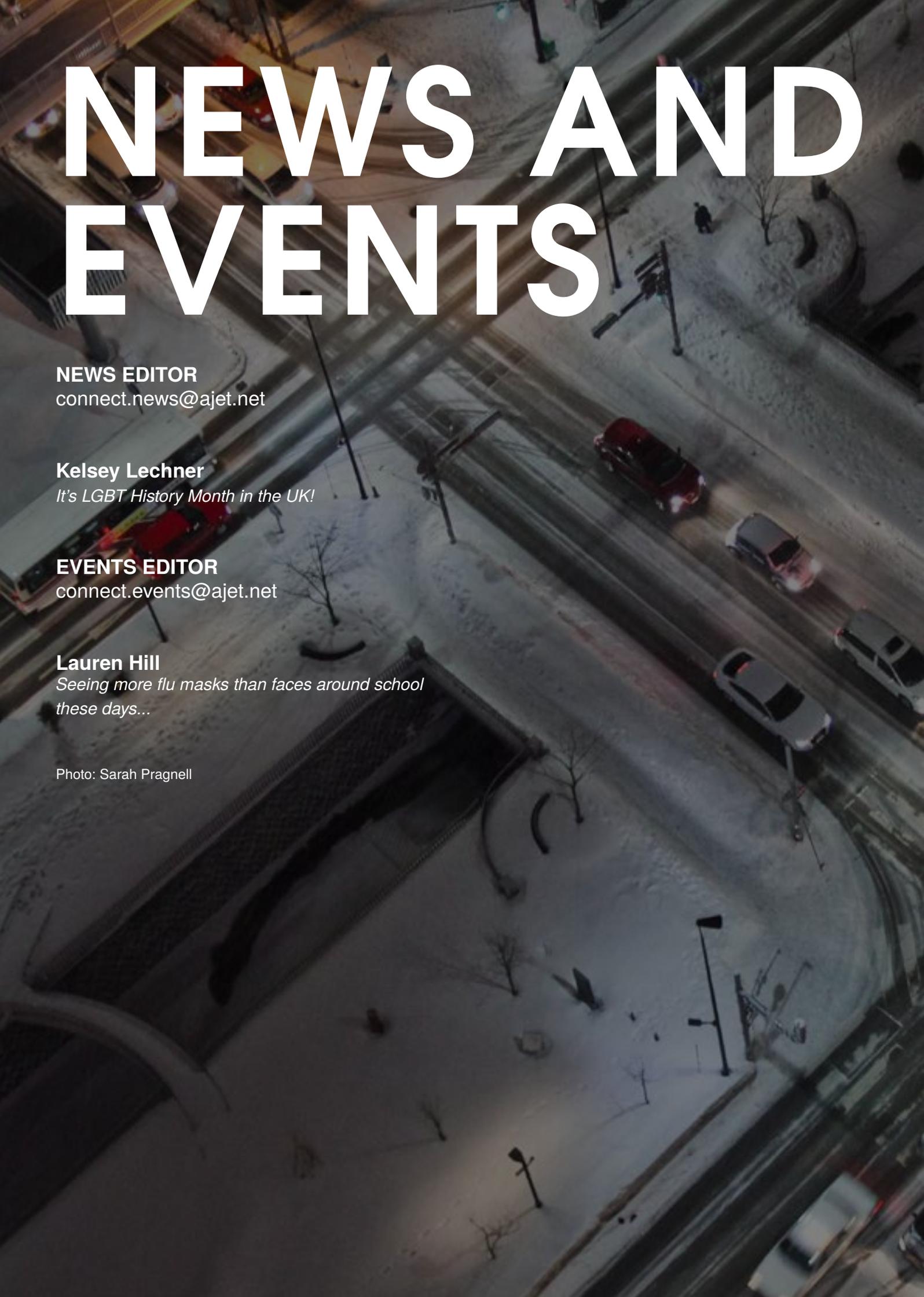
The real heart of winter is only around for a few short months. Spring will come at the same time it always does, and constantly wishing winter would end won't make it move faster. Eventually the heat of summer will be on us and you may long for the cold of winter again. Find enjoyment in winter while it's here. Take a deep breath of the cold night air and don't forget to look up. I often find that the stars look best in winter.

Timothy Saar
Head Editor
2nd Year Gifu ALT





NEWS AND EVENTS

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a city street intersection during winter. The ground is covered in a thick layer of snow. Several cars are visible on the road, including a red car and a white car. The streetlights are on, and the overall scene is dimly lit, suggesting dusk or dawn. The perspective is from directly above, looking down on the street.

NEWS EDITOR

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Kelsey Lechner

It's LGBT History Month in the UK!

EVENTS EDITOR

connect.events@ajet.net

Lauren Hill

Seeing more flu masks than faces around school these days...

Photo: Sarah Pragnell



Senso-ji Hatsunehime

Asakusa

Ruth Gadia



People came in droves to Senso-ji Temple on Jan. 11, the custom of visiting shrines or temples during the first day of the New Year exchange for a prosperous year. Senso-ji Temple is dedicated to Kannon, who relieves suffering and bestows blessings. Founded in 645, it is also one of Tokyo's most colorful and popular temples. The New Year celebrations. Security controlled the flood of people entering the temple a strictly limited time. The altar was a flurry of activity before the next batch of people came to take their turn.

Ruth Gadia is an ALT in Sakaiminato, Tottori. She is based at a high school. She was previously an English and Art teacher in Japan for her first year on the JET Programme.

Temple mode

a, Tokyo

a (Tottori)



2. *Hatsumode* is the name given to the Japanese New Year festival held on the first few days of January. Many do this to offer prayers in honor of the Bodhisattva *Kannon*, the goddess of mercy, who was believed to have been founded in 628 AD. Senso-ji is the oldest temple in Tokyo. It is one of the most popular temples, and it was especially crowded for the New Year festival. People, letting visitors enter the Main Hall in batches for a limited time; devotees showered coins and said prayers quickly to receive good fortune.

based in a junior high school and also visits elementary school. She is a teacher in an elementary school in the Philippines. It is

Events Calendar:

February - Mid March

Lauren Hill (Tokyo)

Block 1

Hokkaido
Aomori
Iwate
Akita

Block 2

Miyagi
Yamagata
Fukushima
Niigata

Block 3

Ibaraki
Tochigi
Gunma
Saitama
Nagano

Block 4

Chiba
Tokyo
Kanagawa
Yamanashi
Shizuoka

Block 5

Toyama
Ishikawa
Fukui
Gifu
Aichi

Block 6

Shiga
Kyoto
Hyogo

Block 7

Mie
Osaka
Nara
Wakayama

Block 8

Tokushima
Kagawa
Ehime
Kochi

Block 9

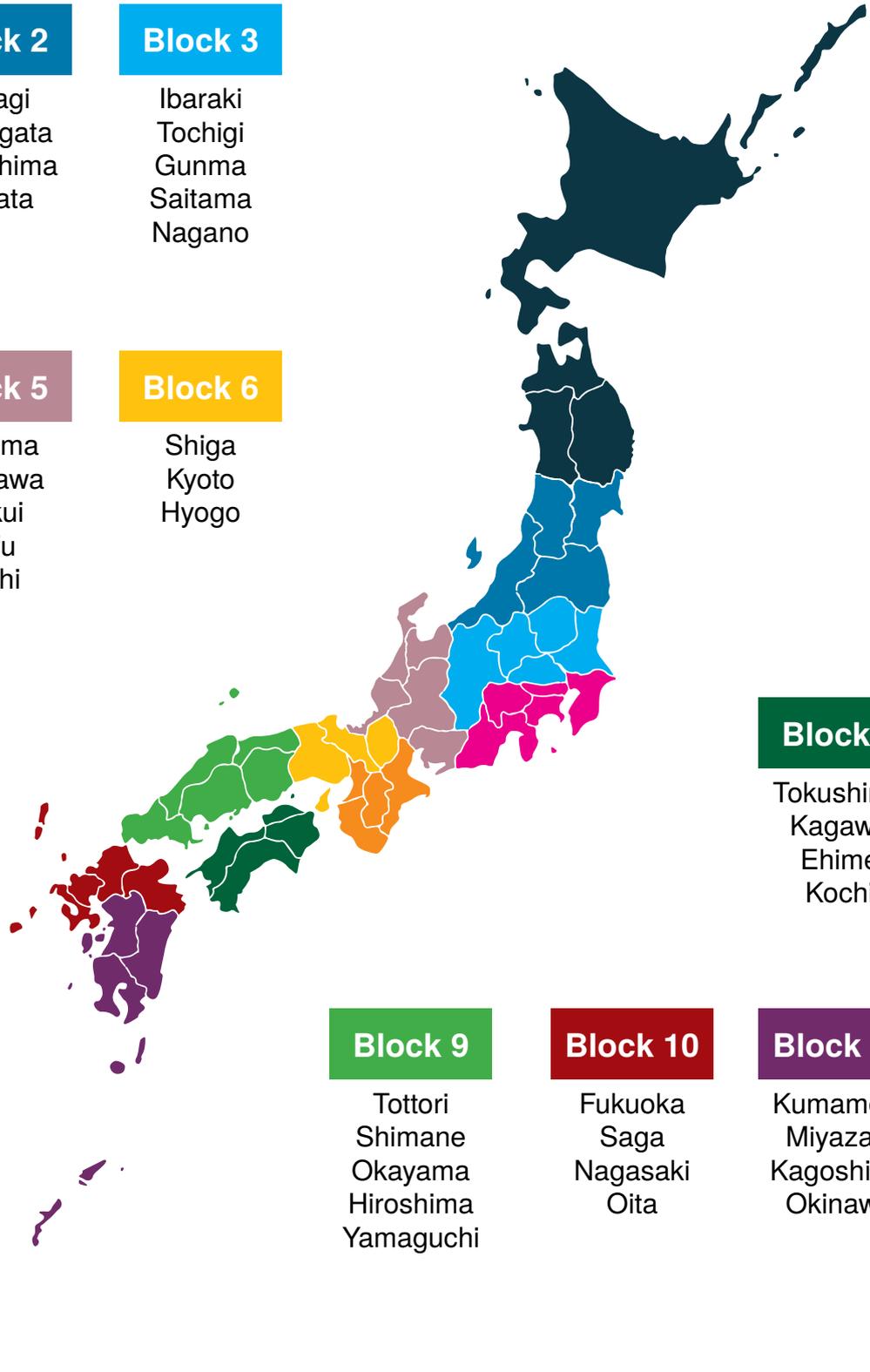
Tottori
Shimane
Okayama
Hiroshima
Yamaguchi

Block 10

Fukuoka
Saga
Nagasaki
Oita

Block 11

Kumamoto
Miyazaki
Kagoshima
Okinawa



Block 1

Sapporo White Illumination 2016

18 Nov. – 14 March

Odori Park, Ekimae Dori & Minami
1-jo Dori, Sapporo City, Hokkaido
Prefecture

Website

Godaison Sominsai (Naked Festival)

03 Feb.

Hanamaki City, Iwate Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Kokuseki-ji Sominsai (Naked Festival)

03 Feb. – 04 Feb.

Kokuseki-ji Temple, Oshu City, Iwate
Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Otaru Snow Road Illuminations

03 Feb. – 12 Feb.

Various sites, Otaru City, Hokkaido
Prefecture

Website

Winter's Tale 2017 Illuminations

03 Feb. – 26 Feb.

Lake Towada, Aomori Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Iwate Snow Festival

04 Feb. – 12 Feb.

Koiwai Farm, Shizukuichi Town, Iwate
District, Iwate Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Sapporo Snow Festival

06 Feb. – 12 Feb.

Odori Park, Tsudome Community
Dome & Ekimae-dori, Sapporo City,
Hokkaido Prefecture

Website

Asahikawa Winter Festival

07 Feb. – 12 Feb.

Various sites, Asahikawa City,
Hokkaido Prefecture

Website

Hirosaki Castle Snow Lantern Festival

09 Feb. – 12 Feb.

Hirosaki Castle Park, Hirosaki City,
Aomori Prefecture

Website

Namahage Sedo Festival

10 Feb. – 12 Feb.

Shinzan Shrine, Oga City, Akita
Prefecture

Website

Wanko Soba All Japan Tournament 2017

11 Feb.

Hanamaki Cultural Center Grand
Hall, Hanamaki City, Iwate Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Candy Market Festival

11 Feb. – 12 Feb.

Hachiko Street, Omachi Town, Odate
City, Akita Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Takeuchi (Bamboo Battle)

11 Feb. – 15 Feb.

Suwa Shrine, Misato Town, Senboku
District, Akita Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Yokote Kamakura Snow Festival

14 Feb. – 17 Feb.

Various sites, Yokote City, Akita
Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Momoishi Enburi (Spring Ritual Dance)

15 Feb. – 17 Feb.

Town Office and Government
Building area, Oirase Town, Kamikita
District, Aomori Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Hachinohe Enburi (Spring Festival in the Snow)

17 Feb. – 20 Feb.

Various sites, Hachinohe City, Aomori
Prefecture

Website in Japanese only



Block 2

Matsushima Oyster Festival

05 Feb.

Matsushima Town, Miyagi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Art Candle Festival

10 Feb. – 11 Feb.

Various sites, Aizu-Wakamatsu City,
Fukushima Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Kasedori (Straw Bird) Festival

11 Feb.

Kamiyama Castle, Kamiyama City,
Yamagata Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Daruma Doll Market

11 Feb.

City centre area, Shirakawa City,
Fukushima Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Uesugi Snow Lantern Festival

11 Feb. – 12 Feb.

Yonezawa City, Yamagata Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Urasa Hadaka Oshiai Matsuri (Naked Festival)

03 March

Fuko-ji Temple, Urasa Town, Minami
Uonuma City, Niigata Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Snow Festival and Fireworks Display

04 March

Yuzawa Onsen Ski Trail, Yuzawa
Town, Niigata Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Sake no Jin (Rice Wine Festival)

11 March – 12 March

Toki Messe Convention Center,
Niigata City, Niigata Prefecture
Website

Echigo Matsudai Fuyu no Jin (Winter Festival)

11 March – 12 March

Matsuhiro Gymnasium, Tokamachi
City, Niigata Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Block 3

Flower Fantasy Illuminations

22 Oct. – 05 Feb.

Ashikaga Flower Park, Ashikaga City,
Tochigi Prefecture
Website

Night-time Illuminations

05 Nov. – 26 March

Tobu World Square, Kinugawa
Onsen, Nikko City, Tochigi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Suigo Sakura Illumination 2016- 2017

19 Nov. – 19 Feb.

Kasumigaura Park, Ibaraki Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Karuizawa Winter Festival

26 Nov. – 11 Feb.

Main Streets, Karuizawa, Nagano
Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Setsubun Gomottomo-Sama

03 Feb.

Mitsumine-jinja Shrine, Chichibu City,
Saitama Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Setsubun Yoroi Toshikoshi (Samurai Costume Parade)

03 Feb.

Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Oni-Koi Setsubunsai (Devil Welcoming Event)

04 Feb.

Festival Square, Fujioka City, Gunma
Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Koshimoto Goshinbisai (Fire Festival)

04 Feb.

Katashina Village, Gunma Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Sumitsuke Matsuri (Ink Face Painting Festival)

11 Feb.

Tamamura Town, Sawa District,
Gunma Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Nagano Toumyou Matsuri (Votive Candle Festival)

11 Feb. – 19 Feb.

Zenko-ji Temple, Nagano City,
Nagano Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Yamada Spring Festival

12 Feb.

Tsunemochi Shrine, Chichibu City,
Saitama Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Saito Festival

09 March

Kashima Jingu Shrine, Kashima City,
Ibaraki Prefecture
Website in Japanese only



Block 4

Sagamiko Light Illumillion

22 Oct. – 09 April
Sagamiko Pleasure Forest,
Sagamihara City, Kanagawa
Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Toki no Sumika Winter Illuminations 2016-2017

29 Oct. – 20 March
Toki no Sumika Resort, Gotemba
City, Shizuoka Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Tokyo Dome City Winter Illuminations 2016

10 Nov. – 19 Feb.
Tokyo Dome City, Bunkyo Ward,
Tokyo Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Tokyo Midtown Ice Rink

05 Jan. – 05 March
Tokyo Midtown Complex, Akasaka
District, Tokyo Prefecture
Website

Lake Kawaguchiko Winter Firework Display

14 Jan. – 19 Feb.
Kawaguchiko Lakeside,
Fujikawaguchiko Town, Minamitsuru
District, Yamanashi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Chinese Spring Festival

28 Jan. – 11 Feb.
Yokohama Chinatown, Naka
Ward, Yokohama City, Kanagawa
Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Setsubun Festival with Celebrity Guests

03 Feb.
Narita-san Shinsho-ji Temple, Narita
City, Chiba Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Eitai Daigo Kagura (Dance for the Gods)

07 Feb.
Sui-jinja Shrine, Unakami Town, Kaijo
District, Chiba Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Hirugaya Ta-Asobi (Dancing and Praying Festival)

11 Feb.
Hiruji Shrine, Makinohara City,
Shizuoka Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Tokaigi Game Party

11 Feb. – 12 Feb.
Makuhari Messe, Mihama Ward,
Chiba City, Chiba Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Katsuura Big Doll Festival

24 Feb. – 05 March
Various Sites, Katsuura City, Chiba
Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Warabi no Hadaka Matsuri (Naked Festival)

25 Feb.
Mimusubi-jinja Shrine, Yotsukaido
City, Chiba Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Tokyo Marathon

26 Feb.
Central Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture
Website

Doll Floating Ritual

28 Feb.
Sumida River, Taito Ward, Tokyo
Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Saito Goma-Ku (Fire Ritual)

12 March
Mt. Takao Kito-den Hall, Hachioji City,
Tokyo Prefecture
Website



Block 5

Wajima Senmaida Aze Mantou (Thousand Candle Rice Field Display)

15 October – 12 March
Wajima City Rice Fields, Ishikawa Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Echizen-Oono Winter Tale Festival

04 February – 05 February
Echizen-Oono Station area, Echizen-Oono City, Fukui Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Hadaka Matsuri (Dancing Naked Festival)

09 February
Konomiya Shrine, Inazawa City, Aichi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Takewari Matsuri (Bamboo Cutting Festival)

10 February
Sugouisobe Shrine, Kaga City, Ishikawa Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Oni Matsuri (Devil Festival)

10 February – 11 February
Akumi Kanbe Shinmeisha Shrine, Toyohashi City, Aichi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Damine Dengaku (Devil Fire Dance Festival)

11 February
Daminekannon Temple, Shitara Town, Kitashitara District, Aichi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Tenka-Sai (Naked Festival)

11 February – 12 February
Matsudaira Toshogu Shrine, Matsudaira Town, Toyota City, Aichi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Mt. Tate Winter Illumination Festival

11 February – 12 February
Mt. Tate Ski Slopes & Valley, Toyama Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Ae no Kaze (Wind Winter Festival)

11 February – 19 February
Various sites, Wajima City, Ishikawa Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Toba Fire Festival

12 February
Shinmei Shrine, Toba Town, Nishio City, Aichi Prefecture
Website

Hanagasa Matsuri (Flower Headdress Festival)

13 February – 14 February
Mori-Hachiman Shrine, Gero Onsen, Gifu Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Mizuumi Tagaku Noh Mai (Traditional Dance Drama)

15 February
Ukan Shrine, Ikeda Town, Imadate District, Fukui Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Iced Waterfall Festival

15 February – 25 February
Hirayu Hot Springs, Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Katsuyama Sagichou (Spring Fire Festival)

25 February – 26 February
Honcho area, Katsuyama City, Fukui Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Hounensai (Fertility/Penis Festival)

15 March
Tagata Jinja Shrine, Komaki City, Aichi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only



Block 6

Kyoto Illumiere 2016-2017

29 October – 09 April
Rurikei Hot Springs, Nantan City, Kyoto Prefecture
Website

The 3rd Nagahama Umeshu Festival

11 February – 12 February & 18 February – 19 February
Nagahama Railway Museum, Nagahama City, Shiga Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

The 4th Kawanishi Townscape Art Museum

19 February – 05 March
Various sites, Kawanishi City, Hyogo Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Godai-Rikison Giant Mochi Lifting Competition

23 February
Daigo-ji Temple, Fushimi Ward, Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture
Website

Kiyomizu-dera Spring Illuminations

03 March – 12 March
Kiyomizu-dera Temple, Higashiyama Ward, Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Higashiyama Foothill Spring Illuminations

03 March – 12 March
Higashiyama Foothills, Higashiyama Ward, Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture
Website



Block 7

Nabana no Sato Winter Illuminations 2016-2017

15 October – 07 May
Nabana no Sato, Kuwana City,
Nagashima Island, Mie Prefecture
Website

Exhibition: Life Beyond the Tsunami – Otsuchi People's Struggles for Recovery and Hopes for the Future

19 January – 11 April
National Museum of Ethnology, Suita
City, Osaka Prefecture
Website

Mizuma-dera Setsubun Festival

02 February – 04 February
Mizuma-dera Temple, Kaizuka City,
Osaka Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Setsubun Festival

03 February
Narita-san Fudosen Temple,
Neyagawa City, Osaka Prefecture
Website

Setsubun Lantern Festival

03 February
Kasuga-taisha Shrine, Nara City,
Nara Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Onda Matsuri (Rice Planting Festival)

05 February
Asukaniimasu Shrine, Asuka Village,
Takaichi District, Nara Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Otou Matsuri (Fire Festival)

06 February
Kamikura Shrine, Higashimuro area,
Shingu City, Wakayama Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Nara Rurie (Winter Illuminations)

08 February – 14 February
Various sites, Nara City, Nara
Prefecture
Website

Sunakake Matsuri (Sand Spreading Festival)

11 February
Hirose-jinja Shrine, Kawai City, Nara
Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Hase-Dera Dadaoshi (Devil Banishing Festival)

14 February
Hase-dera Temple, Sakurai City,
Nara Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Gomikake no Miya (Spring Festival)

19 February
Kawazoe-jinja Shrine, Odai Town,
Taki District, Mie Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

One Night Kanjo Festival

20 February
Nozato Sumiyoshi Shrine,
Nishiyodogawa Ward, Osaka City,
Osaka Prefecture
Website

Omizutori Fire Festival

01 March – 14 March
Todai-ji Temple, Nara City, Nara
Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

March Grand Sumo Tournament

12 March – 26 March
Osaka Prefectural Gymnasium,
Namba District, Osaka City, Osaka
Prefecture
Website

Koya no Hi Matsuri (Fire Festival)

12 March
Kongobu-ji Temple, Koyo, Ito District,
Wakayama Prefecture
Website

Kasuga Matsuri (Spring Festival)

13 March
Kasuga-taisha Shrine, Nara City,
Nara Prefecture
Website in Japanese only



Block 8

Akehama Seaside Illuminations

04 Dec. – 14 Feb.

Akehama Seaside Sun Park,
Takayama City, Ehime Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Nanrakuen Plum Festival 2017

28 Jan. – 05 March

Nanrakuen Japanese Garden,
Uwajima City, Ehime Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Exhibition: Tosa at the End of the Tokugawa Shogunate

29 Jan. – 10 May

Kochi Prefectural Museum of History,
Nankoku City, Kochi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

The 38th Ayakiku Kurabiraki (Brewery Opening Festival)

11 Feb.

Ayakiku Brewery, Ayagawa Town,
Ayauta District, Kagawa Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

The 10th Friedensfest

19 Feb.

Naruto German House, Naruto City,
Tokushima Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Block 9

Exhibition: Teach me, master! What is Japanese Painting?

01 Dec. – 28 Feb.

Adachi Museum of Art, Yasugi City,
Shimane Prefecture
Website

Genpei Housui Gassen (Coloured Water Spraying Display)

05 Feb.

Hinase Port, Hinase Town, Bizen
City, Okayama Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Chikara Mochi Eyo (Powerlifting Tournament)

05 Feb

Kenmitsuji Temple, Mimasaka City,
Okayama Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Rabbit Carnival

12 Feb.

Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial
Centre, Minami Ward, Hiroshima City,
Hiroshima Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Saidai-ji Eyo Hadaka Matsuri (Naked Festival)

18 Feb.

Saidaijikkannon-in Temple, Higashi
Ward, Okayama City, Okayama
Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Ofuku-Birakisai Hadaka Matsuri (Naked Festival)

18 Feb.

Kui-Inari Shrine, Mihara City,
Hiroshima Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

DANCE Fes WAN ver8

11 Feb. – 12 Feb.

Yonago Public Hall Great Hall,
Yonago City, Tottori Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Ushikae Shinji

03 Feb.

Hōfu Tenman-gū Shrine, Hōfu City,
Yamaguchi Prefecture
Website in Japanese only

Photos:
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Illaura Rossiter
Giovanni Perez
Giovanni Perez
Christopher Meneses
Christopher Meneses

Block 10

Nagasaki Lantern Festival

28 Jan. – 11 Feb.

Chuo Park & Minato Park, Nagasaki City, Nagasaki Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Setsubun Festival with Large Otafuku Entrance

03 Feb.

Kushida-jinja Shrine, Hakata Ward, Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture

Website

Shujou Onie (Spring Devil and Fire Festival)

03 Feb.

Tennen-ji Temple, Bungotakada City, Oita Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Ofuro-san Matsuri (Spring Festival)

09 Feb. – 11 Feb.

Furo-gu Shrine, Okawa City, Fukuoka Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

World Hobby Fair 2017 (Winter)

12 Feb.

Fukuoka Yahuoku! Dome, Chuo Ward, Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Ureshino Attakamatsuri

28 Jan. – 12 Feb.

Downtown Ureshino Onsen, Ureshino City, Saga Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Block 11

Nakijin Castle Ruins Cherry Blossom Festival

28 Jan. – 12 Feb.

Nakijin Castle Ruins, Nakijin Village, Kunigami District, Okinawa Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Yamaga Lantern Festival

03 Feb. – 04 Feb.;

10 Feb. – 11 Feb.;

17 Feb. – 18 Feb.;

24 Feb. – 25 Feb.

Yamaga City, Kumamoto Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Okinawa Flowers and Food Festival 2017

04 Feb. – 05 Feb.

Onoyama Athletic Park, Naha City, Okinawa Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Sengoku Higo Matsuri (Samurai Festival)

12 Feb.

Multipurpose Plaza, Nagomi Town, Tamana District, Kumamoto Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Hatsu Uma Sai (Decorated Horse Parade)

19 Feb.

Kagoshima-jingu Shrine, Kirishima City, Kagoshima Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Kagi-Hiki Matsuri (Log Pulling Festival)

19 Feb.

Nakatsu Shrine, Kanoya City, Kagoshima Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Gaun Gaun Matsuri

26 Feb.

Fukada Shrine, Ichikikushikino City, Kagoshima Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Kiwaro Fuduson Spring Fire Festival

28 Feb.

Kiwaro Fuduson Temple, Kumamoto City, Kumamoto Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Tamayura Onsen Festival

04 March – 19 March

Tamayura Onsen, Miyazaki City, Miyazaki Prefecture

Website in Japanese only

Tarou Tarou Matsuri (Spring Festival)

05 March

Hasimasaki Shrine, Hashima Town, Ichikikushikino City, Kagoshima Prefecture

Website in Japanese only



In the News

Kelsey Lechner (Tochigi)



22 November 6 December

350 Japanese Self-Defence Forces have arrived in South Sudan to support the UN's peacekeeping mission. The Japanese forces are tasked with engineering and construction, as well as responding to emergency calls from other UN and peacekeeping staff. Although they have not been given the rights to use force, they are also assigned to guard UN bases, which have been attacked previously. While Prime Minister Shinzo Abe says that this will expand Japan's ability to respond to threats, particularly from China and North Korea, critics say that this could entangle Japan in its first overseas fighting since World War II and is in direct violation of the country's no-war constitution.

<http://bit.ly/2gaBYPh>

4 December

Despite facing a shortage of hotel rooms, the government plans to restrict the number of nights homeowners can rent out rooms or residences to guests to 180 nights each year. The plan will be submitted by the tourism and labor ministries to a Diet session in 2017 and targets organizations such as Airbnb.

<http://s.nikkei.com/2iivBdk>

16-year-old Utinan Won, born to Thai parents, lost a court appeal against deportation to Thailand, despite being born in Japan and unable to read or write Thai. Even though his mother had already returned to Thailand and found a Japanese guardian for him, fulfilling the laws for a special residence permit, the Tokyo High Court upheld the deportation order from the District Court. Won's lawyer states that the judges did not consider Won's mother's repatriation and simply re-evaluated the same evidence submitted to the District Court.

<http://bit.ly/2jIGmxi>

8 December

First Lady Akie Abe accused Japan's public and business sectors specifically of misogyny, stating that "Japanese men tend to prefer cute women over capable and hardworking women," which pressures women to conform to men's expectations at the sacrifice of potential success. Despite her husband Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's calls for increasing the number of women in the workplace, Mrs. Abe affirms that, despite women's increasing participation in the workforce, big business is still

largely a "man's world." She also made calls for women's voices to be more represented in politics. Japan currently ranks 156th out of 193 countries for political representation of women, and PM Abe's approval rate is lower among women.

<http://bloom.bg/2hkCMle>

4 January

A Japanese transwoman inmate filed a suit in June of 2016 demanding allowance of hormone therapy. The plaintiff was diagnosed with "gender identity disorder" as a teenager and officially changed her sex to "female" in 2006. She was arrested and transferred to a detention center in February 2015, and there denied access to hormone therapy. She became mentally unstable and unable to communicate with others, even during her trial, and was subsequently convicted to 16 years in prison in December 2015. Guidelines set by the government in 2011 deny any obligations to administer hormone therapy to detainees and inmates, but more and more doctors specializing in "gender identity disorder" are speaking out and petitioning for a revision of the guidelines. As of March 2016, about 50 inmates were currently or were expected to be diagnosed with "gender identity disorder."

<http://bit.ly/2j9W8Oz>



Drinking Your Way into Japanese Culture

Richard Thornton (Niigata)

At the end-of-year *enkai*, I had one of those glorious moments of belonging that made the whole Japan adventure worthwhile.

The food is all but finished. Everyone is beginning to get those tell-tale pink cheeks. I can see the glint in *Kocho-sensei's* eyes. He is clearly gearing himself up to leap across the cultural gap.

K: Richard-sensei... Can you drink Japanese sake?

Classic. Why not ask about *sashimi* and *natto*, too? Maybe even a chopstick skills compliment.

R: Of course! I love *nihonshu*. I went to *Sake no Jin* last year.

The magic words. It's as if I've gained a whole new dimension that *Kocho-sensei* is seeing for the first time. But, maybe it's a trick. He has to make sure.

K: Really...? What do you like?

I don't wanna come across too keen. "Richard-sensei, the alcoholic" is hardly the tag I want, but this may be a chance to change *Kocho-sensei's* perspective on foreign folk forever. I might actually manage to *fit in*.

R: Recently, I've been drinking *Katafune* (a local brewery which just won an award), but my real favorite is *Nigorizake*. Do you know *Bishamon*?

Kocho-sensei only just catches his surprise before his eyes pop out, then breaks into the biggest cheeky grin I've ever seen this steely man pull.

K: So, you'll drink some with me tonight, right? What's your recommendation?

He handed me a list of incomprehensible names, all in *kanji*.

R: Ah... *chotto*... I can't read...

So close. So very close. Next time.

The Joys of Drinking *Nihonshu*

The longer you stay in Japan, the more you want to prove you aren't the typical *Naruto*-fan foreigner, trying to buy a *samurai* sword before going home to brag about your unique experiences in glorious *Nippon*. Not that there's anything wrong with anime and history, it's just I don't want to be easily put into a little *gaikokujin*-shaped box. After two or three years, it becomes a compulsion; we desperately try to break expectations so that people engage with us, not as a *gaikokujin*, but as real flesh-and-blood human beings.

If you're looking to be taken seriously in Japan, my first recommendation is to become fluent in Japanese. How enlightening. Almost like saying, "All you need to do to become a pro soccer player is kick the ball like a pro." After studying for 10 years or more, you'll still slip up. It's almost enough to drive you to drinking.

Which is where my second recommendation comes in. Why drink thin, tasteless *Asahi* when you can sample the real pinnacle of Japanese drinking culture: *sake*, otherwise known as *nihonshu*. For most, it's something you regret drinking with the sociology teacher at the *nijikai*, right before you butcher "Hey Jude" during *karaoke*. However, *sake* can, and should, be so much more. It's a chance to connect cultures without the social barriers that soberness creates. So much so that the concept has entered many Japanese dictionaries: ノミユニケーション (*nomyu-nication*).

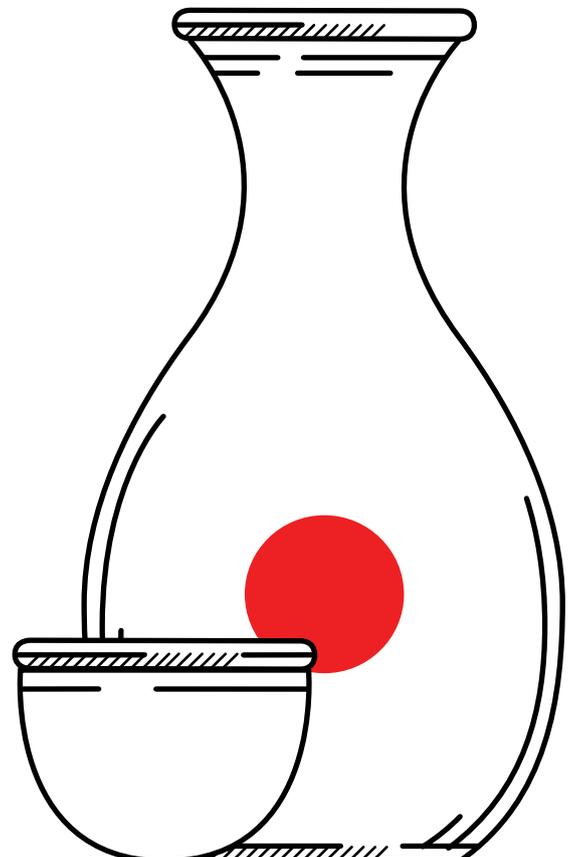
Niigata Sake No Jin

I am of course extremely biased. I live in Niigata, which is famous for being full of rice fields. We use that rice to make over 65% of Japan's *nihonshu*. As a result, there's a huge *sake* culture here. Living in Niigata, you quickly realize that *nihonshu* is the craft beer of Japan. Every city has its own local specialty. The variety is endless.

If you wanna become fluent in *nomyu-nication* but don't know where to start, look no further. Niigata's *Sake no Jin* (にいがた酒の陣) is being held this year on the 11th and 12th of March. If *sake* is the craft beer of Japan, then going to *Sake no Jin* is like hitting up Munich during Oktoberfest. 90 local breweries offer more than 500 different varieties to make it the biggest Japanese rice wine tasting event of the year. In exchange for your 2000-3000 *yen* entry fee, they arm you with a *sake* cup and send you out into the stalls to try whatever you like the look of. I've gone every year since coming to Japan, and every year I leave with a new favorite.

Due to its fierce popularity, *Sake no Jin* has been designated this year's official Niigata AJET block event. We're grabbing a *ryokan* (complete with an *onsen*) for people who'd like to spend the night, and buses will be arranged to and from the event. If you're interested in joining us, you can RSVP [here](#). There's loads more information on the AJET Block 2 Facebook group, or at *Sake no Jin's* [website](#).

Richard is from Grimsby, U.K. and now lives in Joetsu, Niigata. He doesn't drink as heavily as this article implies.





LGBT BEYOND TOKYO

Doing Your Best With Less

Michelle Belmont (Shizuoka)

Every time I read an interesting, informative LGBT-themed *manga*, one thing sticks out: Tokyo. It seems like everything happens in Tokyo. All the best stories, all the TV shows, the biggest pride events, the hottest bars, it's *all* about Tokyo. Sure, there are LGBT communities in places like Osaka, Yokohama, Fukuoka, Nagoya, and Sapporo. But they aren't *Tokyo*. They don't get the same publicity, draw the same crowds, or have the most resources. For example, in 2016 the Kyushu Rainbow Pride [1] and the Kansai Rainbow Festa! [2] had a turnout of 5,000-6,000 people, while the Tokyo Rainbow Pride attracted over 70,000 and was reported on in worldwide news services like the UK Daily Mail. [3]

And then there's me. You see, I live in what people would call the *inaka*. Of course an area with

around 300,000 people isn't exactly a shack in the woods, but if that area is two hours from Tokyo... it might as well be nowhere. "But!" you may say, "I hear there's lots of great apps you can use to meet people!" This is where the differences between my reality and other parts of LGBT reality collide head-on.

I guess a little information about me is needed to make sense. My name is Michelle, and I am a transwoman who identifies strongly as a lesbian. This is where the initial conflict arises. I think "LGBT" as a concept in Japan is much more fractured and compartmentalized than it is in some other countries. You could blame it on any number of potential reasons: the small LGBT population numbers, the patriarchy, a lack of education in

LGBT issues, or plain old prejudice if you want. However, the truth is that each letter in LGBT (as well as the left out letters, like Queer, Intersex, and Asexual) are really their own individual fiefdoms in Japan, and they can be very exclusive.

Take for example, Shinjuku Ni-chome, known as a popular hub for the LGBT community — in Tokyo, again. Most of the bars are segregated by gender or sexuality, and sometimes anything that blurs those lines can be challenging. I've been to lesbian bars where I, as a fully out and transitioning transwoman, could only get in if I was accompanied by other cisgender lesbians. Meanwhile, the same bar allowed several transmen in, which I still don't understand.

On one of my rare visits to Ni-chome, I met a very friendly bisexual woman who spent the evening taking me and another foreign lesbian that she met to different bars. She talked at length about how stifled she felt in the social climate of Japan, even among the small LGBT community. She said that sometimes, especially if she mentioned having recently gotten out of a relationship with a male, women would say she was a "fake" or just ignore her completely afterwards.

A similar thing happened to me, too. At one of the bars, I was talking with the patrons and the bartenders about being transgender, and they were all praising me for being out and representing LGBT issues in rural Japan. They asked questions about my lifestyle, hardships, and the whole process of transition. It felt like they had an urgent desire to understand, and that was a positive thing that I was happy to oblige.

However, when it came to relationships and sex, the conversation shifted. What struck me the most was that it seemed none of the women in the bar that night (as well as other Japanese lesbians I've talked to) had ever considered transwomen as capable of being *lesbians*. There was a compartmentalized view, as if to say "lesbians are this" and "transwomen are that." There was no intersectionality, no concept that the two weren't mutually exclusive ideas. There was a disconnect between accepting trans people as an aspect of the sexual minority community and accepting them as a valid component of the *lesbian* community.

When the bartender was asked by her friends if she would date a transwoman, she paused for a bit to think about it. After some consideration, she said (roughly translated): "I respect them and all, but I couldn't ever date one. That's not my thing." I get that. Everyone has their own feelings and preferences, and there's nothing wrong with that. Some people are really open to a variety of experiences, while others can't quite move beyond simple biology. Attraction is what it is, and I don't judge anyone for that. Still, it hurts sometimes to hear it. More important than my feelings, though, the fact that the concept of a transwoman identifying as a lesbian had never crossed their radar highlights how much more education Japan needs on trans issues, even among the larger LGBT community.

And it's not that these were bad places, because they certainly weren't. Once inside, I felt the same friendliness as anyone else would, though inwardly I also felt sort of isolated. It was like being a very welcome *guest*, but not a full-fledged member of the community. However, three-and-a-half

years ago, I visited a women's only bar in Fukuoka where I felt right at home, fully welcomed by the women there, and even hit on by a few. I went again to Tokyo's Ni-chome, during the 2016 Tokyo Rainbow Pride, as a guest

speaker for a panel discussion on overcoming difficulties in LGBT life. This time I certainly felt more connected, but it was other foreigners in the community who were paying me attention.

Meanwhile, out here in the "countryside," one's relationship potential seems to depend on whether or not you're a gay male. Many of my gay friends talk about how they have decent options, going on dates from time to time, and in some cases having serious, long-term relationships. But whenever I talk with my few lesbian friends, all I hear is "Yeah, I haven't been on any dates in a while."

I asked a gay male friend of mine about this recently, and his response was that it's the same everywhere. He said that essentially, men have most of the freedoms in the world, while women have most of the responsibilities. Of course, this isn't completely true, but on some level, it persists as a social construct. After all, women are expected to bear children, take care of the house, get coffee with their girlfriends, and gossip about men. That

"There was a compartmentalized view, as if to say 'lesbians are this' and 'transwomen are that'."



pressure to bow to domestic social rules tends to bear more of its weight on women than on men. That means that, on some level, society devalues women who aren't getting married and having children.

Let me give you an example. I work in a high school, and for the past two years I have had my third-year students write an essay on any one of four social issues. Out of the 129 students who choose to talk about the same-sex marriage issue, only 6 said they were against it. First, let's take a step back and recognize that 123 out of 129 students (of voting age in a few months) said they were for same-sex marriage! However, one thing that persisted throughout most of the essays was that many students thought allowing same-sex marriage would hurt Japan's drastically declining birthrate. [4]

It was apparent that many of the students viewed overarching social obligations as equally or more important than personal happiness. What was interesting was that very few of these students considered the possibility of surrogacy or in-vitro fertilization. A recent article from Advocate.com [5] relates the difficulties that LGBT couples face in getting IVF or legal recognition in surrogacy cases. Same-sex couples are barred from receiving IVF by Japanese doctors, and they cannot adopt children under 6 years old.

The article also says that a child born to a Japanese couple via a surrogate mother in the US would

still likely be legally considered the surrogate's child in Japan. Despite not having any part in the relationship, and not even being a legal mother in the US, Japan would place the responsibility on the woman, taking it away from the child's legal parent. This highly traditional viewpoint promoted by the government brings home this idea that the woman's job is to have children, and that's that. When you think about the social pressures on women, it's no wonder many Japanese lesbians are secretive about their sexuality.

A year ago, I was determined to overcome this problem and meet a girl online. I did some research, downloaded some apps, and dove into it. First of these was Tinder, which might as well be called "Dwindle" since there seems to be little fire ready to burn. Put in "Girl looking for Girl" and countless profiles pop-up, of which maybe one in 40 is an actual lesbian/bisexual girl. The other 39 profiles are straight girls just looking for a "bestie" to teach them English, for free of course. Many of these women actually state in their profiles that they are not interested in relationships/hookups, and anyone looking for that should "swipe left" to pass on them.

I then tried Spindle+, advertised as an app specifically for lesbians. What I found was a small few people in my area, less than 10 within a 30 km radius. Of course all of them spoke Japanese only, and the whole app was very confusing and difficult to navigate. I couldn't figure out how to message or connect with anyone, and

nobody has paid any attention to me in the year I've been on it. I gave up on that.

What's next, then? OkCupid, of course! This was a different app, this one was full of real lesbian/bi/pan women seeking other women! In Tokyo. Nearly everyone I've seen on the app who pops up as "in my area" is in Tokyo, and furthermore, it's almost all foreigners. And that's not really a problem, love is love after all. But it doesn't move you forward when your goal is to find and connect with the Japanese LGBT community.

I guess it comes down to the question of "What do I *really* want?" A part of me still can't decide if I want to be part of a community, or if I just want a girlfriend. It feels as if the community is the part of those manga which interested me the most, and pulled me towards Japan in the first place. What I've seen of the LGBT community in Japan, both from manga written by lesbians and from my own experiences, is a small, tight-knit realm where people are generally compassionate and friendly. Perhaps that contradicts some of my earlier stories on some level, but I'm optimistic enough to believe that these are either exceptions to the rule or social misunderstandings. The reality is probably somewhere in the middle.

But once again, that all happens *only* when I visit Tokyo. Back here in my little burg of 300,000 people, I find myself feeling alone and isolated. I have plenty of friends among the English-speaking community here, but none of that really connects back into the LGBT community I long for. I find myself searching for expression and for a place where I feel like I can have an impact.

In fact, I long for those things so much that last year I joined Stonewall Japan [6], a national LGBT organization, as the leader of my area. In the end, though, I found the same problems. As much as I tried to connect locally, create events, and cultivate a community, the base just wasn't there. The biggest cities had all the members, all the events, and all the focus. This wasn't the organization's fault, as a lot of work was put into trying to solve this issue. Even now that I'm no longer a leader, I intend to help my successor continue building up the small community in my area. Still, under my leadership, that community just didn't quite coalesce.

Maybe I didn't try hard enough. However, it feels sometimes like it's impossible to push back against

the force of a world-class city bearing down on you, like an ant avoiding footsteps. As an ant, you really only have two options: either run to the side and climb onto the foot, or get crushed. But as much as I talk about how nice it would be to live in Tokyo and be a part of that community, the truth is I don't really *want* to leave my nice little area. I have a good job, a less stressful daily life, and a drastically lower cost of living. There are plenty of *anime* and game shops to attract my attention away from my sorrows, and I can still go down to the local bookstore and buy used lesbian *manga* for 100 *yen*.

But it isn't the same, and perhaps it never will be. There's only one Tokyo.



CLUB
IT
NN

Advertisement board with a glowing top section and a green-bordered bottom section containing text and images.

2009-10-14
2009-10-14



*Interested in some LGBT manga?
Here are some of Michelle's favorites!*

Love My Life – Yamaji Ebine (2001)
Indigo Blue – Yamaji Ebine (2002)
Honey & Honey – Takeuchi Sachiko (2006)
'Ohana Holoholo – Torino Shino (2010)
レズビアン的結婚生活 (*Rezubian-teki Kekkō Seikatsu*) – Higashi
Koyuki, Masuhara Hiroko, and Sugiyama Emiko (2014)
僕が私になるために (*Boku ga Watashi ni Naru Tame ni*) – Hirasawa
Yuuna (2016)
僕が私になるために (*Sabishisugite Rezu Fuuzoku ni Ikimashita
Repo*) – Nagata Gabi (2016)
僕が私になるために (*Hitori Koukan Nikki*) – Nagata Gabi (2016)

Michelle Belmont is the first openly transgender teacher in Shizuoka. Hailing from the controversially anti-trans North Carolina, USA, she enjoys her slightly too peaceful life in rural, yet suburban Japan. Her cute hamster keeps her company when the rural life becomes lonely. She is currently assisting her successor in Stonewall Japan as a Prefecture Rep. for Shizuoka.

Sources:

- 1 <http://bit.ly/2jdSPGb>
- 2 <http://bit.ly/2jdYPyk>
- 3 <http://dailym.ai/2jdUETH>
- 4 <http://dailym.ai/2iqO3DY>
- 5 <http://bit.ly/21Vno0G>
- 6 <http://bit.ly/2jdSPGb>

Photos:

Illaura Rossiter
Illaura Rossiter
Michelle Belmont "Yoyoji Park in Tokyo during an LGBTQIA+ meetup"
Wikicommons

Closeted

CLOSETED - ADJECTIVE; KEEPING SOMETHING SECRET,
ESPECIALLY THE FACT OF BEING HOMOSEXUAL.

Nick Lavin (Toyama)



If you have ever been (or indeed still are) closeted, you can agree it is no bed of roses. Having to conceal your sexuality and a part of your identity from family, friends, colleagues, and peers can leave you feeling isolated, confined, and frustrated.

There is a reason why the term “closeted” is used with regard to those who are keeping their sexuality a secret from those around them. It is dark. It is restrictive. It is suffocating.

My time spent in the closet was awash with confusion and anguish, on both a mental and emotional level, as I tried my best to circumnavigate across the spectrum of my own sexuality. Even now when I reflect on my experiences being in the closet, I cannot help but grimace.

Flashback to my high school days. I am sitting with my female friends in the canteen, engrossed in enjoyable conversation. “Mate, are you, like, a faggot or something?” one of the popular, athletic types suddenly probes. Silence. Those around stare. Silence is soon replaced with sniggers and slurs. My words fail me as I desperately try to salvage a fragment of my crumbling heterosexual facade. Deeper into my closet I withdraw.

This was just one of the day-to-day experiences that I encountered during my youth which made me feel like I would never be able to escape the dark solitude of my closet.

Fortunately, however, my closet was only a temporary abode. I was able to step out of the darkness into a warm and accepting welcome from all of my family and friends, to which I am extremely grateful. The positive reaction from those around me left me wondering

what it was that had made me so fearful to come out during my younger years. The world outside the closet was bright. Liberating. I could breathe, finally; I had cast off my shackles and bid *adieu* to the isolation of my closet for once and for all. Or so I had thought.

Before leaving for Japan on the JET Programme, my sexuality was the last thing on my mind. During Pre-Departure Orientation, lecturers kindly gave speeches discussing the difficulties that incoming JETs can face after arriving in Japan — mainly culture shock. Given the geographical distance between Britain and Japan, I tried to mentally prepare myself as best as possible for the impending culture shock which awaited me in the land of the rising sun.

Much time was spent considering the challenges that await foreigners in Japan. However, topics which were never discussed were the challenges which lay in wait for me as a homosexual male.

With Tokyo Orientation over all too soon, I suddenly found myself behind my desk at work on the first day of my new job. An uncomfortable mixture of nerves and jet lag, matched with the stifling heat of the Japanese summer, meant my once freshly-cleaned shirt was drenched in perspiration as I began to make my rounds greeting different people within city hall. After many introductions and an excessive amount of bowing, one particular gentlemen mentions my big *gaijin* nose and compliments my physical attributes. This was met with laughter from my new supervisor. “Relax! He’s not a homo. Don’t worry!”

My throat ran dry.



My words failed me.

I decided to smile graciously and let the comment slide as playful office banter.

After a long first day at work, I was quickly ushered to a local *izakaya* which was filled with the faces of my new work colleagues. It's my welcome party. The smell of cigarette smoke and *sake* filled my nostrils as I took my seat within the venue. After a few words of greeting, a couple cans of Kirin Ichiban, the conversation turned to relationships.

"Nick, do you have a girlfriend?"

"Nick, what is your type?"

"Nick, what do you think of Japanese girls?"

The barrage of questions was quick and relentless. In that moment, I was offered two choices: tell the truth or lie.

I regrettably chose the latter.

Like a repeat offender, I find myself being frog-marched back into my closet once again. Though

many years have passed, my closet remains unchanged and the familiar darkness greets me like an old friend. Only this time, my closet feels smaller and more cramped than I remember. I awkwardly contort my body, trying to squeeze into the same space which my 14-year-old self would have had no problem fitting into. My brief spell outside of the closet had enabled me to grow in many more ways than I could have imagined.

I had once naively thought that stepping out of the closet would be one of the hardest challenges I would face in my life. However, admittedly, stepping out of the closet, enjoying the taste of liberation, and then being forced back into the same closet is undeniably even more challenging.

However, this is of course not just limited to myself. I imagine that many members from the LGBTQIA living in Japan are faced with similar situations on a regular basis. Living in Japan for any minority can be a stressful and at times frustrating experience. However, members of the queer community are statistically more likely to be faced with additional

anguish and strife. Unfortunately, this mental and emotional burden can often lead to low self-esteem, alcohol/drug abuse, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

Finding solace and refuge within a queer space can be an excellent way to reduce the stress and anguish of everyday life. From an outside perspective, the bars, clubs, discotheques, and other queer spaces as found in Shinjuku Ni-chome and Kita-ku might appear to be nothing more than a place where gay men drink vodka and twerk to the likes of Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj on a superficial level. However, these queer spaces are much more than this. These queer spaces offer sanctuary. Safety. Family. Home. It is a place to step out of the proverbial closet and present the most authentic and honest version of yourself.

Unfortunately, for those who do not reside in big cities like Tokyo and Osaka, queer spaces and communities are seldom found. From my experience, this can heighten one's sense of isolation and solitude while living in the *inaka* of Japan. Though you can

surround yourself with many close friends within the local community and among fellow JETs and alumni, the lack of a queer space to retreat to can leave you with an unshakeable feeling of loneliness. My incarceration within the closet seems perpetual.

However, the worst was yet to come.

On June 12, 2016, an assailant walked into Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, armed with an SIG Sauer MCX semi-automatic rifle and a 9mm Glock 17 semi-automatic pistol. Opening fire, the gunman killed 49 people and wounded 53 others in a heinous hate crime. This was both the deadliest mass shooting by a single gunman and the worst attack against the LGBTQIA in United States history.

Pulse was a gay nightclub. It was a queer space. A place which people retreat to in search of acceptance, unity, and love, had in that instance been desecrated into somewhere of discrimination, stigma, and hate.

The LGBTQIA community worldwide was in mourning.

My alarm sounds at 7 a.m. on a seemingly ordinary dreaded Monday. I stir. I yawn. I stretch. I reach for my iPhone and begin scrolling through Facebook as I steal a couple of extra minutes in bed. Expecting the usual stream of selfies and memes, I pause. Stunned. I frantically read through article after article feeling a surge of different emotions, even a world away.

My clock now reads 07:32 a.m. Work beckons me. It is in that instant that I realize that similar to my sexuality, my emotions too must be left firmly sealed within

my closet.

As with any other Monday, I routinely pull out my trousers, shirt, tie, and jacket from my closet and begin to get dressed. I apply cologne, style my hair, and put on my watch. My last accessory to apply is the most important — my mask of heterosexuality. With a heavy heart, I cower behind this mask.

REMEMBER TO TURN ON THE LIGHT.

Wanting to grieve but not being permitted to because of societal values and norms has been my toughest challenge to date. Forcing a smile I try to feign normality. It was in this instance that I felt my closet was at its darkest. However, to quote a well-known proverb, “the darkest hour comes just before the dawn.”

As I sit pondering my desolation inside my closet, a faint voice calls out from the darkness: “You are not alone.”

Like music to my ears, my heart leaps as my eyes scan my closet trying to distinguish who had called out to me from the shadows. My search is in vain as I see nothing but darkness: “It gets better.”

A different voice calls out from another corner of my closet, only louder: “We are here for you.”

A chorus of encouragement erupts from within my closet. Suddenly, a light switches on and I see that I am not alone. Faces smile at me and I recognize these people as my comrades of the LGBTQIA cause. These are of course the faces of Stonewall Japan and other allies. Comment after comment fills the page from people offering support and love for those in need. My anger is replaced with determination. My loneliness replaced with togetherness. My sorrow replaced with pride.

I realize as I sit in my apartment amongst the Japanese rice fields, that to escape the darkness of my closet, all I had to do was remember to turn on the light.

Nick Lavin is a 3rd year CIR and the AJET Vice Chair located in Takaoka City, Toyama Prefecture. He majored in Japanese Studies at the University of Manchester, and has an interest in linguistics and queer culture. He wrote his thesis regarding queer identity through the medium of the Japanese language. Nick likes to spend his weekends drinking good coffee, hanging out with friends, and endlessly watching RuPaul's Drag Race. Also, food. Lots of it.

Need someone to talk to? Try contacting the Peer Support Group (PSG), details [here](#).

Photo:
Giovanni Perez
May Zhang

ARTS AND CULTURE

CULTURE EDITORS

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Annamarie Carlson

Winter in Shizuoka is all of the cold and none of the snow. Ruuude.

Michael Sosnick

If I'm ornery it's because I'm too cheap to properly heat my apartment.

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Sabrina Zirakzadeh

So excited for my first Valentine's with my wife-to-be rather than just my girlfriend! I can't wait!

Travis Shaver

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Erica Grainger

February - my favourite month as I can celebrate V's Day and my birthday all within 28 days!

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Photo: Sarah Pragnell



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Hokkaido Miso Ramen

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Hiroshima Style

たこ焼き
Takoyaki



Valentine's Day Guide

By Sabrina Zirakzadeh (Osaka) and Steven Thompson (New Zealand)

Celebrating Valentine's Day in Japan offers its own unique challenges, but also represents a great opportunity to do something a little special in appreciating what you have with your partner. *Connect* gets romantic advice from Sabrina and Steven and learns what Valentine's Day means to them.

Sabrina (engaged)

I am either a huge loser or one of the luckiest people alive! Every Valentine's Day date has been with my current partner and nearly all have happened in Japan.

Preparation

To relax and get in the mood, I put on some favorite romantic music and burn vanilla scented oil while I get ready. Then I put together my look based on what my date has liked in the past; if they liked it before, they'll probably like it again, and that helps me feel more confident, too!

Valentine's Day Date

In Japan, Valentine's reservations are competitive and other traditional dates are more expensive, so I like DIY dates. One year I made a homemade dinner, while another year, we celebrated at Korakuen garden in Okayama and spent the night watching our favorite romantic comedies. My favorite Valentine's was when we got a fondue set and some candy molds to make our own fancy dinner and dessert together. Sometimes we catch a movie or visit a museum or garden, but my favorite Valentine's in Japan have all been at home.

Gifts

Gifts can be touchy. My fiancée knows me too well! One year she surprised me with a replacement for a much-beloved poster that had been destroyed moving to Japan. How do you compete with that? Well, I usually give homemade presents. My best gift was when I wrote her a song, but how can I outdo that in the future? Oops...

Etiquette & Final Tips

In the past, I spent too much time worrying and ended up fumbling. Most etiquette advice is overrated. The most important things are to be yourself and to be open-minded. Does it matter that your date monopolizes the conversation if you learn about their passions in the process? Is it important that you forgot to hold the door when taking your date to the best restaurant they've never been to? If you make an honest connection and give things a chance even when they go a bit wrong, then when things go well, they can be better than you can imagine in the future. That's the best advice I can give for dating in general. Romance and all good things know no boundaries, and so too should you!

Sabrina Zirakzadeh lives with her partner of seven years in Osaka City. This year, they plan on spending Valentine's Day celebrating their recent engagement, probably with homemade food, blanket forts, and dancing.



Steven Thompson (married)

In Japan, the most important question is: Will you celebrate it “Japanese style”? So, are you focusing on one partner for February 14th and then reciprocating on March 14th for White Day? Are you celebrating only one? Both? Embracing the cultural traditions of the country you’re living in is a unique experience. Just make sure that no one is caught off guard!

Preparation

Often, men think there’s not much to do in preparation for a date, and this can be especially true for long-term relationships. However, Valentine’s Day is the perfect opportunity to really step up your game. The old adage of “You should never stop dating your spouse” applies here.

A nice, full shower *should* go without saying, so once you’ve cleaned up, it’s time to...clean up! Your facial hair, that is. If you have a beard, trim and groom it, including stray hairs around your face (eyebrows and nose). Considering a haircut or trim? Do it! Wear non-wrinkly, well-fitting clothes. Tuck in that shirt, wear a color-matched belt and shoes, and pick out a smart tie. You can scale this look for any level of formality by rolling sleeves up or down, and changing your jacket, sweater, and shoes. If you know what physical features your partner likes best about you (eyes, forearms, chest hair), try and accentuate that!

Valentine’s Day Date

I believe memorable experiences outclass and outlast any gift, especially on Valentine’s Day. For instance, a hike with some mountaintop wine at sunset. One of my personal favorites was a Mexican buffet at home, which showed effort and consideration. Since you’re in Japan, maybe consider a nice room in a quiet *onsen ryokan* (hot spring inn), where you can hire a romantic private bath for the two of you. What’s important is that it feels like an occasion rather than an obligation or afterthought.



Gifts

As mentioned, I think special, shared experiences are better than gifts given for the sake of giving. However, don’t underestimate the symbolic power of a beautiful, tidy bouquet of your partner’s favorite flowers with some chocolates they like (for me, anything with peanut butter).



Etiquette

Go out of your way to make your partner feel special, and really pour on the romantic gestures and compliments. Even if you both feel embarrassed about it, this is *the day* to drown yourselves in cheesy displays of love and affection. Hold open doors and pull out chairs. If you usually do it, go even bigger!

Final Tips

Over the years of dating seriously and casually, I've come to the conclusion that Valentine's Day is

a great excuse to display your emotions and show your partner what they mean to you. If you're in a long-term relationship, this is your chance to act like you're trying to woo them on a first date all over again! Don't worry about looking silly. Get out there and cheese it up, Romeo!

Steven Thompson is a writer, editor and translator who spent 5 wonderful years in Fukushima, where he went on plenty of cheesy dates with his now-wife. Feel free to throw incredibly high-paying work and or deeply researched Star Wars theories to him @distantshores.

Photos:
Illauro Rossiter
Sabrina Zirakzadeh
Sabrina Zirakzadeh
Steven Thompson
Steven Thompson



What a Musical World

AJET CHARITY MUSICAL SPOTLIGHT
Sabrina Zirakzadeh (Osaka)



One thing that sets the JET Program apart from other ALT companies is the emphasis on grassroots cultural exchange outside of the classroom. Whether by joining a local dance troupe, volunteering around the neighborhood, or learning a martial art, there are many ways for JET participants to get involved with their communities. However, some take things further by using their combined presence and unique talents to entertain, raise money for charity, and give back to the community that has welcomed them, with one of the Western world's longest-running phenomena: musical theater.

Since the JET Program began, many local and prefectural AJET groups have put on musicals written, directed, and staged entirely by JET participants. These productions are well-known and loved within the Japanese community, and their popularity continues to grow. Shows are produced in Hokkaido, Kyushu, and even tiny Kochi Prefecture, and the long-running Niigata and Tokushima musicals even have substantial reputations outside of their prefectures. What is it that drives these productions and makes them such resounding, popular successes?

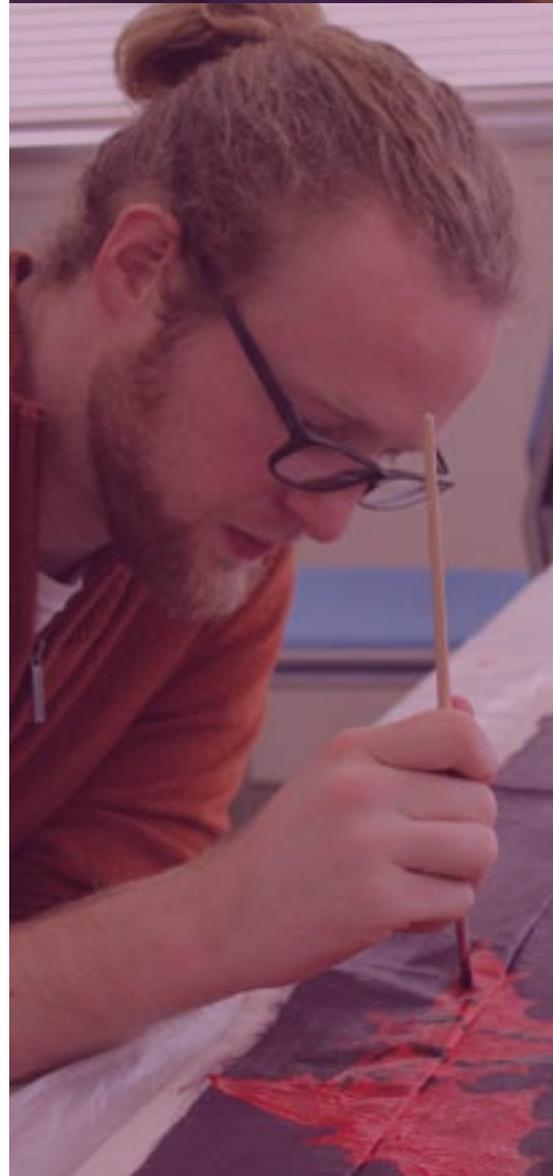
WHAT MAKES A MUSICAL?

Both the Niigata Charity Musical and the Tokushima AJET Musical celebrate their 20th anniversary this year, which is almost as long as the JET Program has existed in those areas. "When this was first started," explains Viet Ngo, one of this year's directors in Tokushima, "it was a way to get the JET community together. It's still a way to bring the JET community together, [...] and reach out to the Japanese community here."

In addition, past Tokushima director Jaymie Udan says "in most of Japan, [especially in rural places like] Tokushima, Japanese people don't usually have an occasion to listen to everyday English. The musical gives them the opportunity to not only practice listening to English, but to do it in a fun and memorable way." The Niigata musical also aims to raise money for local charities, and to give local JETs a chance to show their skills and raise their spirits. They can do this while giving back to the community, according to 2017 director Mei Perrier.

To reach these goals, the community has a lot of work to do. First and foremost is finding a director or directing team with the drive and ability to make educational, inspiring entertainment out of mere concepts. The Tokushima musical is voted on by the JET community, with "a lot of thought [being] put into what shows would be appealing to the audience, adaptable to our resources, showcase the talent pool we have available, etc.," according to Udan. Once the show is decided, the AJET committee fills the leadership roles: Udan was selected to direct in 2015 after helping choreograph the 2014 show, and returned as assistant director and choreographer in 2016, while Ngo was chosen as one of two directors this year after he submitted what would become the winning proposal, based on the legend of Hercules.

Other musical groups take a more relaxed approach due to smaller participation numbers. Perrier, a third-year Niigata JET and musical participant, stepped into her role this year because she felt she could contribute the most through directing. "I love organizing stuff and planning





things around, [but] I'm very bad at dancing and I'm not a really strong singer, so I thought I would be the most useful behind the curtains, even though I miss acting a lot," she explained. In a production with around sixteen cast and crew in total, her decision is surely appreciated.

The full production process from show proposal to dress rehearsals takes about a year for most AJET musical groups. Tokushima begins accepting and reviewing potential show ideas in the summer and selects the cast from auditions in the fall, while Niigata follows a similar timeline with the show selection and auditions being completed in August shortly after the new JETs arrive. Nearly every AJET musical group aims for an early spring premiere, to coincide with the new school year and renewed enthusiasm for English and cultural studies amongst their Japanese communities. But finding enough time to rehearse and prepare the props, costumes, and sets is far from easy. The biggest hurdle? "Scheduling," says Ngo. "We're all individuals with different schools and responsibilities. So it's difficult to schedule people in an optimal way."

Udan adds, "Because our cast/crew comes from all over the prefecture, we rehearse and perform in as many different cities/towns as possible to make it fair for everyone involved."

The logistics of working around the cast and crew's schedules and locations mean that, despite having several months between casting and opening, rehearsal time is scarce and each one is fast and furious, with many members working as "choreographers, lyrics writers, props designers, costume makers, music editors, and PR experts," according to Perrier.

In addition, most of these musicals run on a shoestring budget. The Niigata musical is produced entirely on donations, but the team prefers that most of the cost go towards charity (this year, they went to the Itoigawa fire victims). "With donations, we pay the show, rehearsal venues, and some other costs related to musical (the fabric for our handmade costumes, the material we used for the sets [...])," says Perrier. "What is left over goes to the Niigata AJET charity."

This presents some difficulties, but nothing that the musical teams cannot overcome. "A lot of time is spent doing things like searching for performance venues we can use for free," Udan explains, "and of course the copious amounts of rehearsal time and crafting and the like is volunteered by our cast/crew."

REAPING THE REWARDS

Despite the difficulties, producing the musical is a rewarding and exciting experience, and one that changes every year even for repeat participants. "Some years, you'll get a batch of JETs with a bunch of varied talents (not just musical theater ones [...] but anything that can be used for the show, [like] martial arts, or juggling). Some years there will be lots of enthusiasm for the project, but not many people interested in getting up and performing onstage," says Udan. "The end result is that each



year, the show is very tailored to and personal for all of the participants. It's both a challenge getting the show up in those circumstances as well as a reward seeing it come to fruition."

Even before opening night, the cast and crew gain precious memories and experiences to take with them after the show is over. "I met most of my best friends on JET through [the] musical and I have only good memories with each cast," says Perrier, a sentiment shared by the Tokushima directors.

"Sure, they were tough times, but they were fun, too," Ngo states, and Udan adds that "the musical has been the site of so much of my personal and professional growth in the past three years. JET definitely wouldn't have been the same without it."

Still, it's nice when all the hard work pays off, and that's what seems to happen with the AJET musicals, year after year, show after show. As each show is conceived and written by JETs, and they're able to connect with their local audience in unique ways. For example, Perrier explains that this year's production of *Dracula* "has *nothing* to do with anything made before. Basically, Dracula comes to Japan because he's a huge *otaku* and tries to steal the manga manuscript of a hard-working but poor manga team made of foreigners. It is entirely original and features many anime/J-Pop songs." Similarly, the Tokushima musicals tailor their shows to match local legends, history, and settings, and make a point to use music and simple English dialogue that the audience can easily understand no matter their English level. The end results are funny, original takes on familiar tales that entertain and resonate with the Japanese audiences and help bring the foreign and Japanese communities closer together.

The amount of work that goes into making each show a success while also building international communities is nothing short of spectacular. But the participants say they are happy just to put on a good show and have fun doing so. "We are very self-sufficient, try to do the best with the least money, and still manage to make the audience laugh and come again year after year," says Perrier of what makes her beloved Niigata musical crew so special.

Udan also reports that "every year, we have students and community members come and see us who report back to their ALTs that they loved the show and have become inspired to study English harder because of it. It's definitely the greatest feeling, knowing that we've provided that inspiration [...] to so many people."

What started as a mere concept with only a leadership crew builds into successful productions that can run for multiple showings around the prefecture with great success (with Niigata routinely donating around 200,000 yen to charity each year), despite the language barriers and minimal budgets. What makes that possible? As Ngo puts it, "I think [it's] everyone having an overall great experience working together and enjoying the show."

In the end, all the hard work is worth it, both for the AJET groups and audience alike. "We have longtime fans who love to keep up with the returning cast members from year to year," Udan says, "which is absolutely amazing to see — it's obvious we're making an impact." Between bringing together the JETs who make it happen, helping encourage English learning in communities all over Japan, and mixing together foreign and Japanese cultures into original shows that keep us all laughing and enjoying ourselves year after year, the AJET musical groups will surely continue to make an impact for many, many more years to come.

The 2017 Niigata Charity Musical "Dracula" runs 4 Feb. — 18 March, and the 2017 Tokushima AJET Musical "Rapunzel on Mt. Tsurugi" runs 26 Feb. — 19 March. For information on locations, times, and more, please visit the [Niigata Charity Musical Facebook page](#) and [homepage](#), or the [Tokushima AJET Musical Homepage](#) and [Facebook page](#).

Photos:
Francesca Abbondaza-Bergeron
Jaymie Udan
Jaymie Udan
Francesca Abbondaza-Bergeron
Jaymie Udan
Jaymie Udan
Francesca Abbondaza-Bergeron



A Simple Japanese New Year

Steffi Kowlessar (Shizuoka)

My first winter vacation in Japan has been a pleasant eye opener, not least of all because I'm a Caribbean girl and this is my very first real winter! It's great to experience how another culture celebrates the same holidays as I do, but in different ways.

Christmas and New Year in Trinidad is an unofficial week-long holiday spanning from 24 Dec. to 1 Jan. where people still have to go to work but most don't bother to. Throughout the holiday, family and friends gather to eat and drink and just be with each other, gossiping about the year that has gone by. We call this casual hangout time 'liming,' and we even do it at the beach in December. My experience in Japan was something quite different, but underneath the layers of difference is a thread of the same sense of unity and camaraderie that I experience in my home country.

My holiday began with a trip to Yokohama. For the holidays, many Japanese people visit other cities or even go abroad on vacation. I thought I should join the tradition and took myself to Yokohama with some good friends. My first thought on getting there was, "Couples! Couples everywhere!"

In Japan, Christmas is a romantic time, and from what I saw I likened it to Valentine's Day — times 100! In Yokohama, particularly Minato Mirai and the Christmas Market at Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse, the crowd was thick and consisted mostly of couples! Affectionate, PDA-driven couples! It was a big change from the festive family affair that is Christmas in most parts of the Western world. It was also slightly sweet to see.

The abundance of Christmas souvenirs and decorations, the many tall Nutcracker statues and Santa statues, and even fake snow in the Christmas market, all seemed like a pleasant Christmas wonderland. There were so many desserts and foods on offer, some traditional sweets like cookies, but most were authentic Japanese foods that looked very interesting. And to top off my experience in Yokohama, I enjoyed the lovely Night View at Minato Mirai. Lights and illuminations lit the city, displaying a fantastic sight.

There was no week-long holiday for me since I went

back to work on the day after Christmas. But the New Year holiday was close and when it came, I enjoyed it immensely!

I rang in the new year with great Japanese friends. Drinking and laughing until midnight seems like the thing to do at 12 a.m. on 1 Jan. no matter where you are in the world. At midnight, my students have informed me, there is the important tradition of *hatsumode*, the first shrine (or temple) visit of the year. Japanese families go to shrines to pray for good fortune in the year to come, and then they go to see *hatsuhinode*, or the first sunrise. This signifies a new beginning and stems from the ancient Buddhist tradition that the Sun is a deity which is to be respected and brings good luck.

I didn't wake up early enough to see the sunrise, unfortunately, since my friends and I went stargazing that night. In the mountains during winter, the sky is very clear and beautiful.

I did, however, get to experience a traditional Japanese family's New Year party. It was filled with vibrant laughter, good food and great drinks, much the same as back home. The difference lay in the dishes served. Each dish has a meaning for the

new year. Meanings range from joyful to happy and lucky.

My favourite was a savory, traditional winter dish called *oden*. This boiled dish was shared by all and consisted of something I had never even heard of — ground fish mixed with different types of flour, formed into many different shapes, and boiled for a long time with potatoes, eggs, and other vegetables. It was all very new and delicious!

There was no traditional gift giving between family members, but the children of the family collected *otoshidama* (monetary gifts) from all their relatives. It was great to see their joy and satisfaction as they all had fun with their relatives.

Japan's culture may be different from my own, but spending the holidays with great people ensured I had fun experiences and made an abundance of great memories.

Steffi Kowlessar is a short Trinidadian girl enjoying her discovery of Japan's food, people, and scenery. She lives in a quiet area of Shizuoka and is beyond glad that it doesn't snow. She can handle the cold, but could live without the wet.

Photos:
Steffi Kowlessar
Steffi Kowlessar



Who What When Wear

Kymerlee Morris (Fukushima)



Who

Wha a gawn massive. That's Jamaican for "How are you?" I'm Kymerlee, a fifth-year ALT living in Iwaki-shi, Fukushima. I'm from the beautiful island of Jamaica. As an only child, you might assume I'm an introvert, but I'm actually a social butterfly (or so I like to think). I'm a Sagittarius and very strong-willed, independent, and sociable. I like to watch reality TV programs, travel, play table tennis, and read erotic literature.

What

My fashion style is simple yet bold. I take something simple, unique, understated and add a bit of pizzazz to it. My style commands attention, but not the negative type. I am a shopaholic. I love dresses! My fashion muse is Claire Sulmere. She's able to transform an everyday look into something chic and savvy. Her sense of style relates to me and is one I admire.

When

Deciding when to wear what is crucial for most people. The wrong timing could be very embarrassing. My weekday to weekend look is like ying and yang. I often look in the mirror and feel extremely impressed by my own transformation. For work days I wear something dark colored with a cardigan, no makeup, and no curls in my hair — "Plain Jane." As the weekday transitions to the weekend, that's when the inner Kym shines through. My social event look consists of big, loose curls, subtle eyes and bold lips, a dress that accentuates my curves. Totally glamorized — "Barbiefy."

Wear

I'm wearing a white cape dress, paired with a red coat and platform heels, all from ASOS. ASOS is a UK based online store, which sells clothes from various designers. They cater to both sexes.

The dress is Alisilio, my coat is designed by ASOS and my shoes are ASOS Pancakes. My hair's big and dramatic with subtle daytime makeup using Candy Yum Yum lips from MAC. Some designers that I like are Coach, Aldo, Alisilio, Melissa, and Michael Kors.

Photo: Kymerlee Morris

marimekko

Design. Fashion. Lifestyle.

When: Dec. 17 - Feb. 12, 2017

Where: The Bunkamura Museum of Art (Shibuya, Tokyo)

Official Website:

http://www.bunkamura.co.jp/museum/exhibition/16_marimekko/

This winter is the perfect opportunity to feast your eyes on all things Marimekko. The Finnish textiles and fashion house celebrates its 66th birthday with a colourful retrospective exhibition featuring their trademark floral patterns, playful prints, and a whole lot of flower power! From its humble beginnings in Helsinki, Finland in the early 50s to becoming a global iconic powerhouse, with many international designers including the Japanese textile designers Katsuji Wakisaka and Fujiwo Ishimoto. This exhibition perfectly captures the essence and imagination of Marimekko's many designers and their collaborations, showing the gradual change from past to present.



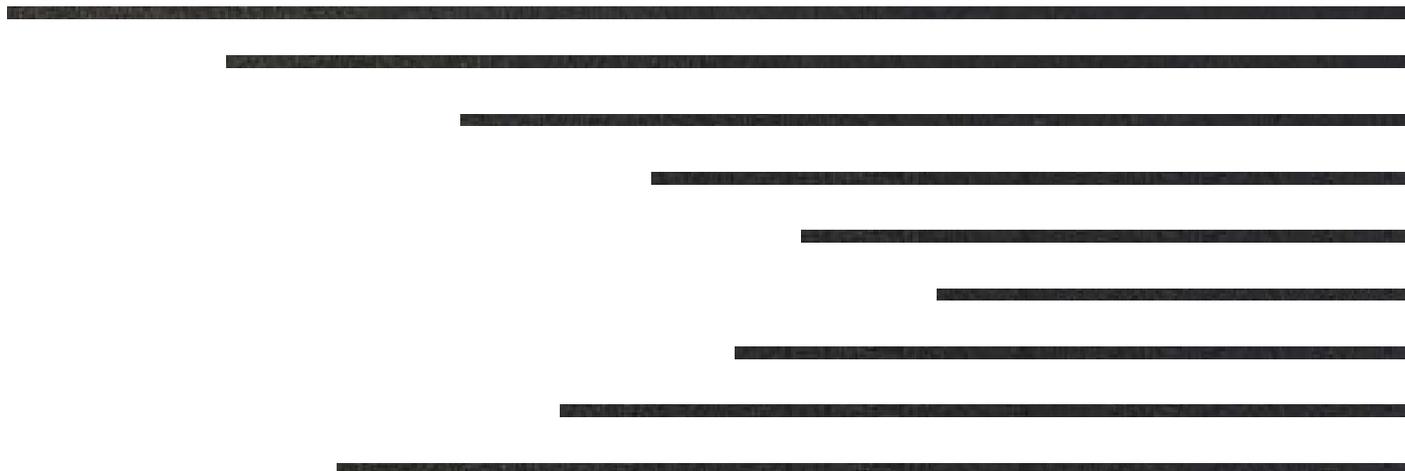
Joji Suzuki lives in Tokyo with his two cats, Hana and Awa. He's currently studying Graphic Design at Tokyo Zokei University and enjoys painting, sketching, and photography. In his spare time, you can find him at art exhibitions or museums. He's especially interested in surrealism and postmodern art. Contact him at: jojisuzuki@gmail.com.

Photos: Joji Suzuki



Life in Rural Japan

Sam Ramdi (Kobe)





I got a new apartment last month. I went from living in a quiet neighborhood in a spacious suburb about an hour by bus and train from downtown Kobe to a gritty urban residence a mere 15-minute walk and train ride from the city core. I'd venture to guess that "gritty" wouldn't be the ideal descriptor of many people's ideal residence. For me, however, it's been precisely what I'd always wanted.

While searching for the place, I had a lot of requirements. No tatami, no Japanese-style toilets, a proper gas range in the kitchen, more than one room, within 10 minutes by foot from a station, and as close to downtown as possible. Obviously this all had to be within my budget of ¥65,000 per month, and I refused to pay key money (an obligatory tip to the landowner, often the equivalent of up to six months' rent). The last thing I wanted, and I know I'm sounding a tad bit demanding at this point, was to be in a neighborhood with some character.

My previous neighborhood, while tranquil and nice, didn't feel like it had any spirit. I wanted to be in a place where people have lived, where people have died, where things have happened. After hours of trawling through apartment rental websites, I found the place.

Nishidemachi is a low-lying suburban residential area just south-west of Kobe station. Generally speaking, the neighborhoods in Kobe south of the train tracks are a little rougher, and Nishidemachi is no exception. A Google Images search turns up plenty of pictures of the local rundown Shōwa Era-style *shōtengai* (arcade mall) called Inari Market. While it appears that the area was once flourishing, all but two of the strip's many businesses are now abandoned.

Browsing pictures online gave me a sense that this neighborhood was once something quite grand, so I did some research to see what had happened to it. My idea of research is standing at the doorstep of my potential residence, finding the nearest *izakaya*, and getting drunk with the locals to ask what's what. The truth that I was told was a little dark, but also compelling and deeply fascinating.

On a still September night, I dragged a Japanese friend of mine to explore the area with me, "explore" being a euphemism for getting drunk. "Area" is a metaphor for a tiny local *izakaya*. Lucky for me, there was the perfect spot a hop, skip, and a jump from my potential future doorstep. We popped in and got the reaction you'd expect from a place that's likely never had a foreigner or

anyone under 40 patronize its walls in years.

We ordered beers and *sashimi*. We took recommendations for some more food and were served a delicious fish that had been cooked whole in some kind of sweet soy sauce broth. After a couple beers, I plied the bar master, a stout middle-aged Japanese lady, for info. "I've heard this neighborhood has a bad reputation, but it seems totally fine to me," I mused to her. Cho-san, a pinky-fingerless customer at the table behind me, also chimed in periodically to tell the story. They told me of a man Yamaguchi, who about a hundred years ago formed a group with fellow dock workers in the area and aptly called it *Yamaguchi-gumi* (Yamaguchi group). In its later years, it would become the largest organized crime group in Japan.

Harukichi Yamaguchi grew up in Nishidemachi. He worked at the port just south of the neighborhood. Because the neighborhood was historically a *buraku* (a hamlet of the lowest caste of feudal Japanese society), the residents couldn't find much else in the way of work. Yamaguchi organized these lowly labourers and formed something of a dispatch company, sending people here and there and making a meagre profit through finding them work. Upon

his retirement, he passed the torch on to his son, who passed it on shortly after World War II to his childhood friend, Kazuo Taoka.

While it's safe to say that the Yamaguchi family had anything but a privileged upbringing, Kazuo Taoka was from a different breed entirely. "His father passed away before his birth, and his mother died of overwork when he was only six years old," Cho-san piped in through a mouthful of *yakisoba*. The bar master finished that thought: "He was an orphan, so he had no choice but to move here from Shikoku to live with his grandparents." Cho-san resurfaced from his *yakisoba*. "His nickname was *Kuma* (bear). He got into street fights. He would go straight for the eyes and try to claw the guy's eyes out. Brutal!" And so the night went, me listening, nodding my head, and drinking beers, pausing only to ask my Japanese friend to help me decipher Cho-san's heavy dialect.

They continued to tell me about one night when a group of Yamaguchi-gumi members went out on the town in the local red light district of Fukuhara-cho. There, they got into a scuffle with a rival gang and one member split open the head of a rival member. As an act of retribution, that gang raided the Yamaguchi-gumi. During the raid, Kazuo Taoka used a *katana* to

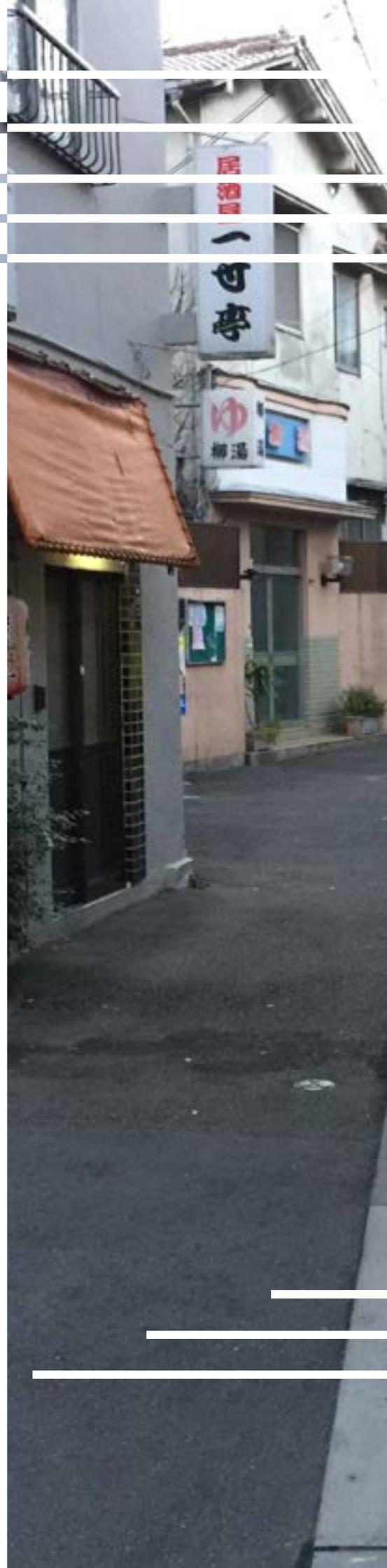
stab one of the attackers to death. He was tried for murder, and sent to prison.

It was only after his release that he was selected as the successor to his friend, and became the third leader of the *Yamaguchi-gumi*. It was under his leadership that the group embraced their gang-like mentality, began incorporating racketeering, gambling, blackmail, drug and human trafficking, and extortion into their activities, and grew to become the largest organized crime group in the country.

Listening to their tales with wide eyes, my only thought was, "Yeah, I want to live there!"

I moved in a few months ago, but what remains from those days is nothing but a few words under hushed breath, and a bad reputation. The story lives on though. I made friends with my neighbor and I decided to see if I could corroborate the stories I'd heard that night at the bar. Mr. Michiba told me that he remembers the days when they were a simple dispatch company. He's 76 years old and has lived in the neighborhood all his life, so he would have been just entering elementary school when Taoka was released from prison and took charge of the gang.

"They never bothered anyone





really,” Mr. Michiba told me one night after I mustered up the courage to broach the topic with him. “They were just a bunch of guys working on the docks originally, you know? After that, they did whatever, but they did a lot of good for the people in the neighborhood too. I can’t say I like them, but I can’t say I particularly dislike them either.”

Walking around the neighborhood now, you would never realize the storied past that the walls could tell. Half of the rundown Inari Shōtengai was recently demolished to make way for an apartment building. In reality, this neighborhood, too, has also become quite quaint and quiet. Still, unlike my old neighborhood, stuff has most certainly happened here.

Sam Ramdani is a Kobe-based JET hailing from Vancouver. His interest in Japan stems exclusively from his fascination with the various subspecies of mold native to the island nation, and nothing else.

Photos:

Sam Ramdani “Towards Nishidemachi”

Sam Ramdani “Inside Inari Market”

Sam Ramdani “Nishidemachi *izakaya* and *sento*”



Music Recommendations

Sabrina Zirakzadeh (Osaka)

CONNECT Recommends

Da-iCE:

They're a personal favorite pop boy band of mine because they're not the cookie cutter singing group like from the 90s. Their videos on YouTube mainly consist of their dance practices, so watching them gives me the inspiration to learn their dance moves (though not really acting upon it).—Lilian Diep, Assistant Head Editor

“Woo Hoo” by The 5, 6, 7, 8’s:

The band and their musical performance was internationally introduced in Quentin Tarantino’s film, *Kill Bill Vol. 1*. I own the soundtrack and can’t resist dancing when I hear this catchy tune and lyrics, which prove entertaining and timeless.—Erica Grainger, Fashion

“人生 x 僕 =,” One OK Rock:

I have a soft spot for this album because it’s my first album by One Ok Rock (late, I know). It’s their 6th album but they’re a group that sings both in English and Japanese and can serve as a nice introduction to Japanese rock music.—Ashley Hirasuna, Head of Visual Media

Ayumi Hamasaki:

Since high school, I’ve been a fan. She has done something in nearly every style and genre, from rap to classical to euro to rock, but what impresses me the most is her lyrics. She writes them all herself, and they’re all so poignant, deep, and versatile.—Kelsey Lechner, News

“Obokuri Eeumi,” Ikue Asazaki:

This is my favorite Japanese song. Featured in the anime series *Chomploo*, the song is reminiscent of the Amami Islands musical style of *shima uta*. It remains, for me, one of the most haunting and resonant songs I’ve heard in any language.—Korellia Schneider, Copy Editor

Makoto Matsushita:

The year is 1982. The just-released Toyota Camry cruises the streets, outfitted with cutting-edge stereos. Out of these speakers trickles the smooth crooning of city pop master Makoto Matsushita. His cooler-than-thou lounge stylings are the sound of Japanese prosperity and opportunity on the horizon, a future that’s now in the distant past.—Mike Sosnick, Culture

Readers Recommend:

RADWIMPS has resurged in popularity after scoring *君の名は* (*Your Name*). **PinocchioP** has also had a growth in popularity as his music evolves. Both he and **sasakure.UK** are also not only some of the longest running Vocaloid producers but are great guys. Finally, **Kalafina** as a group continues to impress aesthetically and in terms of harmony.—Kristin Troilo, Kanagawa

Photo: Sarah Pragnell

FEBRUARY RELEASES

Sabrina Zirakzadeh (Osaka)

In need of entertainment? Each month, *CONNECT* brings you the latest information on upcoming releases and events in Japan. Here is the most anticipated entertainment for February!

Movies

- 3 Feb.** *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (Supernatural Mystery): Directed by Tim Burton, starring Eva Green and Samuel L. Jackson
- 17 Feb.** *Cell* (Zombie Horror): Written by Stephen King, starring John Cusack and Samuel L. Jackson
- 18 Feb.** *The Nice Guys* (Action, Comedy): Directed by Shane Black, starring Russell Crowe and Ryan Gosling
- 24 Feb.** *La La Land* (Musical, Romantic Comedy): Starring Ryan Gosling, Emma Stone, and Rosemarie DeWitt
- 24 Dec.** *Digimon Adventure Tri. 4* (Animated Adventure): Written by Akiyoshi Hongo, starring Junko Takeuchi, Natsuki Hanae, and Takahiro Sakurai

Music

- 4, 11 - 12 Feb.** SEKAI NO OWARI National Tour — Nagoya City, Aichi, and Osaka City, Osaka (Rock)
- 18 Feb. - 17 May** ONE OK ROCK "Ambitions" Tour — Hokkaido, Miyagi, Saitama, Chiba, Yokohama, Niigata, Shizuoka, Aichi, Osaka, Hyogo, Wakayama, Hiroshima, Tokushima, Fukuoka, and Okinawa (Rock)
- 22 Feb.** FIVE, SHINee (K-Pop)
- 25 - 26 Feb.** METROCK ZERO 2017 — Roppongi, Tokyo (Rock and Pop Festival)

Live Theater and Events

- 9 Jan. - 18 Feb.** *Frankenstein* —Tokyo, Aichi City, Aichi, Osaka City, Osaka, and Fukuoka City, Fukuoka (Horror Musical)
- 18 Feb. - 25 Feb.** The 2017 Winter Asian Games—Sapporo City, Hokkaido (Winter Sports Competition)
- 4, 5, 11, 12 Feb.** Niigata AJET Charity Musical Presents *Dracula* —Joetsu-shi, Tokamachi, Kariwamura, and Murakami, Niigata
- 26 Feb.** Tokushima AJET Musical Presents *Rapunzel on Mt. Tsurugi*—Ishii-cho, Tokushima

Sources

1. <http://imdb.to/1DZWXgA>
2. <http://bit.ly/MxVjLD>

Photo: Sarah Pragnell

LIFESTYLE

HEALTH & NUTRITION EDITORS

connect.health@ajet.net

Pameline Kang

OH MY GOSH! IT'S SNOWING! #tropicalgirlproblems

Jessica Williams

The flu here sure doesn't mess around!

#nomoreIV'skthanksbye

TRAVEL EDITORS

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Dylan Brain

Lara Bigotti

"Nothing burns like the cold." — George R.R. Martin

Photo: Orrin Heath



Health Spotlight

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Pameline Kang (Ishikawa)

What is SAD?

Winter is depressing. Reduced daylight hours accompanied by chilly nights can be a recipe for winter blues. However, if your winter blues are severe, you might have a case of SAD. [1] Seasonal Affective Disorder (otherwise known as SAD or 季節性情動障害 *Kisetsuseijōdōshōgai*) is known to be a subtype of major depression that comes and goes based on the seasons. [2]

Factors such as change in your circadian rhythm, drop in serotonin levels (affecting mood balance), and disrupted melatonin levels (affecting sleep and mood) due to reduced exposure to sunlight contribute to SAD. [2]

Do I have SAD?

According to medical experts at Mayo Clinic, Seasonal Affective Disorder symptoms can present themselves during late fall or early winter, and go away during the sunnier days of spring and summer. However, for some people, these symptoms may start out mild and become more severe as the cold season progresses. [2]

Here is a quick checklist to see if you are suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder, courtesy of Mayo Clinic:

- Irritability
- Tiredness or low energy
- Losing interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Heavy, “leaden” feeling in the arms or legs
- Problems getting along with other people
- Experiencing changes in your appetite or weight
- Feeling sluggish or agitated
- Having frequent thoughts of death or suicide

The National Health Service (NHS, UK) has listed more symptoms of SAD, which you can refer to [here](#).

Managing SAD

The American Psychological Association recommends the following tips for managing seasonal affective disorder [1]:

Soak up as much daylight as possible	Eat healthily	Spend time with your friends and family	Keep an active lifestyle	Seek professional help
				

We at *Connect Magazine* are committed to ensuring that your health and mental well-being are important to us. Below are some helplines should you find that you are experiencing the symptoms above:

AJET Peer Support Group (PSG)

Helpline: 050-5534-5566

Skype @ AJETPSG

AJET PSG is a listening and referral service which operates on the principles of confidentiality and anonymity. We are open to all JET Programme participants every night of the year, from 8:00 pm to 7:00 am—a period when other services such as the Tokyo English Life Line (TELL) are not in service, and when Prefectural Advisors (PAs) are often unavailable.

JET Mental Health Counselling Assistance Programme

With the aim of enhancing mental health support for JET participants, CLAIR offers the JET Mental Health Counselling Assistance Programme. This programme provides a partial subsidy (50%, up to ¥20,000 per year) for counselling costs incurred through consultation with mental health professionals in Japan not covered by health insurance. The coverage period is from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017. For further information, please ask your contacting organisation.

Disclaimer: Not all symptoms of SAD are listed in this article, however, these few symptoms are key signs of depression which we encourage you to seek qualified assistance should you find that you fulfill any of the symptoms listed above.

Sources:

[1] <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/seasonal-affective-disorder.aspx>

[2] <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/basics/symptoms/con-2002104>

Photo: Leia Atkinson

THE AJET PEER SUPPORT GROUP IS RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS!



TO
REQUEST AN
APPLICATION
CLICK HERE!



THE AJET PEER SUPPORT GROUP (PSG), THE JET COMMUNITY'S ANONYMOUS LISTENING AND REFERRAL SERVICE, IS CURRENTLY RECRUITING NEW MEMBERS FOR THE 2017-2018 JET YEAR.

ABOUT PSG

PSG is a confidential and anonymous resource provided by JETs, for JETs. Our volunteers are trained to listen and support callers through a wide spectrum of challenges, and put them in touch with the appropriate resources.

PSG operates from 8pm to 7am, 365 days a year, and is the only overnight support service designed to serve JETs nationwide. Contact us at 050-5534-5566, on Skype at "AJETPSG", or check out our website at www.ajetpsg.com

Who We're Looking For

Any re-contracting JET (ALT or CIR) is eligible to volunteer with PSG. We seek open-minded and dedicated volunteers with an interest in assisting other JETs, and a willingness to learn PSG's specific way of accomplishing this.

PSG Volunteers are NOT counsellors, but peers who train to be effective listeners and a resource for other JETs. Prior training in psychology or counselling, or service in support roles may be helpful, but is not required. All selected volunteers will undergo approximately 25 hours of training and role-play exercises to understand PSG's specific mission and techniques.

All prospective volunteers must have reliable home internet service, e.g. via a landline. A smartphone or pocket WIFI alone is not sufficient.

Time Commitment

Flexible. Members typically volunteer two to three evenings each month. Volunteers must submit ten open evenings each month and two holiday/ weekend nights, from which their shifts will be assigned.

Successful applicants will take part in mandatory training sessions throughout mid-May and June. While multiple sessions will be scheduled, in principle new volunteers will have to devote one full evening per week for five weeks to complete training, with individually scheduled practice role-plays to follow.

How to Apply

Interested JETs may apply via the 'Be A Volunteer' page on our website: www.ajetpsg.com. For further inquiries, please contact our Volunteer Coordinator, Lynne Francis at psgapplications@gmail.com. Please do not contact the hotline with recruiting-related questions. Applications will be open from February 13, 2017 to March 13, 2017.



A close-up photograph of a white ceramic bowl filled with a clear, light-brown broth. In the center, a soft-boiled egg is partially submerged. To the right, there are several pieces of dark green leafy vegetables, possibly spinach or chard. The bowl is placed on a light-colored surface with a pink rose pattern. The text 'TAKAOKA NABE FESTIVAL' is overlaid in a white, hand-drawn, brush-stroke font across the middle of the bowl.

TAKAOKA NABE FESTIVAL

Lilian Diep (Toyama)

Every year, Takaoka, Toyama Prefecture, holds a *nabe* festival; a glorious weekend filled with stands of hot soupy goodness in the falling snow. At just 300-400 yen for a bowl of nabe, you're able to visit stand after stand to try out whatever your empty stomach desires. A *nabe* festival this big spans more than just one location. It covers the areas from Takaoka station, to Takaoka Daibutsu, and to the Daiwa shopping center.



It's so popular that they have a huge vat with a team of people cooking it around the clock. And if *nabe* isn't your thing, they also have green *ramen* and carrot *ramen*.



Like any *matsuri*, you have your usual festival food of *karaage*, sweet potato sticks, and crepes. Being that Toyama sits on Toyama Bay with access to seafood, we also have oysters, clams, fish on sticks, and crabs for eating. A really popular *nabe* bowl is the seafood stew nabe.



Photos: Lillian Diep

FEAR FACTOR

Nabe-Style

Pameline Kang (Ishikawa) and Xan Wetherall (Fukushima)

Many of us take pride in experimenting with 'taboo' delicacies, especially when we travel abroad. Japan is definitely no stranger to unique (and possibly bizarre) food ingredients. Since *nabe* season is finally here, let us at *CONNECT* Magazine introduce some ingredients that might shock even the most seasoned *nabe* eater.



Whale (鯨 *kujira*)

Despite the controversial nature of whaling in Japan, whale *nabe* does exist and can be found in the Kansai region. It is known to be a traditional cuisine of Osaka. Known as *hari-hari nabe*, the meat and blubber is seasoned before being added to the hot pot. The owner of a *hari-hari nabe* restaurant in Osaka, Mrs. Ohnishi, claims that whale meat is more tender than beef, and it's more easy to digest. It is also higher in protein and polyunsaturated fatty acids, as compared to beef. [1]

What makes this *nabe* more shocking is that whale meat is riddled with potentially dangerous levels of mercury and other contaminants, which can affect human health when consumed regularly. (More information here)

SHOCK FACTOR XXXX

Angler Fish Liver (あん肝 *ankimo*)

Ever wanted to try foie gras, but from the sea, and without the moral quandary? *Ankou*, or angler fish, is the liver for you! The hotpot overall is great, really filling, meaty, and more-ish, but it's the liver that everyone wants more of. Request it specifically as "*an-kimo!*" Although popular in Iwaki, Fukushima prefecture, *ankou nabe* is probably better known for being a Northern Ibaraki prefecture specialty — but hey, we can share!

(Review by Xan Wetherall)

SHOCK FACTOR X

Pufferfish/Blowfish (フグ *fugu*)

Would you like to dine with death? *Fugu* is considered to be a great delicacy in Japan, even if its skin and organs are highly poisonous. In case you are wondering what death from *fugu* poisoning looks like, you can read a little more about it here. *Fugu nabe* can be found all over Japan, and *fugu* slices for hotpot can be bought in various supermarkets in Japan as well.

SHOCK FACTOR XX

Horse (馬 *uma*)

No we are not horsing around, you can really eat horse meat with *nabe*! Also known as *sakura nabe*, horse meat is typically eaten à la *sukiyaki*-style. *Sakura nabe* got its name as the color of fresh horse meat resembles the *sakura*. It is said to have originated from Yoshiwara, Tokyo's red-light district in the Meiji era. Horse meat is high in protein and iron, and low in calories and fat. *Sakura nabe* is available in Tokyo, Nagano, and Kumamoto.

SHOCK FACTOR X

Beef Pork Offals (もつ *motsu*/ホルモン *horumon*)

Animal offals might seem like a weird *nabe* ingredient to Westerners, however, offal dishes are no stranger in Asian cuisine. A local specialty in Fukuoka is *motsunabe* (もつ鍋), a type of *nabemono* in Japanese cuisine made from beef or pork guts, with beef intestines being the most-used internal organ. This *nabe* is considered to be highly nutritious and low in calories.

SHOCK FACTOR X

Sources:

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2001/sep/09/foodanddrink.features4>

Photo: Sarah Pragnell

Saga

International

Balloon Fiesta

Dawn Wyruchowski (Shimane)





In October, my dear friend Maria and I took a road trip through Kyushu. We passed through Fukuoka and drove down to Nagasaki and Mt. Unzen's sulfuric hot springs, but our true destination? Saga. This was the first I'd heard of the tiny prefecture, but as Maria told me, it hosts an annual hot air balloon festival and competition, drawing participants from all over the world and crowds in the millions over the span of two weeks. We planned to be there for just one day, but it promised to be the highlight of an already magical trip.

After an already wonderful trip filled with *ramen*, Nagasaki *champon*, and more churches and cathedrals than I had ever expected to see in Japan, we arrived near Saga Balloon Station late on our third day. Like most of the Japanese countryside, darkness consumed the chilly night air. The expansive fields felt more like outer space than anything, especially on tiny roads that seemed barely big enough for our rented white-plate. Finally, we found a patch of grass to camp on beside the Kase River, overlooking the Saga International Balloon Fiesta site. Compared to the rainy, lush, pacific northwest forests from my childhood backpacking, our campsite, near train tracks, bright festival tents, and late-night maintenance work, presented a vastly different experience.

We had intended to save money and increase our spirit of adventure by camping during our entire trip, but thanks to an incredibly generous friend who hosted us in Fukuoka and an eerie out-of-season campsite on Mt. Unzen, this was our first night using my little green tent, one best suited for summer with its mesh panels and thin, airy fabric. Usually, I sleep like a boulder even on hard roots, but the early November chill and my hyper-awareness of the city noise kept me restless. But never has a cold, sleepless night been so worth enduring, for the next day turned out to be one of the most beautifully surreal experiences of my life.

At 5:30 a.m. we awoke to the sounds of a growing crowd walking past our tent. Maria graciously rushed outside to claim a good spot on the river bank, and by 6:00 a.m. we were bundled up, sitting on my floral, water-resistant mat with our shoes safely next to

us on the grass. We huddled together in our sweatshirts, legs fidgeting under the warmth of Maria's sleeping bag. Numerous vans had pulled onto the field. Massive circles of fabric covered the grass behind every single one. Anticipation clearing our bleary eyes, we watched and waited as crews hauled large baskets out of the vans, laying them on their sides next to the deflated balloons.

For a long while it looked like nothing was happening. The baskets lay still. The balloons lay flat; a field of rainbow patchwork. A panel of announcers speaking both in Japanese and English tried to entertain the crowd while we waited, and we learned that over the course of nine days, the balloonists complete challenges to demonstrate their speed and dexterity. Today's main event would involve dropping weighted tassels onto several large Xs marked in blue on the field. As we sat, anxiously waiting, little teams of people scurried around the field making preparations we couldn't quite see.

Then, a flame! A large, roaring inferno of flame, shooting from the metal frame atop a still-sideways basket and into the cavernous space at the bottom of a big, purple balloon as at least four people held it open. Little by little, bursts of fire ignited all across the field, hissing and spurting as crews turned the fuel on and off again. It might have been the cold, my enthrallment, or my memories of summers spent learning to light fires with wet wood in Washington's Olympic peninsula, but I swear I could feel the heat from the flames tickling my shins and thawing my breath out before my eyes. The fires kept burning, adding color to the cold, blue morning as air pockets began to form inside the balloons. Bulbous hills of colorful fabric rose steadily from the ground and a technicolor landscape emerged before our eyes.

By this point, the announcements were accentuated by beautiful music that dipped and soared as if tracing the outline of each growing balloon. Some inflated and rose enough that the baskets could be turned upright. Solo fliers or groups of two or three people stepped inside. Then, so subtly that I couldn't pinpoint the moment it left the earth, the same big, purple balloon from before

lifted gently into the air before my eyes. “*Itterashai!* Have a nice flight,” the announcers boomed, speaking faster and faster as they called out the countries and numbers of each balloon rising swiftly into the sky.

Before long, floating works of art in dusky pantone colors, in patterns of red and black, in endless configurations of the rainbow, pictures, and words filled the atmosphere. As the sun rose behind us, illuminating the living fantasy, the wind gently carried the balloons away across the river. We got up to stretch our legs, eat some breakfast, and pack up a bit before returning to the grass for the precision event. The balloons sailed back our way and slowly approached the targets, making me wonder what kind of etiquette or traffic rules there must be for 3D air space with no lanes or signals. One man flew his balloon close along the ground for several meters until he could lean out and literally place his weight in the very center of the X. Another few balloons flew so close overhead that people standing might have been able to grab the baskets and pull them down.

After another few hours, we left for an *onsen* and returned to the riverside for the afternoon launch, feeling very lucky to be in Japan where you can leave a sitting mat somewhere all afternoon and nobody will touch it. As before, the balloons grew and lifted easily off the ground, but this time the air flow kept them suspended like an elaborate mobile directly above our heads.

The final event on our schedule was night mooring. For a third time, balloons created a fantastic skyline as they inflated. This time they stayed on the ground, tied down with ropes, and many of them grew into gigantic shapes. We saw a panda, a rabbit, a fish, an owl, and, my personal favorite, an octopus. Overall, my favorite balloon from the day had a vibrant color scheme surrounding “*yume*,” the kanji for “dream,” which was made out of hundreds of children’s drawings of their dream balloons. This balloon captured the entire cathartic experience of the festival for me: Thousands of people from around the world coming together, hundreds of balloons floating together, all to create a dream as vivid as anything you see whilst sleeping. As the riverbank grew completely dark, the balloons flickered with the glowing flame keeping them inflated. The final touch on the dream was the spark of life among heaps of fabric. Those fires burned on and drew us in; the pull of a communal campfire on a scale more massive than anything I could have imagined.

From Seattle to Shimane, Dawn Wyruchowski constantly lives under cloud cover and loves taking long walks in the resulting rain and greenery. She hopes to one day have a dog named Waffle.

Photo: Maria Chaverri





Blaser.

VENDÉE

OREIVYSTĖS
CENTRAS

L.X-BLN

Kōtō

Hisamitsu

young

COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY EDITORS

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Joshua Francis

I've resigned myself to a high energy bill, it's better than my bones shattering from the cold.

Marissa Beale

*Hokkaido: where everyone bonds over how cold and snowy it is! #community
"The cold never bothered me, anyway" #frozen
#yeahright*

SPORTS EDITORS

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Subane Abdi

There's nothing as calming yet frustrating as seeing fresh snow wherever you go...you can barely walk!

Emma Riley

"The future is female"

Photo: Illaura Rossiter



A lit candle in a paper holder with stars and handwritten text, set against a dark background. The candle is lit, casting a warm glow. The paper holder has five white stars and handwritten text. The background is dark and textured, possibly sand or a similar material.

and Happiness
starts with
Routine

GARDENING IN JAPAN

Monique Coutour (Kagoshima)

Before coming to Japan, I had never gardened. But small family gardens are a defining feature of life in rural Kagoshima Prefecture. A neighbor is even a homesteader, living exclusively off a small farm. Inspiration to cultivate a garden arose out of the lack of organic produce, fresh herbs, and spicy peppers. Specifically jalapeños — I missed the Mexican flavors from my home in Southern California. I was intrigued that so many people around me were doing it, and I wanted to join in. Being no gardening expert, I am writing this to share with you how cultivating organic produce in rural Japan has been a deeply rewarding experience, and provide some insight from the Japanese garden.

I had space at home to garden, the help of my community, and supplies and advice from the home store. Summer plants were grown from seeds, starting in mid-March. This takes time and patience, but provides many plants for far less cost than buying starts. The rest of the plants were given to me by community members and people from the schools I work at. Finding great natural compost made from uneaten school lunch was instrumental to achieving healthy and productive soil and crops.

Summer plants are quite easy to grow from April to November if you plan it right, and water accordingly in the peak of summer. This season I grew cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, green beans, jalapeño peppers, cayenne peppers, togarashi peppers, shishito peppers, togan, a goya green curtain, sweet potatoes,

and a variety of herbs: rosemary, basil, lemongrass, marjoram, parsley, and mint. Peppers love the heat and humidity of subtropical Japan, and many of them are still alive as I write this in January! During the rainy season, growing in pots is helpful so you can move them out of the torrential rains. Goya and togan are nutrition-packed native Japanese vegetables that thrive in the heat with no maintenance.

Gardening anywhere requires planning, timing, good soil and compost, water, sun, weeding, persistence, and patience. Luckily, in Japan there is more than enough water and sun. My winter garden includes daikon, napa cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, brussel sprouts, green onions, and carrots. These crops are even easier and require less maintenance than summer varieties. And the ultimate Japanese vegetable, daikon, grows like you can't believe. Just pat a seed in the dirt and watch the biggest thing you have ever grown rise from the soil.

Monique Coutour is a third-year ALT in Ei Town, Kagoshima Prefecture, and is from Santa Barbara, California. In her other life, she is a commercial salmon fisherman in Alaska, a surfer, snowboarder, and avid traveler. With a Master's degree in Environmental Politics, her passion is keeping eco-labels honest and figuring out solutions to make our world a more sustainable place.

Photo: Monique Coutour, "Spicy togarashi peppers are still kicking in mid-January."





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Contact the Head Editor of *CONNECT*, Timothy Saar, at connect.editor@ajet.net with your submissions, comments, and questions.

ARTICLES

Write about something you're doing. Write about something you love. Tell us a story.

SPOTLIGHT

Tell us about someone in your community who's doing something neat and noteworthy. Cooks, collectors, calligraphers — we want to hear about the inspiring people around you.

COMMENTS

Let us know what you think. Interact with us on Facebook, Twitter, and issuu.com.

PHOTOS

Members of the JET community contributed to the photos you see in this issue. If you're an aspiring photographer and want your work published, please get in contact with the lead designer, Lehlogonolo Mokotedi, at lehlogonolo.mokotedi@ajet.net.

HAIKU

Each month *CONNECT* will feature *haiku* from our readers. A *haiku* is simple, clean, and can be about anything you like! If you're an aspiring wordsmith with the soul of Basho, send all of your *haiku* along with your name and prefecture to connect.editor@ajet.net.

COMICS

You asked for it, and now *CONNECT* features comics. Whether you're a desk doodler or a published artist, we want to see your panels and strips about life in Japan.



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