

AJET

CONNECT

News & Events, Arts & Culture, Lifestyle, Community

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2019

Bathing Bare in Hot Spring Heaven

Getting Fit and Clearing Your Mind: The Benefits of Kendo

1,000 Worlds Clash at Tokyo Game Show 2019

6 Festivals in 6 Days: The Tohoku Tour

Unravelling the Threads of Chiharu Shiota



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

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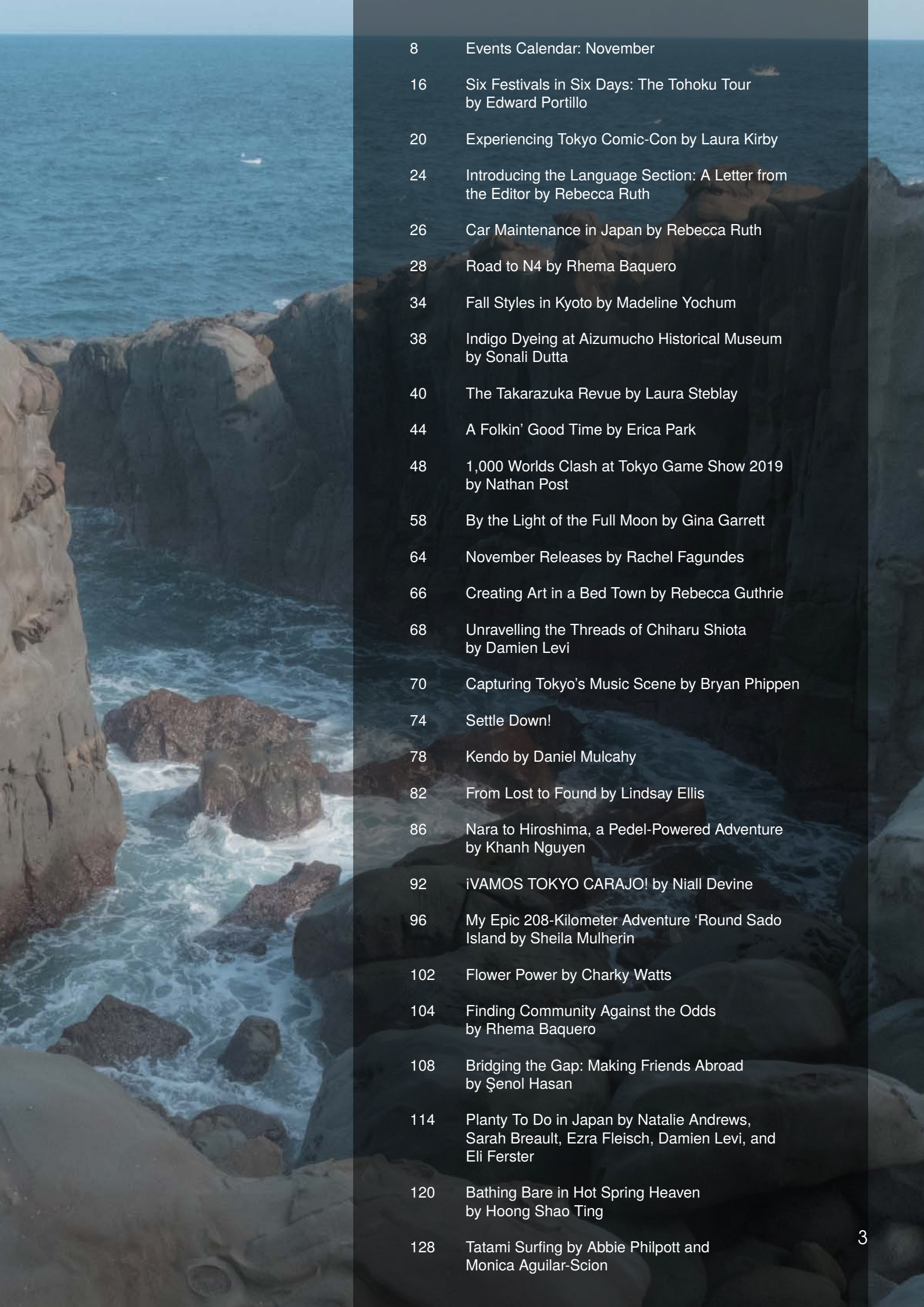
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

As usual I will open with a sentence about the weather—this is a Japan-based publication after all! Autumn has arrived and with that the echoes “*Samui desu ne!*” have begun. Chestnut and sweet potato flavoured goods have bombarded us all. In addition to those seasonal changes, *CONNECT* welcomes changes of our own: our new team members!

I am thrilled to welcome three new members of the *CONNECT* team. First, we have Eli Ferster (Kyoto) as one of our General Section Editors. Eli will be sourcing articles for all sections across *CONNECT*. Second, we have Clare Braganza (Fukushima) who is our new Community Section Editor. Clare will be sourcing articles about finding communities and creating your own community while living in Japan! And lastly we have Rebecca Ruth (Hyogo) for our brand new role as Language Section Editor. Rebecca will be sourcing articles about learning and teaching languages. Rebecca has written a personal letter from the editor to elaborate on what to expect from the Language Section this year! A very warm *haere mai* (that’s “welcome” in Māori) to them and I look forward to working with them for the remaining *CONNECT* year. If you would like to contact them or read their full bios, please check out our [meet the team page](#).

Now for my top five articles for November . . . Honestly this was a hard decision because I think our team sourced some *incredible* pieces for this month. And no, I do not just mean the type of shallow “Oh, it was really hard to choose the winner . . .” spiel you hear at the annual speech English speech competitions. It actually *was* a tricky decision! In no particular order:

1. Travel presents a collection of favourite onsens in “Bathing Bare in Hot Spring Heaven.” Great to get into the groove for onsen season!
2. Wellness presents a piece about the mental side of *kendo* in “Getting Fit and Clearing Your Mind: The Benefits of Kendo.”
3. Entertainment presents an article about the mega-hyped 2019 Tokyo Game Show in “1,000 Worlds Clash at Tokyo Game Show 2019.”
4. Events presents an article written by a fellow Gunma-ite about their crazy journey around Tokoku in “6 Festivals in 6 Days: The Tohoku Tour.”
5. Arts presents our very own Copy Editor Damien with a piece about artist Chiharu Shiota in “Unravelling the Threads of Chiharu Shiota.”

I hope you enjoy reading all what our November issue has to offer! Finally, if you are interested in contributing for *CONNECT*, please join our [Contributors Circle on Facebook](#). We would love to see your work published in *CONNECT*.

Mata ne until December’s issue!

Alice Ridley
Head Editor
2nd Year Gunma ALT



Photo: Charlotte Coetzee

ASSISTANT HEAD EDITOR

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Hannah Lukow

"I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am." – Sylvia Plath

GENERAL SECTION EDITOR

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Eli Ferster

"Tadashii yori tanoshii, tadashii yori omoshiroi"
– Wanima

Natalie Andrews

"Can I have a look at Uranus too, Lavender?"
said Ron." – J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

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"In the beginning there as nothing, which exploded." – Terry Pratchett, *Lords and Ladies*

Damien Levi

"Welcome to my kitchen, we've got bananas and avocados." – Chrish Guerra

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Ashley Hirasuna

"Make it work." – Tim Gunn

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"The only way to know how strong you are is to keep testing your limits." – Jor El

LANGUAGE AND EVENTS

EVENTS EDITOR

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Linka Wade

"You never get bad fortunes in cookies, ever noticed that? They never say stuff like: 'Oh dear, things're going to be really bad.' I mean, they're never misfortune cookies."
– Terry Pratchett, *Feet of Clay*

LANGUAGE EDITOR

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Rebecca Ruth

"At some point you have to look yourself in the eye and admit your faults, like that you can't eat a sandwich without it falling apart."

Photo: Ethan Wang (Kobe)



Events Calendar:

November 2019

For Japanese only webpages, you can download the Google Translate extension to read the pages in other languages

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

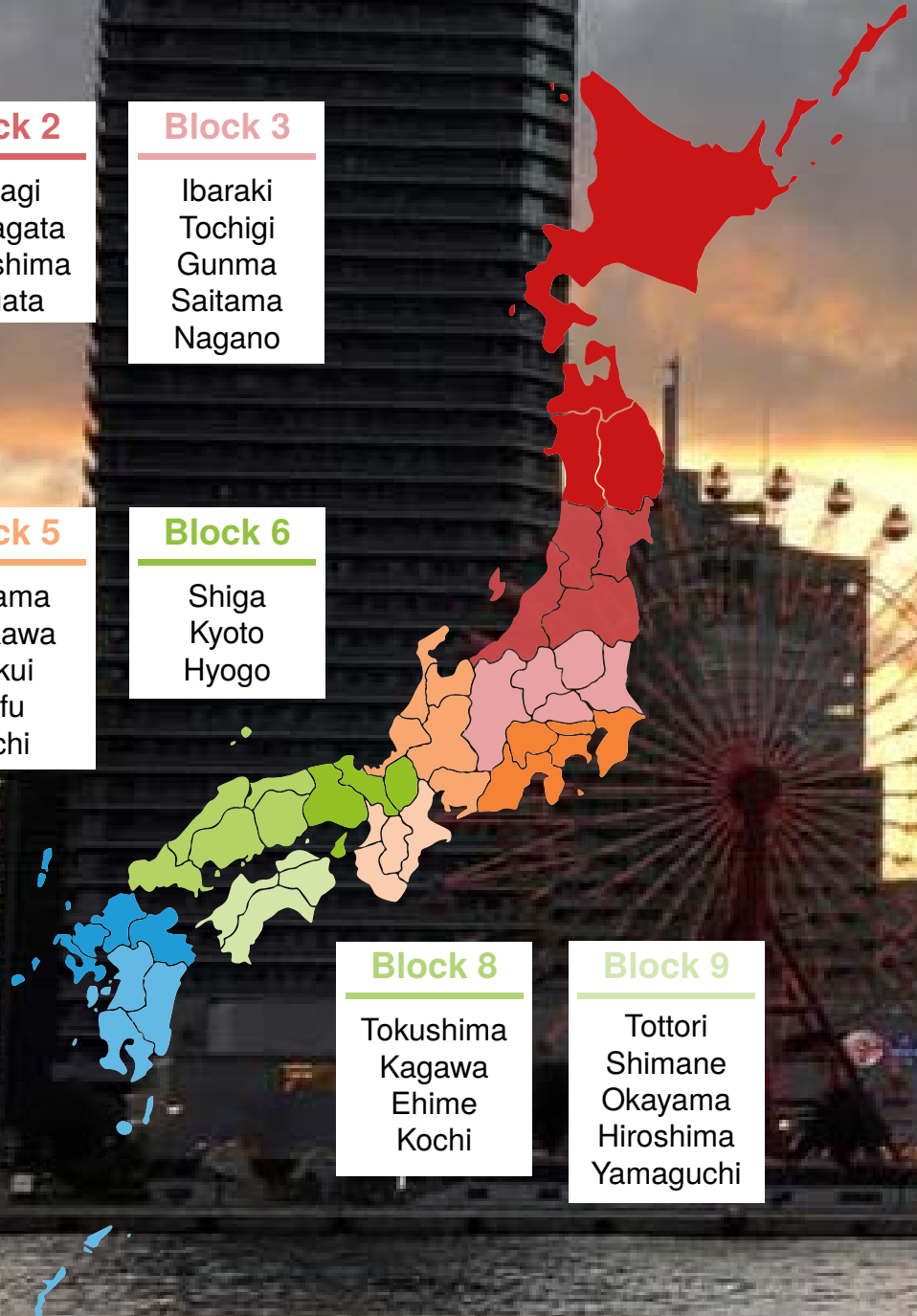
Tottori
Shimane
Okayama
Hiroshima
Yamaguchi

Block 10

Fukuoka
Saga
Nagasaki
Oita

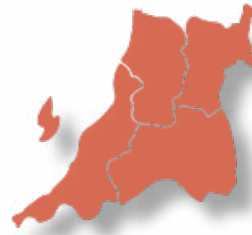
Block 11

Kumamoto
Miyazaki
Kagoshima
Okinawa





Block 1



Block 2

Sapporo White Illumination

November 22 Onwards

Sapporo City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Fujiwara Festival

November 1 - November 3

Hiraizumi Town, Iwate Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yokote Chrysanthemum Festival

October 26 - November 5

Yokote City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sapporo Art Stage

November 1 - December 1

Sapporo City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hirosaki Castle Chrysanthemum and Fall Foliage Festival

October 18 - November 10

Hirosaki City, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Taimatsu Akashi

November 9

Sukagawa City, Fukushima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nihonmatsu Mum Festival

October 1 - November 17

Nihonmatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

34th Osaki Balloon Festival

November 22 - November 24

Osaki City, Miyagi Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Arare and Senbei Festival

October 26 - November 11

Niigata City, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nanyo Chrysanthemum Festival

October 19 - November 10

Nanyo City, Yamagata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shoun Sanso Garden Fall Leaves Illumination

Mid October - Late November

Kashiwazaki City, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Zuihoden Fall Light Up

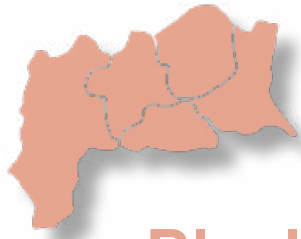
November 15 - November 17,

November 22 - November 24

Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

MOSAIC



Block 3

Mashiko Autumn Pottery Fair

November 1 - November 5
Mashiko Town, Tochigi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nationwide Udon Summit

November 16 - November 17
Kumagaya City, Saitama Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Yuru Kyara Grand Prix 2019

November 2 - November 3
Nagano City, Nagano Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Oyama Balloon Festa

November 9 - November 10
Oyama City, Tochigi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nikko Soba Festival

November 15 - November 17
Nikko City, Tochigi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Miya Jazz Inn 2019

November 2 - November 3
Utsunomiya City, Tochigi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

King of Pasta Competition

November 10
Takasaki City, Gunma Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tanigawa Ropeway Night Cruising

November 1, 2, 3, 8, 9
Minakami Town, Gunma Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Annual Kanto Chrysanthemum Display

October 27 - November 25
Midori City, Gunma Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 4

Kotohiro Ohtori Shrine Tori no Ichi Festival

November 8 and November 20
Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Daidogei World Cup

November 1 - November 4
Shizuoka City, Shizuoka Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

20th Nobunaga Memorial and Fall Leaves Festival

November 10
Fujinomiya City, Shizuoka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Fiesta de Espana

November 23 - November 24
Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tokyo Comic Con

November 22 - November 24
Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Kurimoto Furusato Sweet Potato Festival

November 18
Kurimoto Town, Chiba Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sankeien Garden - Choshukaku and Yokobuean Open to the Public

November 23 - December 8
Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Japan Fisherman's Festival

November 14 - November 17
Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sagamihara Festa - Ramen Grand Prix

November 16 - November 17
Sagamihara City, Kanagawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)





Block 5

Yakimono World

November 28 - December 4
Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Samurai and Ninja Festival

November 10
Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Gifu Air Force Base Air Show

November 10
Kakamigahara City, Gifu Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yattokame Festival

October 26 - November 17
Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Mammoth Flea Market Z

November 16 - November 17
Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Koran Gorge Momiji Festival

November 1 - November 30
Toyota City, Aichi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Echizen Crab Festival

November 16 - November 17
Echizen City, Fukui Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 6

Himeji Castle Night Fantasies: Folktale Phantasms

November 9 - November 30
Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kibune Momiji Toro

November 2 - November 24
Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hitaki-Sai Festival at Fushimi Inari Taisha

November 8
Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

16th Kusatsu Machi Akari

November 1 - November 2
Kusatsu Town, Shiga Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Kiyomizu-dera Night Illumination

November 16 - December 1
Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Rokko Meets Art 2019

September 13 - November 24
Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Mogami-yama Momiji Festival

November 23 - November 24
Shiso City, Hyogo Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

B-1 Grand Prix in Akashi

November 23 - November 24
Akashi City, Hyogo Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)



Block 7

Fall Foliage in Expo '70 Commemorative Park

Late October - Late November
Suita City, Osaka Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

4th All Meat Festa

November 9 - 10, November 15 - 17
Wakayama City, Wakayama
Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Udono Matsuri

November 22 - November 23
Kiho Town, Mie Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

17th Shinon Kansha Taiko Drum Festival

November 9 - November 10
Ise City, Mie Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Suzuka Balloon Festival

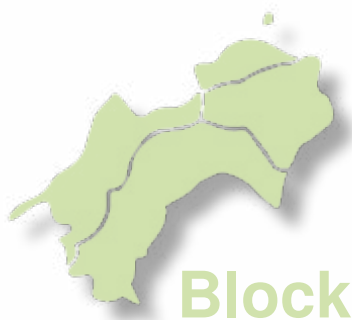
November 22 - November 24
Suzuka City, Mie Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kishu Lacquerware Festival

November 2 - November 3
Kainan City, Wakayama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Harvest Hill 500,000 Cosmos

Early November
Sakai City, Osaka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 8

Ainan-cho Autumn Festival

November 3
Ainan Town, Ehime Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Autumn Awa Odori

November 2 - November 4
Tokushima City, Tokushima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

42nd Furusato Carnival - Awa's Tanuki Matsuri

November 2 - November 4
Tokushima City, Tokushima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kagawa Skills Festival

November 9 - November 10
Takamatsu City, Kagawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

12th Sakawa Sake Brewery Road Theater

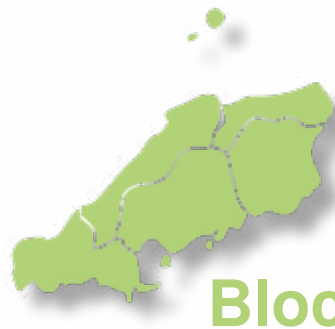
November 16
Sakawa Town, Kochi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

168th Otoi Sumo

November 26 - November 27
Seiyo City, Ehime Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Otani Pottery Festival

November 9 - November 10
Naruto City, Tokushima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 9

Autumn Fantasy Garden

November 15 - November 24
Okayama City, Okayama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Chayamachi Oni Matsuri

November 17
Kurashiki City, Okayama Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Tottori Crab Festival

November 16
Tottori City, Tottori Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Okayama Castle Illumination

November 15 - November 24
Okayama City, Okayama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

The 28th Ube Biennale

September 29 - November 24
Ube City, Yamaguchi Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Hofu Tenmangu Shrine Gojin-kosai

November 23
Hofu City, Yamaguchi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

The 68th Ube Matsuri

November 2 - November 3
Ube City, Yamaguchi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Izumo Taisha Shrine Kamiari Festival

November 6 - November 13
Izumo City, Shimane Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hiroshima Kagura Grand Prix

November 23
Akitakata City, Hiroshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hiroshima Ramen Stadium 2019

November 2 - November 4
Hiroshima City, Hiroshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)





Block 10

Tagawa Coal Mine Festival 2019

November 2 - November 3
Tagawa City, Fukuoka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hakushu Festival Water Parade

November 1 - November 3
Yanagawa City, Fukuoka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

15th Arita Autumn Pottery Festival

November 20 - November 24
Arita Town, Saga Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Ureshino Onsen Autumn Festival

November 3
Ureshino City, Saga Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Omura Autumn Festival and Local Gourmet Fair

November 3
Omura City, Nagasaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Light Garden in Glover Garden

November 22 - February 10
Nagasaki City, Nagasaki Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Shining Festival

November 21 - December 25
Sasebo City, Nagasaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Onogawa Battle Festival

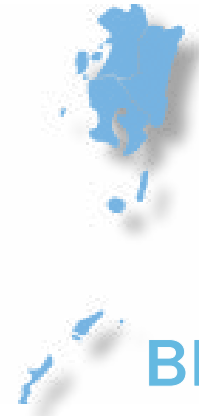
November 9
Oita City, Oita Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Taketa Bamboo Lantern Festival - Chikuraku

November 15 - November 17
Taketa City, Oita Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Usuki Takeyoi

November 2 - November 3
Usuki City, Oita Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 11

Yatsushiro Myouken Festival

November 22 - November 23
Yatsushiro City, Kumamoto Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

60th Sengan Garden Chrysanthemum Festival

November 1 - November 24
Kagoshima City, Kagoshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Ohara Festival

November 2 - November 3
Kagoshima City, Kagoshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

36th Iki iki Machi Festival in Kadogawa

November 2 - November 3
Kadogawa Town, Miyazaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

38th Aya Horse Racing

November 3
Aya Town, Miyazaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Okinawa Geinou Festival

November 3
Okinawa City, Okinawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tour de Okinawa

November 9 - November 10
Nago City, Okinawa Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

6 Festivals



in 6 Days: The Tohoku Town

Edward Portillo, Gunma



When I came to Japan in 2017, I set out to see every one of its 47 prefectures. As part of that ongoing quest, I took a 2000 km journey through the region of Tohoku this summer. Each of the six prefectures in the region has an amazing and historic summer festival, and I was able to see them all in just six days. Follow me to Japan's vast north!

Fukushima Prefecture

First up was the *Fukushima Waraji Matsuri*, in Fukushima City. I set out from Tokyo, and after several hours of travel, arrived in time to join in the climax of the festival: the parade of the *waraji*. You may ask yourself at this point, "what is a waraji?" Well, it's a traditional straw sandal. The kind you might have seen an average person wearing as they went about their business a few hundred years ago. But these are no average sandals, not in Fukushima. Instead, the people craft giant versions of these traditional sandals, including a golden version, among others. One giant waraji is several meters long, carried by over a dozen men, and big enough for a man to "surf" it by holding on to the thick sandal tongs.

Seeing that man desperately holding on to the sandal as he was bounced up and down the street was an experience I never thought I'd have, nor is it an image that I will ever forget. After parading the sandals up and down the main avenue, covering the pavement in straw, the giant sandal—the largest waraji in all of Japan—was

hoisted up vertically, for everyone to admire. I took a piece of straw as a souvenir, and headed to my hotel to rest up for the trek to the next day's festival.

Iwate Prefecture

Some 250 km north of Fukushima lies the city of Morioka, home to the *Sansa Odori Matsuri*. The trip was long, and I even had to stop for a few quick car repairs, but eventually I made it to my lodgings and headed out into the city to see the festival.

There is a legend in these parts about a demon named *Rasetsu*, who terrorized the castle town of Morioka long ago. The people cried out to the deity *Mitsuishi-kami* for aid. Hearing their pleas, the deity caught *Rasetsu*, and forced the demon to pledge never to bother the people again. *Rasetsu* left his handprint on the rock of Mitsuishi Shrine as proof of his pledge. Thus was born the name Iwate, the rock (岩, *iwa*) hand (手, *te*) prefecture.

The people were so overjoyed at these events that they danced in the streets shouting "*sansa sansa*," and continue to do so to this day. This is no small dance parade, but a mass of people, young and old, from the city and the surrounding areas, dancing as their ancestors did long ago. After watching the hundreds of dancers parade by, I headed to the nearby castle ruins to look over the city and dine on festival food. Life was good.



Akita Prefecture

Just south of Morioka is Hiraizumi. This wondrous town is home to the relics of an age long since past, wherein a powerful clan built a golden “Kyoto of the North,” and inspired legends of a golden city that would cross continents and inspire adventurers to discover a new world. Finding myself among these ancient sites, I felt a connection to the past, but I also saw the connection from this distant outpost, one end of the silk road, to the age of discovery that followed some centuries later.

However, that was but a pit stop on the way to the prefecture and city of Akita, on Japan’s northwest coast. Famous for its dogs and snow, the prefecture also hosts the unique *Kanto Festival*. Here, the locals balance giant tiered lanterns on their bodies before a cheering crowd. You can witness the seasoned veterans expertly maneuvering the bamboo poles from their hands to their shoulders, foreheads, and even to their hips, while nearby elementary kids struggle with their miniature sized versions. It sounds so simple, but to witness it in person is to see wizardry at work. It is through sheer skill and talent that the performers make holding 50 kg poles seem effortless, as they move the poles along their bodies and pass them from person to person. This is truly artistry.

Aomori Prefecture

Nearly 200 km north of Akita, I found myself in Aomori, a city at the northern end of Japan’s Honshu island. Summers here are brief, but during the *Nebuta Festival*, the spirit of the town burns bright. The *Nebuta* (or *Neputa*), are giant floats, pushed and pulled by festival goers, made of colorful paper and depicting famous warriors, local legends, old Chinese tales, and more. The creativity and care with which these floats are made is apparent in each one as it passes by. Even though I didn’t know all of the stories, I still marvelled at the lights, the colors, the dragons, and the cherry trees that rolled by.

But you’d be wrong to think that these floats are the only attraction. The people of Aomori dance along the parade route in special costumes, and the chant of “*rassera*” rings through the air. I found myself shouting this phrase, which is a local dialect version of “*irasshaimase*,” into the night air for hours, getting caught up in the spirit of the festival. I know I will never forget that night, and neither will you.

Yamagata Prefecture

Before leaving Aomori prefecture, I ventured 70 km south, to the little village of Shingo, which hosts the peculiar site known as the Tomb of Christ. Famous from the visits of many a YouTuber, this place definitely had something special about it. Whether it was the presence of the divine or something else, I’ll leave to you to decide, dear reader.

Nearly 400 km down the road to the south, I finally found myself at my penultimate festival, the *Yamagata Hanagasa Matsuri*. I had a heck of a time finding lodgings, but once I did, I was able to head out and witness the people of Yamagata dancing. The name *Hanagasa* comes from the straw hats worn by the festival participants, who come from a variety of different groups

such as the JSDF, local schools, and even a hip hop dance group. That last one certainly put a bit of zest into their dancing, showing that even events with ancient roots can evolve and change.

And here’s a plug, if I may, for a certain little Mexican restaurant near the station. Many places in Japan have good Mexican food, but only Muchas has captured the authentic taste so well. Stop in if you have a chance, and bring me some tacos.

Miyagi Prefecture

The last day of our trip began with a trek to Yamadera, the mountain temple of Yamagata. After parking at a friendly shop, I climbed 1000 steps to see a temple hewn into the mountain. The centuries-old buildings cling to the stone, and overlook a gorgeous view. Definitely worthwhile.

After heading out, I soon arrived at nearby Sendai, the biggest city in Tohoku, and a place I will most certainly be seeing again. The last festival on my list was the *Tanabata Matsuri*, held a month later than most other places in Japan because of their adherence on using Japan’s traditional lunisolar calendar. The decorations of the city were a sight to behold, with giant streamers, long chains of paper cranes, and ornamental balls, among others, saturating the festival areas. It felt like walking through another world.

Wrapping Up

I left Sendai after too brief a stay, and drove four hours back home to Gunma, exhausted, but with a new appreciation for all the people whom I never knew existed, all those who create these amazing events for themselves and their communities.

Japan is a wonderful place full of things to do and sights to see, and every place is special in its own way, so it’s easy to get caught up in the things happening in your own town, but if you venture outside your area, you may just find yourself experiencing something more wonderful than you’d imagined. Every journey I’ve taken has only reinforced my desire to keep traveling, and made me appreciate the opportunity I’ve had to visit so many places. If you happen to see me out there, go ahead and say hello! I’m always happy to meet fellow explorers.

Edward Portillo is a third-year ALT in Gunma prefecture, and is originally from Los Angeles, California. He would not have been able to make this trip without the invaluable support from his friends, who choose to remain anonymous. His hobbies include badminton, video games, and attempting to visit every prefecture in Japan (23 down, 24 to go). This is his third piece for CONNECT and he hopes to keep contributing stories about his journeys in Japan. He has a blog at thisweekinjapan.tumblr.com that he really should update more often.

Photos: Edward Portillo



KA

Explore to Realize



EXPERIENCING TOKYO COMIC CON

Laura Kirby, Tokyo

Whether or not you're into anime, an avid manga reader, or addicted to consoles, you've probably heard of Comic-Con. It's an annual event where fans from across the pop culture community come together to celebrate the new and reminisce on the old. Comic-Con has everything from art exhibitions, panel discussions, the latest news on comic and game releases and even celebrity photo sessions and signings. Here, I will tell you about my experience at Tokyo Comic-Con 2018 to give you an insight into what Comic-Con in Japan is like (spoiler alert: it's fabulous).

After my experience in 2018, there was no question that I will be returning again this year for another round. Last year, the event did not disappoint with video games available for testing, irresistible merchandise and of course, world-class cosplayers. Upon arrival, crowds of excited smiles welcomed me. Immediately, I could see the grand stage where later guests, such as James and Oliver Phelps, would address fans—but you probably know them better as Fred and George Wesley from “Harry Potter”. Ezra Miller (Credence) from “Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them”,

also made an appearance. However, perhaps the most highly anticipated star was Tom Hiddleston (Marvel Cinematic Universe's Loki), who was joined by his co-star Jeremy Renner (Hawkeye). Hiddleston may be making an appearance this year as well. You can see why there was no debate on whether I should go again.

The cosplayers at Comic-Con 2018 were terrific, with one of my personal favourites being the conga line of Deadpools—a treasure I thankfully caught on video. I also found a small group of cosplayers that called themselves the “NEET Army”. One of the things that stuck out to me was how friendly everyone was, and how safe the environment felt despite the massive crowds. Another thing that surprised me was the amount of effort that went into the cosplay costumes; it was astonishing how many were handmade. I was convinced it would be too hard to decide on just one winner for the cosplay contest, but eventually, a man dressed as Bumblebee won, and it looked like the prize was well worth his effort. Many of my favourite superheroes were also there, including many Spider-men and some “Harry Potter characters”—it



was at that point I wish I'd brought my Hogwarts robes.

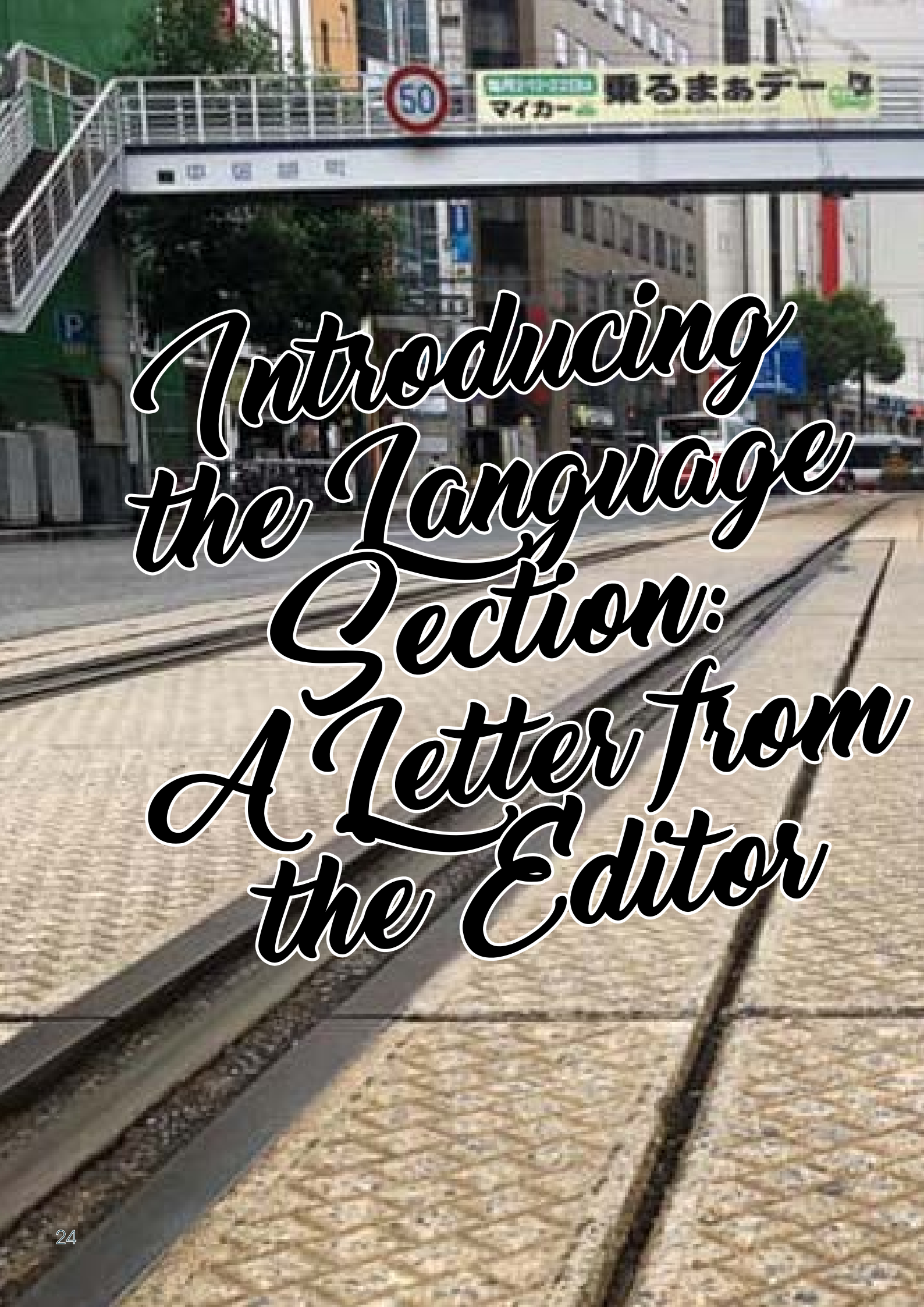
There was truly something for everyone, but I especially recommend anime and manga fans to attend at least one Comic-Con in Tokyo as this is Japan, after all. I particularly like Marvel and Star Wars, so I made a point to see all the Marvel art and the Star Wars Exhibition. My only regret was not purchasing a ticket to enter the exclusive Marvel store. Around the convention centre, there were many stalls selling a variety of merchandise. An example of one of the unique things that caught my eye were the lightsaber chopsticks that were available for purchase. I was also fortunate enough to buy Newt Scamander's wand for a fraction of the price it usually is. In between stalls there were also great exhibitions set up for perfect photo opportunities. Outside, there was a massive robot statue that was so big they had to sound an alarm (much like a truck reversing) when it was being set up. It is not an over-exaggeration to say that there was always something going on. However, perhaps one of the greatest things about this Comic-Con was the Stan Lee memorial where fans could write their own messages to Stan Lee and pay their respects. It was a nice touch that brought fans even closer together as we remembered the man who left a legacy.

This year Tokyo Comic-Con will be held at Makuhari Messe International Exhibition Halls 9-11 (Mihama-ku, Chiba-ken) over three days from Friday Nov. 22 to Sunday 24. Tickets for Friday and Sunday are ¥3,200 each and ¥3,500 for Saturday. For this Comic-Con, organisers are also offering a complimentary official backpack with the purchase of a 3-day pass at ¥7500—if only I could attend all three days! This year you can expect to see celebrities such as Zachary Levi and Rupert Grint. In total, the event organisers are expecting 80,000 people to turn up to what is one of the biggest pop culture events in the world. To get to the venue from Tokyo station, it's just a 30-minute train ride on the JR Keiyo Line to Kaihin Makuhari Station. From there it's an 8-minute walk to the exhibition halls.

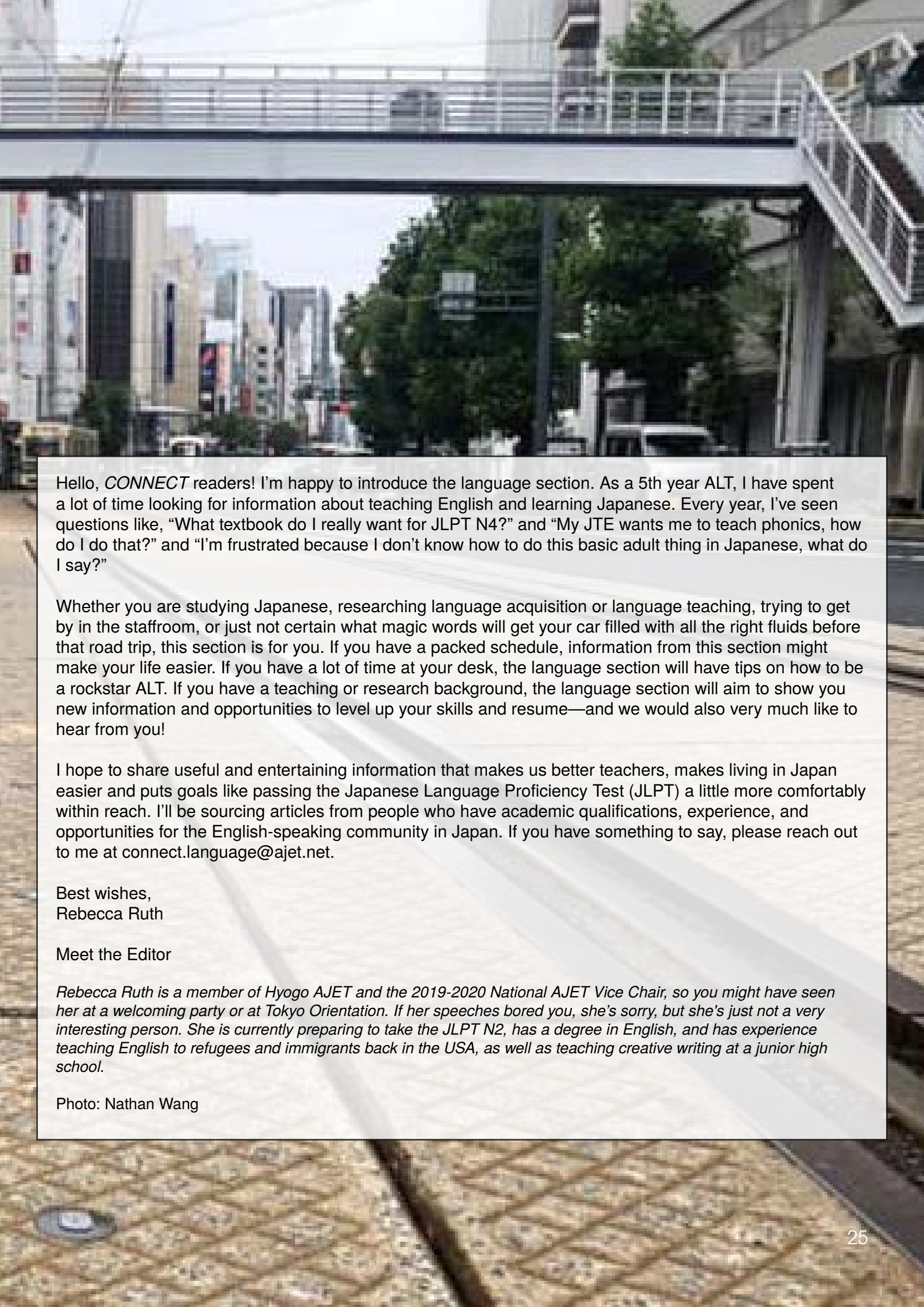
Without a doubt, I strongly recommend experiencing Comic-Con in Japan. You'll get all the latest scoop about comic book and game releases, plus if you're quick (before they sell out) you can get a ticket for a meet and greet. You'll be sure to see me there this year, flaunting my Slytherin colours.

Laura Kirby is a second-year ALT working in Tokyo. In her free time, she enjoys travelling, experiencing new cultures and eating delicious food. Catch up with her latest adventures at lauratheexplorerinjapan.com.

Photos: Laura Kirby

A photograph of a city street with tram tracks. In the background, there is a pedestrian bridge with a speed limit sign of 50 and a banner with Japanese text. The text on the banner includes 'マイカー' (my car) and '乗るまあデー' (ride day).

*Introducing
the Language
Section:
A Letter from
the Editor*



Hello, *CONNECT* readers! I'm happy to introduce the language section. As a 5th year ALT, I have spent a lot of time looking for information about teaching English and learning Japanese. Every year, I've seen questions like, "What textbook do I really want for JLPT N4?" and "My JTE wants me to teach phonics, how do I do that?" and "I'm frustrated because I don't know how to do this basic adult thing in Japanese, what do I say?"

Whether you are studying Japanese, researching language acquisition or language teaching, trying to get by in the staffroom, or just not certain what magic words will get your car filled with all the right fluids before that road trip, this section is for you. If you have a packed schedule, information from this section might make your life easier. If you have a lot of time at your desk, the language section will have tips on how to be a rockstar ALT. If you have a teaching or research background, the language section will aim to show you new information and opportunities to level up your skills and resume—and we would also very much like to hear from you!

I hope to share useful and entertaining information that makes us better teachers, makes living in Japan easier and puts goals like passing the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) a little more comfortably within reach. I'll be sourcing articles from people who have academic qualifications, experience, and opportunities for the English-speaking community in Japan. If you have something to say, please reach out to me at connect.language@ajet.net.

Best wishes,
Rebecca Ruth

Meet the Editor

Rebecca Ruth is a member of Hyogo AJET and the 2019-2020 National AJET Vice Chair, so you might have seen her at a welcoming party or at Tokyo Orientation. If her speeches bored you, she's sorry, but she's just not a very interesting person. She is currently preparing to take the JLPT N2, has a degree in English, and has experience teaching English to refugees and immigrants back in the USA, as well as teaching creative writing at a junior high school.

Photo: Nathan Wang

CAR MAINTENANCE IN JAPAN

Rebecca Ruth (Hyogo)

If you are one of those people who are able (or required) to own a car while working in Japan, you're going to want to take good care of it. It's expensive, and you're probably going to want to be able to sell it to your successor.

Linguistically, taking good care of your car in Japan can be a challenge, but once you have the language tools you'll find that taking care of your car is really convenient and easy. Basic principles apply: fill the tank when it's empty, take it to a mechanic as soon as possible if you hear something odd or see fluid leaks, and keep an eye on that oil.

General Maintenance

You won't need to worry about most things. All the fluids and filters will get changed at the *shaken* inspection. If your tires are old or don't have enough tread, the mechanic will alert you of this.

Howe
make
have
the r

Oil C
There
the fr
indica
odom
most
keep
has th
check
on yo
and c
drivin
chang
short
highw



ever, before you take a long trip, it's smart to
e sure that your oil level is good and that you
enough air in your tires. You'll be safer on
oad and have better gas mileage.

Changes

e will be a sticker inside your car, probably on
ame of the driver's side door. That number
ates how many kilometers you'll see on the
eter when you're due for an oil change. The
basic and important thing you can do to
your car running well is to make sure that it
he right level of clean oil. Take a minute to
k it. If it's not time yet, set a calendar alarm
ur phone for a couple of weeks, or a month,
check it again then. However, if you've been
ng your car for half a year, it will need an oil
ge even if the limit hasn't been hit. Driving
slow trips is much harder on your car than
way driving.

Language Tools

Put air in my tires

タイヤに空気を入れてください。
たいや に くうき を 入れて ください。

Check the air in my tires.

タイヤの空気圧をチェックして欲しいです。
たいや の くうき あつ を ちえっく して ほし
いい です。

Please check my battery.

バッテリーをチェックして欲しいです。
ばってりー を ちえっく して ほしい です。

I want an oil change.

オイルチェンジが欲しいです。
おいる ちえんじ が ほしい です。

I want the cheapest oil.

一番安いオイルをお願いします。
いちばん やすい おいる で おねがいします。

What oil do you recommend?

おススメはどれですか？
おすすめ は どれ ですか？

I need winter tires. (Do you live somewhere snowy?)

冬のタイヤが欲しいです。
ふゆ の たいや が ほしい です。

Change my tires to my winter tires.

冬のタイヤにチェンジしてください。
ふゆ の たいや に ちえんじ して ください。

Fill my tank.

満タンで、お願いします。
まんたん で、 おねがいします。

(Put in) 000 yen's worth of gas, please.

000円で、お願いします。
000えん で、 おねがいします。

cash

現金
げんきん

card

カード
かーど

Can you take this trash?

このゴミは。。。。

I'd like the inside of my car cleaned.

車の中の掃除をお願いします。
くるま の なか の そうじ を おねがいします。

I'd like my car washed.

車の洗車をお願いします。
くるま の せんしゃ を おねがいします。

Special thanks to Nishikawa Kenta, who is very
good at Japanese, for help with corrections in this
article.

ROAD TO N4

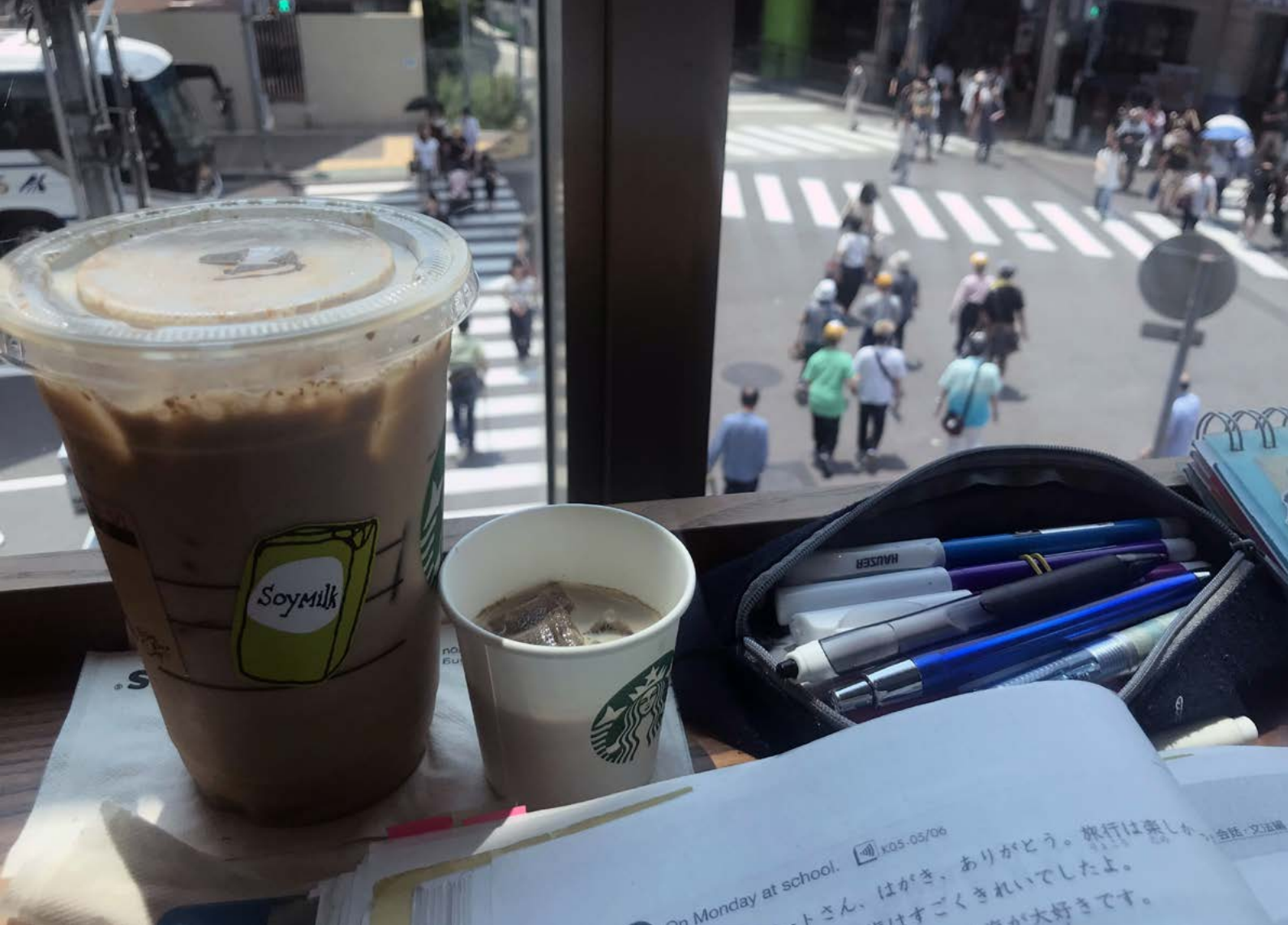
Rhema Baquero (Kobe)

This past July, I took the Japanese Proficiency Language Test (JLPT), and admittedly, I was unprepared. Brand new to Japanese, I spent too much time sorting through online and physical resources, trying to determine which was best for my learning style. Aside from seeing a weekly tutor, I studied alone and without a clear direction. I often found myself in the library jumping from grammar practice to making vocabulary flashcards to listening practices, and not doing enough reading practice. Ultimately, I let myself get overwhelmed with the material and did not hit my stride until a month before the test. Unfortunately, I did not score as high as I wanted on the N5, which tests for only the most basic of Japanese.

I was a little upset about the results. I honestly felt burnt out at that point. But がんばれ (fight), right? With the September registration date looming closer, I had to make a choice. Retaking the N5 in December would give me plenty of time to restudy, but I thrive on a deadline. Having experienced the structure of the test, I decided to push on and sit for the N4 in December and N3 in July of 2020.

“Having a plan will keep you from getting overwhelmed with the material.”

To pass the N4, you must learn roughly 1,500 vocabulary words, about 300 kanji, and be able to understand both written and verbal conversations encountered in daily life. With this in mind, I sat down with my textbooks and calendar to chart out the grammar points, vocabulary and kanji for each chapter. I also mapped reading and listening practice



sessions for my weekends. With the scaffold of my study plan in mind, I could focus on only what I needed. I joined a study (read: support) group of ALTs in my city, I repped for another six months with a free private tutor, and this time, I *limited* the textbooks I use.

If you are interested in taking the test, you can avoid my initial mistakes with these steps:

STEP ONE: THINK ABOUT YOUR LEVEL AND END GOAL

The current version of JLPT consists of five levels, starting at N5 for beginner's Japanese, and N1 for near-fluency. Many Japanese companies require at least N2 for employment. You can chose to work your way up the

ranks by starting with N5 or start where your skills lie. As a newbie to Japanese, I am taking the test as benchmarks for my own learning. I did not have the benefit of a college professor guiding me through, and I want to challenge myself to move past passive learning. Before you decide on which level you are going to take, consider a few things.

1,500+ words
300+ kanji
reading
listening

- Time: The test is only administered in Japan in July and December, and the window in which you can register for the test online or through the mail is small—check that out early in the year. Outside of Japan, the test is generally administered once a year. You will need to figure out how much time you realistically have to study. Be mindful of the content for each level!

- Location: Do you live in a region with a testing center? If not, taking this test just got a lot more expensive. If you only have a few shots to take this test, make N3 or higher your first test.

- Goal: Do you want to work in Japan or for a Japanese company? Are you applying to study at a Japanese university or language program? Do you want a benchmark of personal learning? Are you trying to get a raise at your Japanese job? Need points towards permanent resident status? Knowing your end goal will help you decide how far you want to go.

STEP TWO: NARROW YOUR RESOURCES

The JLPT has been administered since 1984, so there are many FREE resources online to help you towards your goals. As of 2010, JLPT no longer issues an official list of vocabulary or kanji to learn, so many current lists are working off of earlier tests. It also helps to read through the accounts of people who have taken the test to get a feel for what you might need. Reddit and Quora both have good forums on the subject. At the early stages of learning, you can get by with these community sources and a textbook.

As you advance, you will want to invest more heavily in the textbooks and maybe even private lessons. Two of the most common beginner books are GENKI and Minno no Nihongo. I was fortunate to get brand new copies of GENKI 1 and 2 and their work books for 500 yen from a departing JET! Many of my friends at the N3-N2 level use Nihongo So-Matome for vocabulary and grammar practice.

Also, think about what works best for you study wise. I remember information a lot better when I write it down, so I keep a notebook and make flashcards that I can whip out to study whenever I get a chance. I compiled the GENKI vocab audio into a playlist to listen and repeat to myself as I walk to the station. I also like to revise vocabulary with the Memrise flashcard app and Wanikani app while commuting on the train.

STEP THREE: MAKE A (REALISTIC) STUDY PLAN

Having a plan will keep you from getting overwhelmed with the material. With a clear goal you can keep track of your progress over time. But understand that YOUR PLAN WILL CHANGE. Life is always going to get in the way. A few days into week one, I was already adjusting my plan to make it more realistic to my schedule. Quite often, I added, subtracted, and shifted things along. I made



STUDY RESOURCES – choose some, not all!

TEXTBOOKS

- Genki I & II
- Minna No Nihongo I & II
- Nihongo Sō-Matome (multiple levels)
- New Kanzen Master (multiple levels)
- Try! Japanese Language Proficiency Test (multiple levels)
- Japanese-Language Proficiency Test Official Practice Workbook (multiple levels)

APPS

- Duolingo
- Memorize
- Wanikani

ONLINE RESOURCES

- jisho.org
- [Memrise flashcards](#)
- [JLPT Sensei](#)
- learnjapanesedaily.com
- [Tofugu](#)
- [Japanese Talk 101](#)
- [JTALKOnline](#)
- [Genki Self Study Room](#)
- [Study Kanji](#)

my plan with a calendar in Word and printed it to write on, but there are also plenty of task management apps available on both the iPhone and Android.

STEP FOUR: DON'T STUDY ALONE

If really helps to enlist an accountability buddy who will study with you or cheer you on from the sidelines. My husband chose not to take the test at this time, but it helps that he is also learning Japanese through a tutor, self-study, and practicing with his coworkers. We drop our native language when we can and practice speaking with each other. I also joined a study group with my friends who have various levels of Japanese ability. During our sessions, we bounce questions and advice off of each other. Our timed study-blast really helps me to stay focused on what I want to learn.

STEP FIVE: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

If you have been out of school for a minute like I have, it is going to take a bit to get back in that study mindset. Just keep your

goal in mind and push forward. Give yourself benchmarks for your learning and set up a reward system when you hit those points. If your plans get derailed or you find yourself stuck, try not to beat yourself up over it. All you can do is try your best to pass the test! がんばれ!

I fully recognize that I will need to do more than study towards the JLPT to learn Japanese.

“Language is organic, and I will not be able to effectively use it if everything I learn comes from a textbook.”

The test measures your ability to read and listen to Japanese, but it does not test your writing and speaking skills. I will have to work on these myself. We are fortunate to be living in Japan while we

study. Every day at work, I listen to my Japanese coworkers talk. Regularly, I converse with Japanese convenience store workers and waiters in a mix of English and 日本語. Soon, I will improve and be able to ask questions of those who want to speak with me.

The ultimate goal of the test is “to evaluate and certify proficiency in Japanese of non-native speakers.” A month after I take this next test, I will be able to hold a document in my hands that says, “Good job kid. Move on to the next one!” or “GET BACK IN THOSE BOOKS AND TRY AGAIN.” Either way, at least I’ll know where I stand.

Rhema Baquero is a second-year ALT from America in the great port city of Kobe. She can often be found in a coffee shop either reading, writing, drawing or studying Japanese. After playing rugby at university and graduate school, she was excited to finally attend the Rugby World Cup.

ARTS AND CULTURE

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"Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." – Virginia Woolf

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*"Lord, what fools these mortals be!"
– William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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*"Fashion is an instant language."
– Miuccia Prada*

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Photo: Megan Luedtke

雄鳥橋

FALL STYLES IN KYOTO

Madeline Yochum (Kyoto)

Fall is arguably the most beautiful season in Japan. With autumn foliage, festivals, and crisp weather alike, it's the perfect occasion to step outside the box and play with a variety of styles that accompany this seasonal change.

And in Kyoto, you'll find a wide range of street looks that vary from minimalist to modern to norm-core. In the spotlight are three JETs who live and work in Kyoto, with an interview featuring their takes on fall fashion for every occasion.

Alys Grey: Group Gathering

Born in NYC, this is Alys's first time in Asia. She tends to embrace a simple look but pairs it with more colorful, ornate accessories. She's lived everywhere in NYC and happily embraces a mix of Japanese and Western styles. Her dress and cardigan are both from H&M. She got her boots from AEON and her handbag from Alice On Wednesday in Tokyo.

How would you describe Japanese fashion?

Eclectic people who are really high fashion, very sleek, but on the other hand you have people that are very cute, and then there are the people who are kinda funky. So you see some sorts of combinations that you typically wouldn't see in other places.

How does that compare to fashion back in New York City?

It's actually pretty similar, but we don't gear as much towards cute. We don't have as much cute. You're more likely to see more sexy in New York. I think fashion in Kyoto is a bit more reserved. Or, maybe refined is the better word for it. You still see a lot of cute styles, you also see the occasional funky ones. But, when you are in Tokyo you



definitely see a lot more outgoing styles than in Kyoto. People try out things that I don't think they try out in Kyoto.

Fall go-to accessory or look?

I really like wearing leggings with dresses or shorts. It lets me give my summer wardrobe an extended lifespan. I like to pair my leggings with cute ankle boots whenever possible. I have some really cute clothes I picked up while I was in Tokyo. Since I love nautical themes, I've always been a fan of sailor *fuku*-based designs but have never had a chance to try them.

Christin Cook: Dinner Party

Pittsburgh native Christin Cook is in her third year in Kyoto. Over time she's slowly added a mix of

Photo: Alys Grey and Matthew Li

styles to her wardrobe that range from UNIQLO deals to forgotten second-hand jackets. Her bag is from a thrift store in Kameoka, Kyoto called 創庫生活館 亀岡店 (*Sōkoseikatsukan Kameoka-ten*).

How would you describe your personal fashion?

My personal fashion is a gradual mixture of components from all the places I've traveled to. I like to incorporate different bits and my own flair. I like to focus on functionality and comfort, not *just* physical comfort but what makes you "feel" yourself.

How has your style evolved since you first came to Japan?

I experiment more with different silhouettes. In America, there's only one type of silhouette that's seen as attractive, but in Japan it's very different. So, I'm having fun melding the two. For example, high-waisted, wide-legged pants are really popular. And often, oversized shirts. So, I might do something like a more form-fitting, high-neck top with wider pants. Maybe one item form-fitting, one item loose and flowy. Combining the two.



What makes Kyoto fashion unique?

You can find a style that matches how you feel, and if not, you can create your own. There's a little bit more freedom. People won't call you out for being more out there.

Oh really, in Kyoto?

Yeah. Maybe they will feel it, but they won't say it.

What's your go-to fall accessory?

Waterproof leather boots and a scarf. Boots are useful because autumn is the perfect time for spontaneous adventures.

Matthew Li: Daytime Date

Although this is Matt's first job abroad, he's no stranger to Japanese style or culture. This is his fifth time in Japan and over the years he has visited nearly 20 prefectures. He has developed a unique relationship with Japanese fashion. Originally from NYC, Matt's fashion taste leans towards urban streetwear but incorporates elements of casualwear as well.



Photos: Christin Cook (left) and Alys Grey (right)

What are some differences you've noticed among different cities in Japan?

Tokyo fashion is a lot more daring. In Kyoto, there is this conservatism in clothing, especially with men's clothing. Even with women's clothing. I don't see as many niches as I would in Tokyo or Osaka, or even Kobe. Clothing here reminds me of American clothing.

What are your favorite places to shop in Japan?

I like Shimokitazawa in Tokyo and also Omotesando in Tokyo. Other really good places across Japan are Immelimoala in Osaka's America Village. Hiroshima is known to be the home of fashion trends.

What do you like best/least about Japanese fashion?

You can look casual while also looking like you're dressing up. There's a really nice mix between looking unique and appearing casual. Especially

with their oversized clothing. And a lot of the designs mix streetwear with formal wear. It's really interesting to see that here. Depending on what you're into, Japan's a good place to find anything. Especially if you're in Tokyo.

Fall go-to accessories?

In fall, a light jacket. Places with really good jackets are Rage Blue, Bathing Ape, and A.P.C also has really good jackets. I think colored jean jackets and camel is a good design for fall. Surprisingly, orange is a good color if you're wearing a black top, and oversized sweaters are great,

What are you wearing now?

My camel pants are from an underground shop in Seoul, Korea (which also has a location in Shimokitazawa), specializing in oversized clothing. This shirt under it is from WEGO, a fast-fashion brand in Japan. It's really good if you're just trying to find cheap stuff. It's the Forever 21 of Japan. And this bag is from Bershka New York. My go-to fall accessory is a Junred bomber jacket I got from Ragtag.



Photos: Matthew Li (left) and Cristin Cook (right)

Last thoughts?

I guess clothes can describe my personality, or at least my interests and the kind of lifestyle I want to pretend I have. In Japan, I think keeping up your appearance is a way to gauge how much you care about yourself. But that's probably everywhere in the world.



Photos: Matthew Li



Midwest native Madeline Yochum graduated from Washington University with a bachelor's degree in journalism. Before coming to Japan as an AET, she worked as a journalist in Missouri and South Korea. She developed a passion for writing and service in Madagascar, where she documented her experiences teaching in a rural community. Madeline resides in Kameoka, Kyoto near her favorite hideaway: Nango Park.

Photo credit: Madde Yochum





Indigo Dyeing at Aizumicho Historical Museum

Sonali Dutta (Tokushima)

Most, if not all of us, have a staple pair of blue jeans in our wardrobe. Did you ever wonder where that distinctive inky hue came from? Indigo is an ancient dye made from a plant known as “*sukumo*” in Japanese. Tokushima prefecture in Shikoku boasts a unique museum featuring the history and craft of indigo fabric dyeing.

Tokushima has produced indigo, known as “*Awa Ai*” (“*Awa*” is the old name for Tokushima and “*Ai*” is the word for indigo), since the Edo period. There is even a nearby town in Tokushima called “*Aizumi*” which was named after the town’s indigo production, as the “*zumi*” part means “to live”. Tokushima is especially suited for cultivating indigo plants due to the climate, soil quality and plentiful water from rivers. Dye production has greatly benefitted and shaped Tokushima’s economy and culture. In Tokushima, you can also have a go creating indigo-dyed items yourself. The museum is about a 30-minute bus ride from Tokushima station and entry is 300 yen for adults.

When entering the museum, you can see a few indigo-dyed textiles including kimonos and various

wall-hangings. The older textiles are remarkably well-preserved and still bright in colour, perhaps due to indigo’s insect-deterring properties. The kimonos in particular have intricate detailing including embroidery. You can really sense the labour and time that had gone into creating these items.

The museum also has small models that show the process of growing and cultivating indigo plants as well as the method of dyeing. *Sukumo* leaves are locally grown, harvested and dried. They are then fermented for a few months to create the materials for dye with its characteristic blue colour. It’s a long process that can take around a year and it was cool to see how much work goes into each stage of dye production. You can also see the tools needed to create indigo-dyed items.

We also had the opportunity to tour the house and workshop of an indigo merchant who used to live on the grounds of what is now the museum. The buildings date from around the early 1800s. It was interesting to see a historic house of someone who was wealthy as it was much bigger

and had more rooms than a conventional house. Quick tip — you need to take off your shoes to enter the house and there are some steep, narrow staircases.

The best part of the museum experience was being able to experience indigo dyeing for ourselves. You can dye items such as handkerchiefs and scarves from 500 yen onwards. I chose to dye a white handkerchief. Dyeing the fabric is done in a special room which has huge vats of indigo dye. The dye has a strong, but not unpleasant smell. It's pretty cool that this method is similar to the process used hundreds of years ago for creating dyed textiles by hand. The staff help you during every part of the process, explaining and showing you what to do.

First, I chose my pattern and how dark I wanted my handkerchief to be. I chose the darkest shade and a star-shaped pattern. The star pattern was achieved by folding the handkerchief and then putting a wooden fan-like contraption to prevent the dye reaching that part of the fabric. The Japanese term for this technique is “*shibori*”, which is known as resist dyeing because you are preventing the dye from reaching particular parts of the fabric to create a pattern.

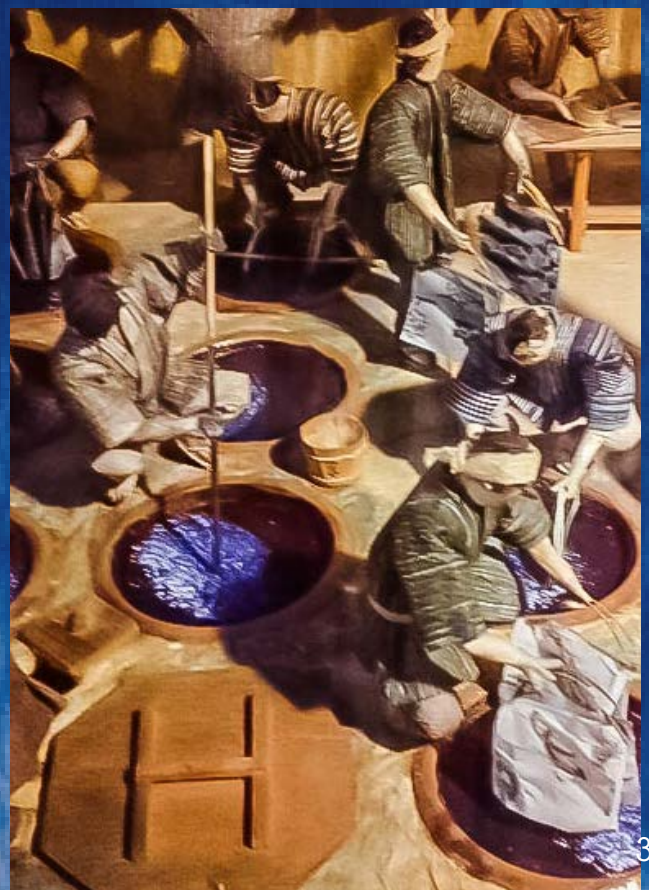
Then we put on plastic gloves and aprons to protect clothes and hands from indigo stains. The staff at the museum told us how long to immerse the fabric into the vats of indigo dye. The fabric went from white to yellow in the first dyeing, then green and finally the vivid dark blue we were aiming for. In between immersions, we also needed to squeeze excess dye from the fabric—this was really fun!



When the dyeing was completed, we then needed to rinse the handkerchief completely to remove all dye. To finish the process, I ironed my snazzy, freshly patterned handkerchief which revealed a vibrant blue colour. The whole process took less than half an hour, and we didn't need to wait in a queue to begin. It was a lovely, unique souvenir from the museum that would make a fantastic souvenir. There is also a gift shop where you can buy similar indigo-dyed products and clothing.

I would recommend a day out to the indigo museum to anyone who enjoys Japanese history, is interested in textiles or fashion, or who simply wants a unique Japanese cultural experience. I was lucky that I was accompanied by a Japanese speaker. But although English explanations and signage are limited, I would still recommend visiting the museum for non-Japanese speakers as you can still enjoy the models, exhibition, and dyeing experience.

Sonali Dutta is a first-year JET in Tokushima prefecture at three senior high schools. Before coming to Japan, she worked in the publishing industry in London, United Kingdom. She studied in York, United Kingdom and Massachusetts, America. Her hobbies include reading, yoga, and writing on [her blog](#). She also enjoys exploring and eating her way through Japan. Her favourite discoveries so far are the Studio Ghibli Museum in Tokyo, deer in Nara, and Sushiro in Tokushima. Her goal while in Japan is to do as many tea ceremonies as possible.



THE TAKARAZUKA REVUE

The Fantastical World of All-Female Theater

Laura Steblay (Osaka)



Introduction

If you've ever found yourself riding the Hankyu train line that stretches from Umeda in Osaka to Takarazuka in Hyogo, chances are you've noticed the posters with dramatic titles and beautiful, heavily made-up figures wearing striking costumes. These posters are the outward face of the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female Japanese theater company which produces lavish, Western-style musicals in central theaters in Tokyo and Takarazuka City. This concise description tends to raise more questions than answers, however, and trying to learn more about this unique form of theater can be daunting. When I first

discovered the Takarazuka Revue over five years ago through the internet, I was simultaneously fascinated and baffled by the productions, culture, and theatrical conventions of the Revue. Let's unpack some common questions about this intriguing art form.

Wait... They're all Women?

All-female performances, let alone a whole company comprised only of women actors, are not common in the theater world. While the concept of cross-dressing theatrically has a long history, from the elegant *onnagata* of kabuki, to the boy actors of the Shakespearean stage,

to the TV star drag queens of today, these familiar examples almost always consist of men performing as women. The reverse is much less common, making Takarazuka a unique and fascinating example of cross-dressing women. Although the company makes no effort to hide this fact, some people who encounter the Revue for the first time are incredulous that these anime-looking dreamboats are not “real” guys.

The shows that Takarazuka produces always have male characters, so how do they achieve this visible gender binary in their all-female company? The actresses, known as *Takarasiennes*, are split up into the two genders of Takarazuka: *otokoyaku* (or “male role”), who play the men, and *musumeyaku* (or “daughter role”), who play the women. The actresses perform their “assigned” genders in intentional and stylistic ways, often pulling inspiration from classic Old Hollywood stereotypes, as well as aspects of Japanese pop culture such as anime and manga. The *otokoyaku* aren’t trying to mimic real-life, everyday men, but rather represent a kind of idealized man who is dashing, heroic, and romantic. The *musumeyaku* work to contrast and balance this image with their femininity, making the *otokoyaku* seem masculine in comparison. These gendered divisions and dynamics also carry into the offstage lives of the performers, where the *otokoyaku* sport short hair, wear pants, and speak in more masculine voices, while the shorter, often younger *musumeyaku* dress in a feminine style and tend to exhibit gentler mannerisms. These carefully constructed gender expressions make the *Takarasiennes* stand out offstage as well as on.

What’s it Like to See a Show?

Many foreign fans, myself included, liken the experience of attending a show at a Takarazuka theater to that of visiting Disney World. The company often bills Takarazuka as a fantastical world of dreams, and the very specific atmosphere and aesthetic can feel like a different universe. Both the Grand Theater in Takarazuka and the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater are enormous, seating over two thousand people each, and the technical capabilities of the sets and stage rival the biggest shows on Broadway. Each of the main performances in these theaters consists of either a one-act musical followed by an extravagant song and dance revue, or a two-act musical with a mini revue before the curtain call. Some of these musicals are imports from Broadway or Europe, while others are Takarazuka originals drawn from a wide variety of sources (and by wide, I mean from sources as diverse as Japanese historical figures, Shakespeare plays, foreign movies like *Ocean’s 11*, and anime like *Rurouni Kenshin*).

Although the musicals are always a fascinating experience, the revues are hands-down the most iconic and unique aspect of Takarazuka. These visually dazzling shows, which often follow a vague theme and have little continuous plot, showcase the skills and allure of the performers in stunning scenes filled with dancing, singing, live music performed by the orchestra, special

stage effects, and sparkles. So many sparkles! The costumes, while sometimes historically questionable, are always glamorous. The heavy makeup and fake eyelashes may seem over the top to some, but just like the intricate makeup of kabuki, it helps define unique traits of a character while enabling the giant audience to read facial expressions. Even if you don’t understand any Japanese, the visuals of the shows alone make for an unforgettable experience.

How Did the Revue Begin?



What’s one to do when it’s 1914, you’re a railroad tycoon, and no one wants to ride your train line to the small hot-spring resort town of Takarazuka? After some failed attempts involving unheated indoor swimming pools, Hankyu Railways founder Kobayashi Ichizo finally found the winning ticket: start an all-girls theatre company! People found the performances much more enticing than swimming in chilly water, and Kobayashi soon founded the Takarazuka Girls Opera School, appealing to the daughters of well-to-do families from as far away as Kagoshima as a suitable way to spend their teenage years between childhood and marriage.

Reflecting the experimentation and blending of cultures of the Taisho era, the shows Kobayashi produced combined the “dance, song, and skill” of kabuki with the spectacle of Western-style theater. The 1920s brought to the company

the introduction of the French-inspired revues, the addition of performances in Tokyo, and the construction of the Grand Theater, the largest modern-style theater in Japan at the time.

In the 1970s the Revue truly took on the form that we see today, with the production of a musical version of *Rose of Versailles* (*Berusaiyu no Bara*), a manga by Riyoko Ikeda about Marie Antoinette and a cross-dressing female guard named Oscar. This show and the actresses starring in it became so wildly popular that it was known as the “BeruBara Boom,” and this phenomenon gave Takarasiennes the star status that still continues today.

Why Do the Same Actresses Keep Playing All the Main Roles?

As a theater kid, the idea of a handful of actors in a troupe always getting the best roles would have seemed like favoritism, but that’s exactly how Takarazuka is designed to work. Unlike Broadway and many regional theaters, individual roles in Takarazuka shows aren’t cast by auditioning large numbers of people to find the perfect fit for that role. Rather, all of the Takarasiennes in a troupe are assigned to roles based on a (sometimes complex and mysterious) hierarchy. The roughly 400 performers are divided into five main troupes (Flower, Moon, Star, Snow, and Cosmos) which perform shows in rotation at the two main theaters. There’s also a special troupe for older actresses, as well as national (and sometimes international) tours.

All Takarasiennes start their career in the Takarazuka Music School (TMS), which auditions over a thousand girls between the ages of 15-18 every year. About 40 are accepted to the strict two-year program, where they are trained in singing, acting, and both Japanese and Western styles of dance. The *senpai/kouhai* culture of Japanese schools and workplaces is strictly observed in TMS, and this dynamic of deferring to seniors carries throughout their time in Takarazuka.

After their debut into the company as full-fledged Takarasiennes, the actresses are assigned to one of the troupes. As young actresses, they will first be given only very small roles, but they have the potential to move up in the hierarchy. Each troupe is headed by a Top Star, a popular and experienced *otokoyaku* who essentially becomes the face and leader of her troupe, and receives all the leading roles in the main theater shows. She is partnered with a Top *Musumeyaku* (who usually plays her romantic opposite), and supported by a *nibante* (a second-in-command *otokoyaku* who usually goes on to become the next Top Star). As Top Stars tend to retire after 2-5 years, and actresses are constantly retiring and being introduced—the hierarchy is in an almost constant state of flux. Aspiring *otokoyaku* are placed on the Star Track where they are constantly tested by the company in various roles to see if they have potential (and popularity).



What’s the Deal With These Fan Clubs?

When visiting one of the theaters to see a performance, it’s hard to miss the crowds of women standing or kneeling in rows outside the stage doors. In a system more reminiscent of well-organized sports fans than theater lovers (it’s actually more similar to the traditional structure of kabuki fans), Takarazuka fans often align themselves with one particular Takarasienne to support her career. They do this by joining her fan club, through which they can buy tickets to the shows she is in and attend *ochakai* (tea parties) where she can interact with her fans in a slightly more private and casual environment. Supporting the actress in this way gives a concrete measure of her popularity, which can help her progress along the hierarchy of performers.

The fan club activity that is probably most mystifying to the uninformed is the practice of fans lining up by the stage doors to see the actresses enter or exit the theater for the day. Fans wait in a specific area with other members of the club to chat with and hand letters to their actress, and will sometimes wear matching themed accessories. Being part of a fan club enables fans to participate in the community of the Takarazuka Revue beyond just being spectators at a show, and gives them a personal connection and investment.



While there is pressure (from multiple angles) on actresses to preserve a specific public image as Takarasiennes, the truth is they are humans, too. There's bound to be a number of actresses who either identify as LGBTQ+ in their private lives or would use those labels in a different cultural context. It is quietly known that some actresses have had female partners during or after their time in the Revue. Hopefully, as society progresses, more actresses will feel comfortable speaking up about their personal connections to their onstage gender presentations. Some already have: when questioned about her style of dress, recently retired actress Nanami Hiroki said in an interview, "The Takarazuka otokoyaku Nanami Hiroki is actually very close to my genuine self. So comparatively, suddenly becoming a very feminine woman would have been more unnatural for me, but at the same time, it's not like I'm a guy either. [. . .] I think it would be interesting to [. . . occupy] the space somewhere between masculine and feminine." However the actresses choose to identify, the fact remains that the stage world created by the Revue presents dynamics of gender and attraction that aren't found on such a large scale anywhere else in the world.

How Can I Experience This Myself?

If you want to attend performances yourself, tickets to shows at the Grand Theater in Takarazuka or the Tokyo Theater can be purchased on either the [English website](#) or the [Japanese version](#). If the show is very popular or you're hoping to spend less money, standing-room-only tickets (*tachimimi*) can be purchased on the day of the performance by joining the line outside the theater a couple of hours before the tickets go on sale.

Every time I attend a Takarazuka performance I discover something new. Given its uniqueness in the world of theatre and Japanese society, it's definitely worth your time to experience it at least once while in Japan. I can promise it will be an adventure to remember!

Further Reading

- [Interview with Nanami Hiroki](#)
- [Takarazuka Wiki Page](#)
- [Takarazuka Official Website](#)
- [Takarazuka Revue Fan Podcast](#)

Originally from Minnesota, USA, Laura Steblay currently works at a junior high school in northern Osaka prefecture. While her dreams of becoming a Takarasienne can never come to fruition, she's holding out hope for that drag king gig someday. Reach out on Facebook or Instagram (@lgsteblay) if you have questions or want to attend theater (Takarazuka or otherwise) with a buddy!

Photos: Laura Steblay

So... Are They Lesbians?

As a queer theatre artist, I've always been drawn to theater's potential for allowing us to imagine ourselves in roles outside of what is considered the norm for society. Because of the fantastical romances and flirtatious revues performed by the actresses of Takarazuka, foreigners sometimes assume the Revue is "lesbian theater." Given that the overwhelming majority of hardcore Takarazuka fans are women, many academics have written articles attempting to dissect the gender and sexual dynamics of the Revue, attributing fans' passion variously to homoromantic desire, needs unmet by husbands, motherly competitiveness, or an outlet to see women breaking the boundaries of gender norms.

While the Revue continues to promote the image of otokoyaku as attractive and romantic, the company has historically been wary of homoerotic associations beyond the world of the stage. The original premise was that Takarazuka was a stepping-stone before the greater calling of marriage and motherhood, and to this day the actresses aren't allowed to be married or even openly dating anyone while they are still members of the Revue. Many Takarasiennes do go on to marry men and start families after they leave the company, while others continue their careers for years.

My Journey from Japanese Traditional Folk Music to 8-bit Technofolk

A FOLKIN' GOOD TIME



Photo: Zen Sasaki

Erica Park (Kyoto)

I stumbled upon Japanese traditional folk music the same way a horror film heroine might trip into a dark, deep pit in an old, creepy mansion: with no clue that my life was about to change.

And much like said heroine who suddenly wakes up in said mysterious, deep pit, I don't even know how I got here. The last thing I remember was wondering about Japanese instruments and typing "Japanese traditional songs" into a YouTube search bar, before being sucked in by the strums of shamisens and the dynamic vocals of Japan's traditional folk singers.

Although it's usually put under the umbrella term "*min'yo*," there is no exact name for the genre Japanese traditional folk music belongs to. Sometimes they're called *inaka bushi* (country melodies), other times they're called *inaka buri* (country tunes), or even *hinata uta* (rural songs). However, I think *min'yo*, whose kanji roughly translates to "the people's chant," is a weirdly accurate description of these simple, yet intriguing songs. For simplicity's sake, I'm going to be referring to them as *min'yo* from here on out.

In the same way certain foods or adorable mascots are part of a prefecture's identity, *min'yo* songs are another way for many regions in Japan to further distinguish themselves. Originally sung by the lower class, their purposes vary from work songs sung while toiling away in fields, to sacred religious chants performed during ceremonies. Many songs tend to have imagery of nature or details of everyday life, and often performances incorporate special dances or instruments.

Take for example Japan's oldest *min'yo* song: "Kokiriko-bushi." Hailing from Gokayama village in Toyama prefecture, "Kokiriko-bushi" illustrates the natural flora and fauna of the village during the harvest season. A performance of "Kokiriko-bushi" is visually intriguing as well; performers move slowly across the stage in uniquely shaped straw hats, as others play the iconic *binzasara*

instrument: an accordion-like apparatus consisting of many wooden slats that clack together to create the “dedereko-den” chorus of the song.

I fell in love with how all these elements came together into a cohesive experience.

More compelling, though, were the powerful emotions behind each song. Each one seemed to condense the essence of feelings like sadness, happiness, or loneliness in a way that you could empathize with, despite the language barrier.

My appreciation for min'yo grew extensively throughout college, and during the long hours of nighttime studying or downtime between projects and papers, min'yo playlists kept me company. Whether it was the more New Age, emotional ballads of Ikue Asazaki, or lo-fi recordings of televised performances from the 90s, I listened to it all. I wasn't too picky, and even if I didn't always understand the words, I let myself get swept away by the vibrant energy each song and performer exuded.

Unfortunately, my college roommate and study buddies didn't quite share the same enthusiasm for min'yo, and I don't blame them. I completely understand that min'yo isn't exactly easy listening for a lot of people. It can be a bit grating at times, with tunes that don't follow traditional Western note progressions, not to mention the sometimes startling *kakegoe* (call-and-response) that seemingly jump out of nowhere.

Older Japanese folks didn't understand why I enjoyed the genre so much, either; even they found min'yo to be a relic of the past that didn't quite have the chops to withstand the more international appeal of modern-day songs. For a lot of people, min'yo was something that only a few Japanese people sang, and even then only to demonstrate Japan's nostalgic, rustic charm. I found myself having to agree with them. It seemed that min'yo was reserved for special occasions, like cultural events or TV specials, and so many recordings I enjoyed were decades old. Perfect preservation of the genre seemed to be the goal, and innovation was limited, if present at all.

And then I discovered Omodaka.

I was looking for more min'yo to listen to on the Internet (as per usual), and during a mindless return to YouTube's homepage, I noticed a distinctive thumbnail. A stark white, minimalist graphic of an arrowhead flower emblazoned on a punchy, vibrant red background; that's all there was to it. The title was equally as simple: “Hietsuki Bushi,” uploaded by Omodaka. At the time, I had no idea what any of those words meant, but I was riding high on my min'yo video binge, so naturally, I clicked.

Imagine my surprise when, instead of hearing the bare twangs of shamisen like I was expecting, I was hit with a

lush, multi-layered 8-bit melody mingling with a classical guitar's gentle strums. Before I could fully process what I was hearing, a loud, piercing, siren-like horn cut through the mix, and jarring though it was, I only became even more entranced by whatever the hell YouTube just recommended me.

Then the vocals kicked in.

To hear the powerful voice of a trained traditional folk singer sing a tragic love story from the Kamakura era is absolutely breathtaking even under normal circumstances, but it was even more so amid the blips and thrums of the 8-bit chords and guitar plucks weaving throughout. The singer's notes swooped up and down with confidence, working alongside the digital landscape of the background music. I'd never listened to such a wonderful marriage between traditional and modern musical aesthetics before, and as soon as the video finished, I was already eager for the next song.

As it turns out, those skilled vocals belonged to classically trained folk singer, Akiko Kanazawa (whose min'yo rendition of the [Beatles' “Yellow Submarine”](#) is definitely worth checking out). But listening to her other works, it was clear that someone else had had a hand in Omodaka's skillful mixing of chiptunes and traditional folk standards. After a few music videos and a deep-dive internet investigation, I soon discovered that Omodaka was not just a one-off, eclectic min'yo mashup, but an expansive collaborative project that combines traditional Japanese music with contemporary visual artists. And behind all of it is one man—electronic music producer and DJ, Soichi Terada.

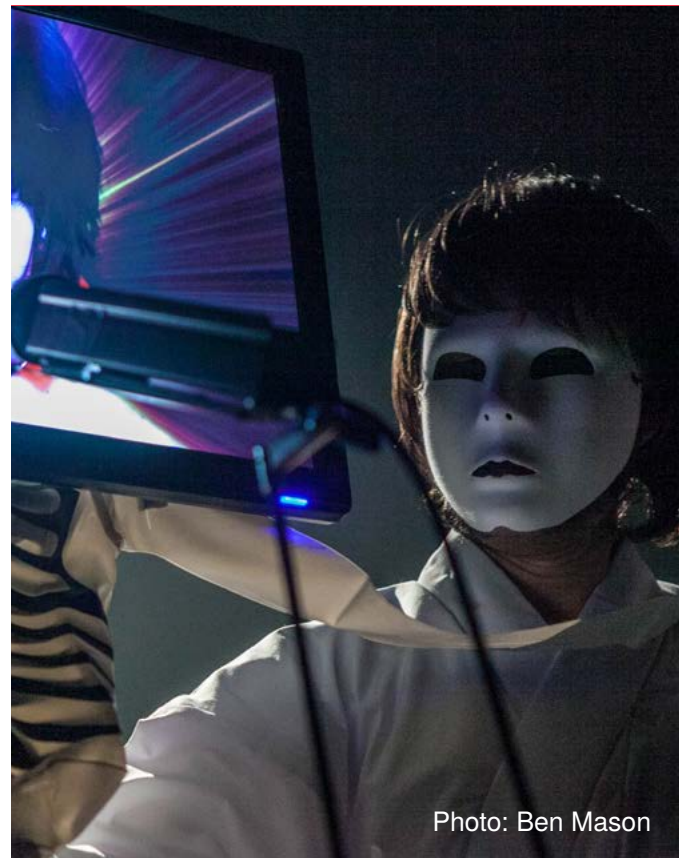


Photo: Ben Mason

Terada, the founder of house-electronic music label [Far East Recording](#), has enjoyed listening to min'yo music since childhood, but felt he “couldn't say that [he enjoyed min'yo]” to his friends because they weren't interested in it. He experimented with min'yo/house fusions, and over time, Terada developed a distinct sound that would define his label. Later on, spurred by a desire to collaborate with visual artist friends, Terada launched the Omodaka project in 2001.

Pieces by the Omodaka project usually involve Terada's friends creating fantastical, even psychedelic, animated music videos for his “techno folk” songs (a term Terada has coined to describe this niche genre). My personal favorites are “Yosowya-san,” with its side-scrolling 8-bit exploration of Japan's gambling culture, and, of course, “Hietsuki Bushi,” an adventure about a love confession thwarted by portal jumping spacemen, a farmer/lion/bird chimera, and oh— aliens. There are also several albums released under the Omodaka name, each filled with songs which need no music videos to shine.

Where Omodaka really shines, however, is during live performances. They are an unabashed bonanza of pure theatricality, complete with large screens displaying Kanazawa in various costumes as she sings to the audience virtually, and props like paper lanterns and bamboo flutes. Especially striking is Terada's costume and stage presence.

Donning a white plastic mask, a shaggy black wig, and *miko* (Japanese shrine maiden) religious robes, Terada transforms into a strange, barely human, androgynous entity whose only goal seems to be to get the blood pumping to some good ol' technofolk.

Best of all, when you look into the audience during an Omodaka show, it doesn't solely consist of geriatric Japanese; the crowd is diverse and, importantly, it's young. I'm certainly no expert in methods of preserving intangible cultural heritage like min'yo, but I think that



Terada is taking a step in the right direction to make sure min'yo will stick around for a bit longer.

Sure, some purists may condemn Terada's genre mixing as sacrilegious to everything traditional folk music stands for. However, when I see the audiences during Omodaka's performances sway their bodies to Kanazawa's trilling and yell back *kakegoe* to Terada, I feel that wonderful energy that drew me into min'yo in the first place. All I hope is that some of these people will also go back and listen to the music that led to the Omodaka project in the first place, and appreciate the unique sound of min'yo, too.

If you would like to check out the Omodaka project or Terada's other works (he's composed music for video games as well!), then I highly recommend looking at his label's YouTube channel: [“fareastrecording”](#) (all lower case, no space). If you search “Omodaka - Topic” in the search bar, YouTube even has a curated playlist with [Omodaka's entire oeuvre!](#) You can also listen on spotify. Furthermore, Terada regularly updates a [Twitter account](#) which announces future performances and other exciting news, like the October 28th release of Omodaka's newest album in five years!

Erica Park is currently working as an ALT in Kyotanabe City, Kyoto Prefecture. Her main interests are Japanese traditional culture, going to art museums, and overanalyzing media (preferably over a tumbler of Laphroaig 12). When she's not doodling or daydreaming about finally getting tickets to a Takarazuka performance, she's planning a trip to yet another prefecture in Japan.



1,000 WORLDS CLASH AT TOKYO

Nathan Post (Gunma)



Ahead of me an enormous frost dragon roared behind a man in glittering armor. To my right, two women were fanning themselves with cash from a bathtub full of money. To my left, a man posed with a sword taller than he was. Behind me, two robots loomed high over their surroundings. And all around me were the sights and sounds of the 2019 Tokyo Game Show.

If you're not familiar with the event, TGS is an annual trade show that plays host to the world's biggest video game companies, as well as a plethora of independent games and developers, as they come together to show off the newest titles and innovations in the industry to each other, the press, and the public.

The show takes place over four days every September at Makuhari Messe, near Kaihin Makuhari Station in Tokyo. It is open exclusively to industry insiders on the first two days, and then to the public on the following two. This year the show ran from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. each day with an admission fee of 2000 yen for the public.

If you've never been to TGS, it's hard to fully comprehend the levels of insanity, passion, and money that surround the event each year. This year, the show attracted more than 260,000 people over its four days. That translates to huge crowds, massive displays, and hundreds of millions of yen spent vying for your attention.

This year's show included some of the biggest upcoming titles of 2019 and 2020, including *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Marvel's Avengers*, *Death Stranding*, and more. There was also a greater emphasis this year on VR developments, with one of the show's eleven(!) event halls dedicated solely to VR and AR gaming.



GAME SHOW 2019



MOST ANTICIPATED GAMES

FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

Judging from my talks with guests on the show floor and the imposing multi-hour line, the biggest thing at the show this year had to be the *Final Fantasy VII Remake* demo.

Final Fantasy developer Square Enix's booth dominated the main hall, with much of it dedicated to this game. Unlike previous *Final Fantasy* remasters and definitive editions, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is a complete reconstruction of the original from the ground up. Fans have been begging for this game for well over a decade and Square has finally responded with a stunner of a title.

Gone are the 1998 original's PS1-era chibi block characters and pre-rendered 2D backgrounds. In their place are beautiful modern recreations of the characters and environments in full 3D, with an over-the-shoulder camera angle and realistic proportions.

Also gone are the turn-based random battles of the original. This change is sure to generate controversy among series purists, but in its place is a much more active and flashy system that incorporates elements of *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy XV*'s real time combat systems with the ATB and menu-based systems of the original.

The TGS demo covered an early sequence of the game, where Cloud and Barret are infiltrating one of Midgar's Mako reactors. It culminates in a boss fight against the original's first boss, the huge robotic Guard Scorpion. The demo featured a bit of exploration and item collecting, and a lot of combat.

The changes in the combat system mark the biggest departure from the original. There are no random battles, so all enemies appear directly in the world. You can run up to them to initiate a fight with no transition to a separate battle screen. During combat, you can move around with the analogue stick to line



up attacks, dodge roll with the X button, guard with the R1 button, and perform basic melee attacks with the square button.

As you fight, an ATB (active time battle) gauge fills up in the bottom-right corner, which lets you perform menu-based attacks, much like the original. Once one bar of the gauge has filled up, you can press the O button to pull up a traditional *FFVII*-style menu, which slows down the game to an almost-paused state. From there, you can use up an ATB segment to cast magic, which costs MP, or perform one of Cloud's signature melee attacks like Braver.

Also carrying over from the original is the Limit Break system. Once Cloud has dealt or taken enough damage, his Limit Gauge starts flashing and allows you to perform a Limit Break attack (in the case of this demo, it was Cross Slash) to deal out heavy damage to your enemies.

And while you might think the shift to a 3D action style would limit player control only to Cloud, Barret was also playable in the demo. You can switch control between party members at any time during combat with up and down on the D-pad, or choose

commands for them by pressing L2 or R2 while in the combat menu.

Barret had access to the same basic actions as Cloud, though instead of sword attacks, his basic square attack unleashes a hail of bullets from his gun arm. He also has access to his own range of special attacks, magic, and a limit break in his combat menu.

The battle against the Guard Scorpion was significantly more climactic than in the original, featuring cinematic changes in camera angle, back-and-forth dialogue between Cloud and Barret during the fight, huge barrages of rockets and gunfire, and of course, fully voiced cutscenes on either side of the fight.

The game is sure to prove controversial, as remakes of cultural touchstones often do, but judging from my hands-on time with the demo, it looks to be channeling the Lifestream of the original while successfully adapting it to the modern age. The first part of *Final Fantasy VII Remake's* episodic release launches on PS4 on March 3, 2020.

DEATH STRANDING

One of the only games at the show to stand toe-to-toe in hype with **Final Fantasy VII Remake** was gaming visionary Hideo Kojima's first new game since his departure from Konami: **Death Stranding**.

This game has drawn reactions of astonishment and bewilderment basically nonstop since it was announced back in 2016. It features the likenesses of Guillermo del Toro, Mads Mikkelsen, and Norman Reedus, as Reedus' character Sam treks across post-apocalyptic America carrying a baby in an amniotic sack, fending off some sort of mysterious rain ghosts. If you've been following this game, you know I'm not making this up.

Up until this point, no one was particularly sure what this game would even be. Kojima is well known for his beloved stealth-action series **Metal Gear Solid**, but the sparse gameplay clips of **Death Stranding** had so far only shown Sam walking along valleys, extending robo-ladders from his backpack to climb cliffs, and cautiously avoiding . . . the rain?

At this year's show, however, Kojima gave an hour-long stage demo of the game and, after watching it, I can finally say I think I know what it is. And what it is is very strange.

The presentation starts with some typical Kojima weirdness as Sam wakes up from a nap on the ground, unzips his pants, and starts peeing away from the camera. A meter pops up beside him showing his bladder's contents in milliliters quickly decreasing. Sam continues like this for 20 seconds or so, aiming the stream around in various directions until his bladderometer reaches zero. The realism of today's games truly is awe-inspiring.

Next, Kojima showed Sam carrying supplies across the wilderness. But there is much more to this act in terms of game mechanics than you would expect. Every piece of gear you give Sam to carry adds to a weight total, and shows up physically as another item on his back. If you stack them poorly, Sam's center of balance (shown by a faint yellow circle under him), will be thrown off and it will be difficult to move and balance.

Balance is an important part of the game, it seems. The L and R buttons are dedicated to controlling Sam's balance as he moves across the terrain. You have a variety of sensors to show you how treacherous different terrain is, from the steepness of slopes to the depth of rivers. If Sam stumbles or falls, his supplies can be damaged or lost.

Kojima pauses to talk about what the "stranding" in the game's title means. First, it implies the solitude of being "stranded." Sam is alone throughout much of his adventure except for holograms, and of course his amniotic baby companion BB.

However, "stranding" also refers to each player's game world as one unique "strand" of a larger thread. And those strands can cross over. Kojima reveals the game will feature passive multiplayer features, somewhat similar to those of games like **Dark Souls** or **No Man's Sky**. As you connect different geographical regions to an in-game network, you begin to see traces of other players' Sams, like their footsteps, paths through the world, rest points, and most importantly, items.

You can use things left behind by other players, like their ladders, shelters, and equipment. And of course you can also craft and leave things behind for them. You can even give other players "Likes" for the things they've left. Kojima reiterates these separate yet connected game instances are the titular "strands" of **Death Stranding**.

The demo continues, and at one point Sam receives a harmonica for delivering some goods. He stops to rest and changes his shoes, massages his shoulders, and plays the harmonica for BB. This is all done through the player's input rather than through a scripted cutscene. BB reacts positively to Sam's harmonica playing and bestows him with a few Likes.

Something more akin to a traditional **Metal Gear Solid** game finally appears as Sam encounters a camp of "Mules," enemies who will try to steal your cargo (though not actually try to kill you). They have amassed a sizable collection of cargo in their camp taken from other players' Sams.

Our Sam proceeds to approach the Mules' camp in a freeform stealth sequence reminiscent of **Metal Gear Solid V**. He is eventually spotted and the Mules



attack with shock spears. Sam equips an electric bola gun and stuns a few Mules before stealing a truck and driving off.

We also got a closer look at the rain ghosts seen in previous trailers, or “BTs” as they are properly known. Sam sneaks through an abandoned town area, trying to avoid some of the floating shadowy creatures, but is eventually spotted. He is pulled through a mass of tar in the ground and ends up fighting a massive four-legged BT with the bola gun from before. He infuses the gun with his blood and dirty shower water to power it up. Once again, I’m not making this up.

Sam eventually runs out of ammo, but as things begin to look dire, he calls for help from . . . other players! A few Sams from other players’ worlds appear to help turn the tide of the fight. Though it appears their participation could be limited to just cheering him on and tossing him items, rather than full-blown co-op combat. We’ll have to wait for more information on that particular element.

As the demo wraps up, Kojima talks more in depth about the kind of cooperative creation available in the world. It seems that crafting is not limited to just gear and items, or even vehicles like trucks and motorcycles. You can actually build bridges, roads, and structures by yourself or with other players, and have those structures show up in everyone’s game worlds, adorned with the name of whomever contributed to that project the most.

I walked away from this *Death Stranding* presentation with more answers than questions for once, which was certainly nice. The game seems to be a mix of heavy world exploration a la *Zelda*:

Breath of the Wild, with occasional stealth and combat mechanics from *Metal Gear*, and held together by a shared world multiplayer system like that of *Dark Souls* or *No Man’s Sky*—all under the roof of typical Kojima political intrigue and supernatural weirdness.

Judging from this TGS demo, *Death Stranding* is shaping up to be one of the most interesting titles of the year. And best of all, it’s out quite soon. *Death Stranding* will be released exclusively for the PS4 on November 8th.

OTHER GAMES TO WATCH OUT FOR

Here are some quick one sentence rundowns of seven other titles to look out for.

***Cyberpunk 2077*:** The team behind *The Witcher* series tackles cyber future tech in this upcoming action RPG.

***Persona 5 Royal*:** An overhauled version of one of 2017’s best JRPGs, featuring new stories, characters, bosses, and Personas.

***Nioh 2*:** A follow-up to 2017’s “like *Dark Souls* but with samurais” title by the team behind *Ninja Gaiden*.

***Marvel’s Avengers*:** A co-op RPG-lite action game with a persistent and evolving world in the style of *Destiny*, but for your favorite Marvel heroes.

***Project Resistance*:** A 4 vs 1 multiplayer title set in the *Resident Evil* universe, where four survivors work to outmaneuver a fifth player playing as a boss monster.



Dragon Ball Z Kakarot: The newest Dragon Ball title takes cues from more traditional RPGs and features expansive zones to explore and secrets to discover in addition to its trademark anime action.

Code Vein: This *Dark Souls*-inspired game combines a stark anime style with a gothic world of blood and vampires.

VR HIGHLIGHTS

There was an especially big focus on virtual reality (VR) at this year's show, and while there may not have been as many big-name VR titles as previous years, the variety of indie titles—and especially hardware innovations—more than made up for it. I saw games using body harnesses, cyber shoes, impact vests, moving chairs, and yes, even smell-o-vision.

TACTSUIT

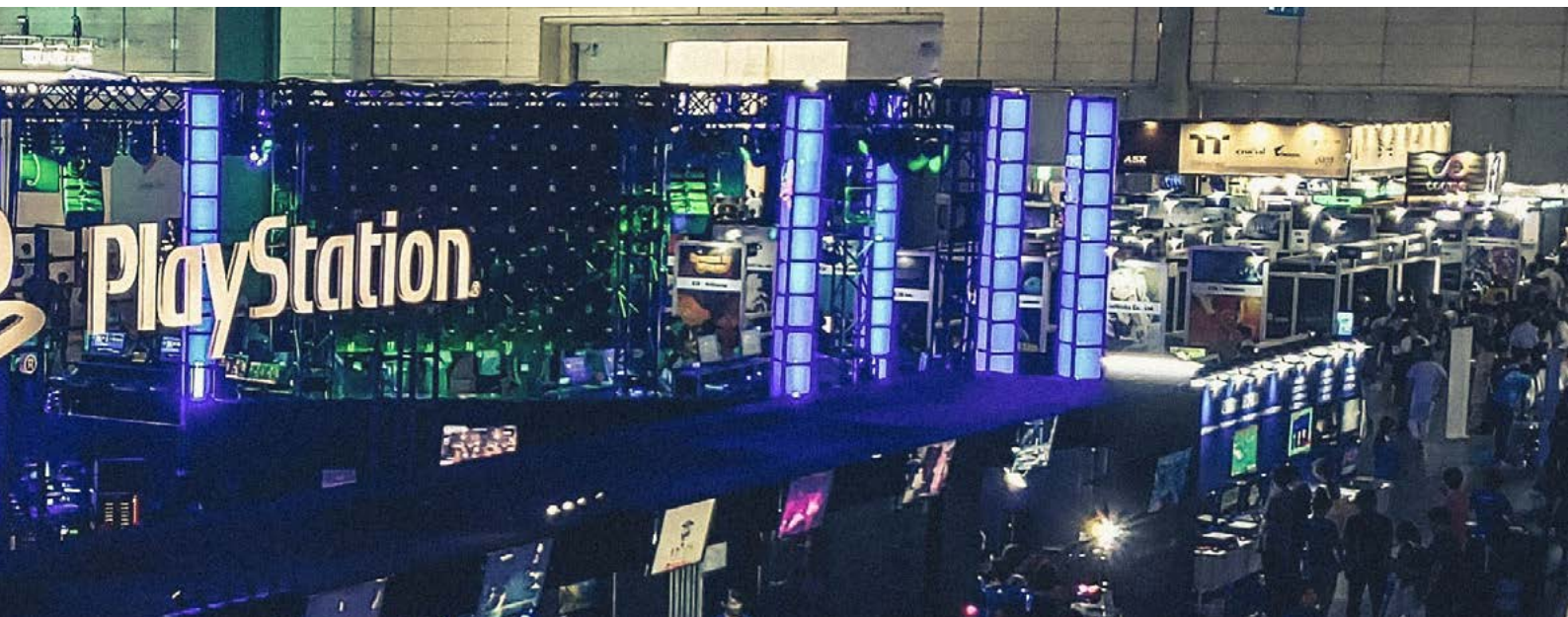
The bHaptics “TACTSUIT” comprises a vest, wristbands, gloves, and ankle bands which all wirelessly interface with select games. The game on display with the suit was a simple cartoonish wild-west shooter. The gimmick here is that you can actually feel the impact of the shots when you're hit. And no, it doesn't hurt. It felt similar to the rumble you would feel from a normal game controller, but localized to different parts of your chest and back. The wristbands also rumbled to signify firing your pistols, but it didn't do much to replicate the kickback of firing a gun in your hand. It was a cool demonstration of the tech that, while expensive, certainly helps immerse you in VR. It probably won't



become a staple of home VR setups, but makes sense for Japan's increasingly popular VR arcades.

CYBERSHOES

Another VR accessory that elicited more than a few smiles and laughs from the passing attendees was Cybershoes', well, cyber shoes. These sandal-like contraptions strapped over your shoes and had what appeared to be small rollers on the bottom to track movement. The game on display was *Skyrim VR* on PC. Guests would sit in a swiveling chair with the shoes and headset, and then take their first awkward shuffles into the world of *Skyrim*. Walking while sitting is probably not an action most of us are familiar with. Even so, seeing these first forays into tackling the problem of movement in VR space was impressive.





KAT WALK MINI

One other solution to the problem of movement in VR was presented in KAT VR's KAT Walk mini. This VR station is a platform about the size of a piece of gym equipment with a waist harness to hold you steady as you walk in place on a concave surface.

The demo featured a realistic VR shooting game controlled with the KAT Walk mini and a gun controller. I didn't get a chance to try it for myself, but the people who did wait in line for the chance were standing, turning, looking, aiming, and (kind of) walking physically while in VR.

The KAT VR mini also seemed to be using a sort of sock-shuffling technique for VR walking, where the players would slide their feet across the concave surface of the platform and shuffle-walk in place to move. Again, it's not ideal, but these kinds of first shuffle-steps are good to see.

AMBIOTHERM

One of the craziest demos on display in the VR booth was Keio-NUS CUTE Center's *The Lost Foxfire*, featuring honest to goodness Smell-o-Vision (or "Ambiotherm," as they called it). In the game, a fox spirit is running amok around your house and you have to chase it down and put it out with a fire extinguisher. As one tends to do.

The only problem is the fox can split into multiple identical spirits with no visual indication of which is the real one. The only way to tell the target apart is by smell. If you're focusing on the right spirit, you'll know by a bit of sweet warm air generated by the Ambiotherm apparatus on the headset.

The game itself was rather simple, but the technology on display was anything but. Chasing after the smells of fox spirits with motion controls in virtual reality was easily the most disembodied I felt at TGS this year.

INDIE GAME AWARDS

Sense of Wonder Night is an award-show-like event held after the second TGS business day, meant to highlight a select few indie games that inspire "a sense of wonder" in those who see them. These were all games and projects worked on by small teams of

just a few people, many of whom are still in school. Here are three of the projects that inspired the greatest “sense of wonder” in me.

UPLIGHT

While many of the games featured at Sense of Wonder Night broke conventions through unique gameplay ideas, *Uplight* was the single nominee that did so through hardware innovation.

Uplight is a handheld game system whose screen is not flat, not round, but a cube. A rotatable 3D cube sits atop a game controller, with five different faces of the cube acting as five game screens that all work together to allow you to play a game in three dimensions across its surface. (The sixth face, of course, was attached to the controller.)

The developers showed off a 3D version of arcade classic *Breakout*. In the *Uplight* version, players would still try to erase blocks from the top of the screen by bouncing a ball between them and a paddle at the bottom. However, here the ball is free to move off the edge of one screen and onto another, so as you play, you rotate the cubic display to keep the ball in view and move your paddle across the screens as well to hit it.

It was one of the most creative pieces of hardware I saw at the show, and I look forward to seeing what other applications it has.

BRAVOON

Bravoon was equally creative in its twist on traditional racing games. At first glance it looks like another future-racer in the style of *Wipeout* or *F-Zero*, but its main mechanic is anything but standard. In *Bravoon* you're of course trying to be the first across the finish line, avoiding obstacles and staying on the track along the way, but the trick here is that you can boost your speed by—wait for it—closing your eyes.

It uses the Xbox's Kinect accessory and face tracking to make this happen. So it's actually you, the physical player, closing your own eyes. And the longer your eyes are closed the faster you'll go. Of course this sets up an obvious risk/reward mechanic of speeding you up in exchange for, well, not having any idea where you're going. It was a really clever game and I wish I had gotten the chance to play it for myself.





STONE STORY RPG

Stone Story RPG is immediately striking for its retro visual style, but this isn't another of the neo-retro pixel art games. **Stone Story RPG** is done entirely in the same ASCII art style of PC games from the '80s like **Nethack**. These games were from an era before even basic 2D art in games, and so were drawn entirely with text editors. The characters, enemies, and entire world were made exclusively from periods, slashes, parentheses, and the like.

Stone Story RPG emulates this style impressively and pairs its minimalist aesthetic with minimalist yet captivating exploration and crafting gameplay. Your character moves around, collects items, and fights enemies automatically. Your role as the player is instead to make choices for your character like what items to craft, what gear to equip, and what paths to take.

This title is also the one that's furthest on its way to being a complete and full game. **Stone Story RPG** is already out in early access on Steam, so give it a look if it sounds like your kind of game. And considering

it went on to win the \$3,000 grand prize for Game of the Show at Sense of Wonder Night, expect to hear more about it in the months to come.

WRAP UP

TGS is something every gamer should experience at least once. And if you're already here in Japan, it's all the easier to do. TGS 2020 will be held in Makuhari Messe in September of next year, though specific dates are yet to be determined. Judging from past years though, expect admission to be open to the public on Saturday and Sunday for a door fee of 2,000 yen or 1,500 yen if you sign up in advance online. Happy gaming!

Nathan Post is a former JET who spent 5 years as a middle school ALT in Fujioka. He's a lifelong gamer whose favorite titles are Kingdom Hearts II, Resident Evil 4, and The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker. When he's not gaming he enjoys pina colodas, getting caught in the rain, and thinking about gaming. He is currently attending language school full-time and working on breaking into Japanese-to-English game translation.





By the Light of the Full Moon: A Foreigner's Perspective of a Moon Viewing Party

Gina Garrett (Okayama)

Tsukimi is the tradition of holding “moon viewing parties,” which occur every September throughout Japan. At *tsukimi*, attendees gather to celebrate and admire the harvest moon—the autumnal equinox’s closest full moon. These celebrations are adorned with decorations of Japanese pampas grass, and guests enjoy traditional foods such as *tsukimi dango*, chestnuts, taro, and sweet potato.

The tradition came to Japan during the Heian period (794-1185), when aspects of the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival were introduced to the country. As in China, many of the early Japanese *tsukimi* patrons were nobility. They would indulge in music and live poetry readings while admiring the moon, often celebrating *tsukimi* on boats so they could fully appreciate the harvest moon’s reflection on the water’s surface. By the Edo period (1603-1868), *tsukimi* had proliferated to the general public and doubled as a harvest celebration.



I was fortunate enough to attend a modern day moon viewing party near where I live in Japan—and within my first six months of living here! I, along with a few of my friends, was invited by a Japanese friend of ours who organized the event. We did not simply attend the party, we actively participated by serving matcha to other guests and patrons. We watched amazing live music performances and even wrote haiku for a poetry contest!

Before the party began, my friends and I went to the organizer's house where we were fitted into yukata by a kimono/yukata expert. I was very thankful for the expert's assistance. The process of putting on a yukata is quite daunting to me—there are so many steps that are easy to do incorrectly. I had dressed myself in a yukata before with marginal success, but I was not eager to repeat the experience.

With professional hands to help, the yukata fitting took a matter of minutes and was quite effortless. I will admit, I have never felt as beautiful as I did when I looked in the mirror after my yukata fitting. I could not thank the expert enough.

The moon viewing party took place at a small park right in the center of Tsuyama, a city in northern Okayama Prefecture. Within the park, I felt like I was transported to a different place in a different time. The sounds of the city outside were virtually silenced—all I could hear was the murmur of running water, birdsong, and the very faint clamor of a nearby children's baseball game. The two large ponds that encompass the park reflected the almost cloudless sky, save for the portions covered with lily pads. The small, perfectly landscaped pines that surrounded the ponds were bathed in the golden light of the setting sun. I felt like a figure in a traditional Japanese woodblock painting, like those I had seen in countless museums and textbooks.

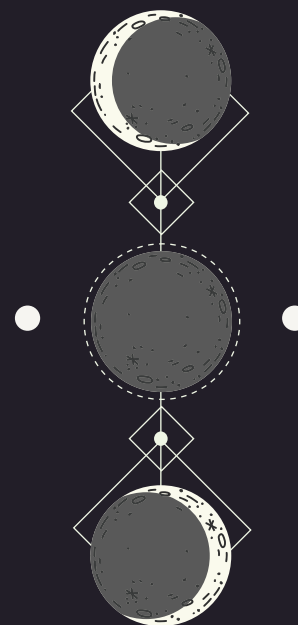
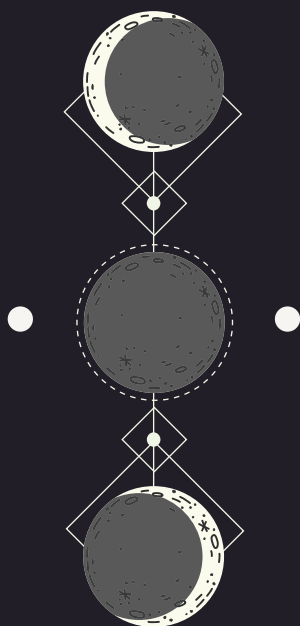
The venue itself was a large wooden building with paper screen walls and tatami flooring that faced the pond. It would act as a stage for the performances happening later that night. Patrons could sit on the rows of white folding chairs that surrounded the stage or choose one of the various wooden benches around the building and close to the pond.

When we arrived, there was already a decent collection of people gathered around the benches and seats talking amongst one another. More people trickled in throughout the course of the party and by the time the musical performances began a crowd had swelled around the stage.

As I mentioned prior, my friends and I helped serve matcha to the other party guests. Though I was excited about going to the party, I was downright nervous about serving tea. I am very aware that the act of serving tea is considered a very meaningful experience in Japan, and thus it is a very stylized process. We were not participating in an actual tea ceremony (something I expect would be tenfold more formal than what I experienced at this moon viewing party), however, there were still many steps to serving matcha that we had to learn and follow. My friend Janjay, who served tea several times that night, later said the following:

“It was very intricate and a bit jarring, because I didn’t think so many steps went into serving tea . . . There were things you had to remember, like which angle to serve the dessert and the way you had to hold the serving cloth and pull it out from your yukata—minor details that I never even thought would be needed. I was afraid I was going to mess up a lot. But in the end it was really fun and enjoyable.”

In the end, I ended up only serving matcha twice, while forgetting a good many of the steps along the way! But, like Janjay, I was still grateful for the experience. The patrons and other personnel who worked backstage were all very kind and supportive, even when I and the other foreigners made mistakes.



The musical performances of the evening started not long after the matcha had been served, comprised of a *koto*, steel guitar, and ocarina respectively. My favorite by far was the *koto* performance. For those who are unfamiliar with traditional Japanese instruments, a *koto* is a 13-stringed instrument made from wood. The closest Western equivalent I can think of is an autoharp or Appalachian dulcimer. The sound it makes is hauntingly beautiful: it has the high-noted elegance of a harp, with an underlying deep, otherworldly richness that I cannot fully describe. It began just as the full moon began to rise and somehow seemed to capture the moon’s luminosity and tranquility. The musician who played the *koto* was likewise stunning—her hair was styled in an elaborate bun and she wore a long, bright red dress.

Earlier in the evening, not long after we stopped serving tea, my friends and the other guests had been invited to participate in a haiku contest. After all the musical performances finished, the winners of the haiku contest were announced. One of the winners was my friend Jaja Navera, who submitted the following haiku:

*The wind softly blows
And behind the cloudy sky
The moon is waiting*



All in all, the moon viewing party was an unforgettable experience, one that I'd recommend to anyone living in Japan. I am extremely grateful that I was able to attend. Everything about the moon viewing party, from wearing a yukata, to serving tea, to listening to music played on a koto struck home how my life has changed ever since I came to Japan.

In my six months of living here, I had slowly become accustomed to life in a foreign country. Many aspects of my life here in Japan that had astonished or amazed me in my first two months now no longer phase me. But, when I looked at

myself in the mirror after my yukata fitting and later when I watched the moon rise over the pond, that awestruck feeling that I had my first day, my first week, and my first month in Japan came back to me.

It is a feeling that I hope will never go away, no matter how long I live here.

Gina Garrett is an Assistant Language Teacher living in northern Okayama Prefecture. She received a Bachelor of Arts at the University of North Carolina Asheville, where she majored in Anthropology. She enjoys exploring other parts of Japan in her free time as well as hiking, crocheting, and watching movies with friends. This is her first year in Japan.





NOVEMBER

RELEASES

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

MOVIES

November 1

- It Chapter Two (2019)
- Dora and the Lost City of Gold (2019)
- Climax (2018)
- Curiosa (2019)
- Miss Stevens (2016)
- Filmworker (2017)
- The Juror (2019)

November 2

- An Elephant Sitting Still (2018)

November 8

- Terminator: Dark Fate (2019)
- A Dog's Way Home (2019)
- Greta (2018)
- Arctic (2018)
- At Eternity's Gate (2018)
- Default (2018)
- The Trip to Spain (2017)

November 9

- Rafiki (2018)

November 15

- Angel Has Fallen (2019)
- Brightburn (2019)
- Andhadhun (2018)
- Loro (2018)
- Bel Canto (2018)
- The Music of Silence (2017)
- Big Brother (2018)
- The Little Witch (2018)

November 22

- Frozen II (2019)
- Zombieland: Double Tap (2019)
- Life Itself (2018)
- Exit (2019)
- Tel Aviv on Fire (2018)
- Kusama: Infinity (2018)

November 23

- Ping Pong Rabbit (2017)

November 29

- Doctor Sleep (2019)
- The Informer (2019)
- Fighting with My Family (2019)
- Kin (2018)
- The Wild Pear Tree (2018)
- Nicky Larson et le parfum de Cupidon (2018)

GAMES

November 1

- Jalopy (Xbox One)
- Citadel: Forged With Fire (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

November 4

- Xbox Elite 2 Controller launch

November 5

- Red Dead Redemption 2 (PC)
- Planet Zoo (PC)
- Garfield Kart: Furious Racing (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Conception Plus: Maidens of the Twelve Stars (PC, PS4)
- Blackсад: Under the Skin (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Just Dance 2020 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Wii, Stadia)
- Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 (Switch)

November 6

- A Year of Rain – Steam Early Access (PC)

November 7

- Ritual: Crown of Horns (PC, Switch)

November 8

- Need for Speed: Heat (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Death Stranding (PS4)
- New Super Lucky's Tale (Switch)
- Disney Tsum Tsum Festival (Switch)
- Jumanji: The Video Game (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle and the Millionaires' Conspiracy – Deluxe Edition (Switch)

November 11

- Romancing Saga 3 (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Vita, Android, iOS)

November 12

- Sparklite (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Age of Empires 2: Definitive Edition (PC)
- Bee Simulator (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Paranoia: Happiness is Mandatory (PC)
- The Touryst (Switch)

November 15

- Star Wars: Jedi Fallen Order (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Pokemon Sword, Pokemon Shield (Switch)
- Tokyo Ghoul: re Call to Exist (PC, PS4)
- Astroneer (PS4)
- Beast Quest (Switch)
- Terminator: Resistance (PC, PS4, Xbox One) – November 15 [EU], December 3 [NA]

November 19

- Shenmue 3 (PC, PS4)
- Google Stadia launch
- Bubble Bobble 4 Friends (Switch)

November 21

- Asterix & Obelix XXL 3: The Crystal Menhir (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

November 22

- Doom Eternal (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Doom 64 (Switch)
- Civilization 6 (PS4, Xbox One)
- Sniper Ghost Warrior Contracts (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

Unspecified Date

- Still There (PC, Switch)
- Kingdom Under Fire 2 (PC)
- Football Manager 2020 (PC, Stadia)

Sources:

<https://www.imdb.com/calendar/?region=jp>

<https://www.vg247.com/2019/07/15/video-game-release-dates-2019/>

Photo: Timothy Eberly on Unsplash.com



3. izakaya workers/ "catch"/ street hawkers

Art: Rebecca Guthrie

Rebecca Guthrie (Saitama)

When I moved to Japan for JET, I had reached a bit of a crossroad in terms of my art. It was something that I had neglected over the previous three years, as I trawled through my English Literature undergraduate degree. Drawing and painting—pursuits that I'd dedicated a good portion of my time to when in secondary school—had been shuffled to the sidelines in lieu of Medieval texts and developing something called a "critical practice." I had a weekly gig as a cartoonist on a university paper, but apart from that, I stopped working on larger artistic projects. Like so many graduates, I wasn't sure what it was that I wanted to do once I was done with university. There was a perpetual, sneaking feeling that I should have studied fine art. I told myself that I would give myself a year in Japan, and that would be enough to figure my future out.

My JET placement ended up being a city called Koshigaya, located in the southeast of Saitama Prefecture. My stomping ground was the well kept and modern suburbs of Koshigaya Laketown, and my local community largely consisted of commuters who had jobs in Tokyo, which lay about 10km to the south. Given that Saitama is known for being one of the most boring prefectures in Japan, you might not think that I would be inspired by living there, but I was. A so-called "bed town" in Saitama was different enough from London for almost everything to be exciting and new for me.



A lot of what I drew and painted in Japan was me trying to capture moments that I felt were visually interesting. The landscape of the suburbs where I lived had a lot of clean lines and boxy, slightly nondescript buildings that looked like a child's drawing of a house. I liked these, especially when the weather was good and we got those amazing anime-esque clouds on vibrant blue skies.

What inspired me the most was the people I saw, especially the high schoolers I taught for that year. Many of them were convinced, in the universal way of all teenagers, that there was really nothing cute or cool about themselves. But coming from the UK, where most students wear dark polyester school uniforms, these kids in their sailor suits and military jackets, with surgical masks and (in the case of the baseball players) shaved heads were serving looks. One of the pictures I included is a painting of sports day, an event that looked great, with blue skies, yellow pitches, and the students wearing their P.E. kits under a very stark, bright sun.

I also painted some friends from back home in the UK, Claire and Peter. It wasn't because I missed them terribly, but because I wanted to practice portraits. Painting them allowed me to revisit specific memories I had had with them. I painted Claire's portrait on a piece of a box that once contained sneakers bought in Harajuku. Because I



Creating Art in a Bed Town

didn't live in a big apartment with a designated space for art, and proper supplies shops were generally far away, I used a lot of old pieces of cardboard as canvases, and acrylic paints from Daiso until I was able to get to Sekaido in Shinjuku and go on a spree.

About halfway through the year, I got my parents to send me my old tablet and I started painting digitally again. I made a small series which I've called "people who look cool, but by accident." The one I included here is of the izakaya "catch" workers; (usually) young guys who hang about on the street and try to drag you into the bar where they work. I also did digital paintings of construction workers and high school baseball players. For these, I usually used referenced images from Google, but I also spent time staring at whoever it was I wanted to draw so I could memorise what they were wearing for later, hopefully in a way that didn't make them feel uncomfortable.

Making art in Japan for a year helped me to realise where I sit in terms of the art world, which is to say that I consider myself to be an illustrator more than a fine artist now, and I'm happy with that title. I'm also pleased that I was able to share some of the things I saw and experienced with people through my drawings and paintings, most of which I put on Instagram. My sketchbook acted as a diary, and I know that I can revisit the things I did in Japan by looking through it.

Did that year in Japan reveal what I was supposed to be doing with my life? Not really. There's a quote by the artist, Paul Gardner: "A painting is never finished – it simply stops in interesting places." I feel like these are good words to make art by, and to some extent, to live by. I'm content with the work I produced in Japan, especially having documented so many of my experiences through it. Before JET, I really expected that I would succeed in that grand plan of figuring it all out, but now I'm just happy that I had the opportunity to have stopped in an interesting place.

Rebecca Guthrie took part in the JET Programme for one year. Placed in Saitama Prefecture, she regularly taught at two schools in the area, both senior high. She is now living in London working as a freelancer within the TV and film industries. You can see more of her art on her Instagram: [@ bexbexbex](#)



Unravelling the Threads of Chiharu Shiota

Damien Levi (Tokyo)

Walking into a room that holds one of Chiharu Shiota's installation pieces is like stepping into another world. Known for her extravagant work using thread, Shiota is one of the premiere performance and installation artists to come out of Japan. I was lucky enough to experience her room-sized installation pieces first-hand and was obsessed with trying to unravel their sophisticated construction. Each step further into the exhibition posed another question—How is this constructed? Where does it begin? How many hours of dedication were put in for me to experience this today?

With the conclusion of [“The Soul Trembles”](#) at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo on October 22, her largest-ever solo exhibition to date, I thought it would be the perfect time to take a dive into Chiharu Shiota's history and her artistry.

Originally born in Osaka, Shiota studied at various universities worldwide in pursuit of honing her artistic abilities. Starting off at Kyoto Seika University where she studied painting, she then embarked on a study-abroad programme at the Canberra School of Art in Australia. It was during her time in Canberra that she began to blur the lines between painting and performance, culminating in her first performance piece, “Becoming Painting” (1994), in which she used her body as a canvas.

In an interview with Designboom, Shiota explained why she transitioned from a 2D medium, detailing how painting began to lose its meaning for her and became, “just colour on the canvas.” It is at this time that she began experimenting with other mediums. “Drawing on a two-dimensional canvas was still too limited so I began exploring with thread. Weaving gave me the opportunity to expand and I feel as if I am drawing in the air on a limitless space.” (1)

Moving on from Australia, Shiota studied in Braunschweig as well as the Berlin University of the Arts in Germany, where she lives to this day. It was here in the 90s that she met and began studying with internationally acclaimed performance artist Marina Abramovic.

Abramovic's influence on Shiota is plain to see in her earlier work, with similar abstract themes and performances. For

one piece, Shiota collected cow jawbones from different butchers in Berlin, transporting them home on the train and scraping the leftover meat and sinew off of them. For another early performance-based piece, she stripped naked and repeatedly tried to climb out of a dirt hole in an attempt to return to Japan.

It was during her time studying at the Berlin University of Arts that she came to see Germany as her home, and decided to settle there, becoming a fixture in the local arts scene. Speaking to Nasty Magazine's Sara Dal Zotto, Shiota discussed how being based in Berlin affected her art. “Living abroad helps me to see myself clearer and see my own identity because I am different. In Japan, I don't differ as much from other people and this makes it harder to see myself.” (2)

Although it was performance-based pieces that originally gained Shiota some attention from the arts community, it would be her installation works that would capture the hearts of the world. An important point in her career would be the Yokohama Triennale in 2001, where she unveiled a thought-provoking installation piece. Five, handsewn, mud-stained dresses reaching from floor to ceiling were barraged with a stream of water in a futile attempt to clean the dirt from the garments.

Picking up traction from this point, Shiota enjoyed success in art circles over the next decade and gained enough notoriety to be asked to represent Japan at the 56th Venice Biennale, a world-renowned contemporary visual arts showcase, in 2015. It is here that her installation, *The Key in the Hand*, caught the attention of attendees. The piece utilised 400 km of red yarn, 180,000 keys and two boats and sprawled out across the entirety of a large room.

Upon entering the room, attendees were confronted with thousands of hanging red keys, tied with the red yarn that is synonymous with Shiota. Her use of colour in this, and every other piece, instantly draws the individual's attention, removing distractions. It allows her work to be experienced rather than simply observed.

When asked whether she feels the need to explain her art to audiences Shiota said, “I think my big scale installations are actually easier to understand and faster to grasp emotionally . . . I don't want to explain my art beforehand.” (3)

In what could be considered an unconventional pivot, Shiota has also seen success in creating set designs and offering artistic direction for various opera and theatre productions. Using her core colours of red, black and white alongside large, abstract set pieces, she has worked on Shakespeare's “*The Winter's Tale*” (2016) and Wagner's “*Siegfried*” (2017) for Theater Kiel in Germany.

As a culmination of the last 25 years of her career, the Mori Museum of Art in Tokyo held the largest exhibition of Shiota's work to date. Running from June 20 until October 27, it primarily featured large-scale thread-based installations but also included sculptural works, video footage of performances, photographs and materials from her theatre work.

A landmark exhibition for Shiota—in her home country no less—the theme was “presence in absence,” a core element that can be felt in all of her previous work. Although she has removed herself physically from her artwork, where she was once a prominent feature, her intention can still be felt in each new piece she creates.

I went into the “The Soul Trembles” with little previous knowledge about the artist and was pleasantly surprised by how easy it was to engage with her work. A little eccentric, with many visually and mentally stimulating pieces, Shiota's exhibition was a delight to wander through. A particular favourite was “Reflection of Time and Space,” a puzzling piece using mirrors to fool the eyes. I spent more time than I'd like to admit trying to decipher how many dresses were present in the piece.

If you're interested in finding out more about this fantastic artist, you can find her personal website [here](#). The website also hosts a catalogue of books written by, or about Shiota with ISBN reference numbers so you can find them at your local library or bookstore.

Damien is a person who exists in the world. He wrote this article in his bed in Tokyo during Typhoon 19, Hagibis, and it was not a fantastic experience. Follow him on Instagram [@damienlevi](#) to make him feel better.

Sources:

1. [Designboom](#)
2. [Nasty Magazine](#)

Additional sources:

- [Blain Southern Museums](#)
- [Chiharu Shiota Artist Website](#)
- [Mori Art Museum](#)
- [The Culture Trip](#)
- [Style Zeitgeist](#)
- [Arndt Fine Art](#)
- [Nieves Fernandez Galeria](#)



Photos: Damien Levi

Capturing Tokyo's Music Scene

A Tokyo JET brings together his love of photography and music

Bryan Phippen (Tokyo)

Music and photography have always been part of my life. I had a sizeable cassette tape and CD collection by the time I entered high school, and my grandparents always made sure I had a roll of film or two for my point-and-shoot camera when we went on family vacations. I combined the two interests when I moved to Portland, Oregon in 2008 and started photographing Portland's punk, metal, and indie rock scene.

After finishing graduate school, I applied for the JET Programme. Having photographed bands like Forward and Boris while living in Portland, I was excited for the opportunity to network with and photograph the bands who reside in and tour through Tokyo. When I was notified by the JET Programme that I would be placed in Tokyo, I did a lot of research on which venues to pay attention to, which stores specialized in the music I listen to, and which bands I could get in contact with once I arrived.

My typical approach to photographing concerts starts with figuring out the camera policy of a venue. I typically photograph punk shows, and the venues don't really care who brings a camera. There are often multiple people with cameras of all types, from professional bodies to small point-and-shoot film cameras. Between sets or after the show, I often have the opportunity to talk to band members who are milling around the bar area or the merchandise table.

When I know the camera policy of a venue, I can start selecting my setup. For example, a punk band playing at a more DIY venue may push me towards using black and white and a flash to freeze the movement of the musicians. On the other hand, a shoegaze band playing in a venue with colorful backlighting and great spotlighting will allow me to skip the flash and take advantage of professionally designed lighting.

My gear consists of two different setups. My camera of choice is a Nikon F4 film camera with an SB-24 flash, a combination that I've been using for ten years. In Portland, most concerts I photographed were on Kodak Tri-X, a classic high contrast black and white film used by photographers like Anton Corbijn, Garry Winogrand, and Sebastião Salgado. When I want photos to be in color, I typically bring my Nikon D700 and Nikon SB-800 flash. Because of the way they were designed, my film lenses are still compatible with my D700, which cuts down on the number of lenses I need to own.

I have now been in Japan for five years, and I am currently working as an ALT at a private school in Tokyo. While in Japan, I have had the opportunity to photograph bands from all over the world, but two shows, in particular, have really made being here feel special. The first was one of the earliest concerts I attended in Japan—a festival called Grindfest, held at Trinity B3 Skatepark in Itabashi. The lineup consisted of punk, grindcore, metal, and a heavy dub group. During the set of a thrash metal band, some people decided to start skating along to the music, and I found myself in a position to catch the band, the crowd, and a skater all in the same frame.

The second was a free event that I heard about by chance on Facebook: a combination concert and art exhibition, with four bands and forty artists, held at an abandoned bathhouse and apartment complex in South Tokyo. I didn't arrive soon enough to see [Boys Age](#), and the [fin.](#) ran into noise complaints and visits from the cops. However, [ヒカシュー](#), an 80s art pop group, and [Melt-Banana](#), a 90s noise group, made the trip well worth it. [ヒカシュー](#) played a career-spanning set and even covered Kraftwerk, which was a pleasant surprise. Melt-Banana were as intense as ever despite downsizing to a duo since the last time I saw them in Portland. The bare concrete bathhouse, lit with industrial work lights and only the tile mural on the wall to remind you of what it used to be, is something I'll always remember.

Concert photography has been a huge part of why I've enjoyed my life in Japan so far—not only because I have been able to hear great music, but also because I have been able to meet great people. I've become friends with people who were just curious about my camera or the photos I took. I've met great photographers like Gin Satoh, who photographed Japanese punk bands in the late 70s and 80s, and Teppei Miki, who introduced himself to me after seeing me at a lot of the same shows that he was photographing. Five years only scratches the surface of the Tokyo music scene, but I'm thankful for all the opportunities I've had, and I look forward to meeting even more people in the future.

Bryan Phippen is originally from a town called Myrtle Creek, in Oregon, USA. He is a fifth-year Tokyo JET working as a Junior High and High School ALT at a combined grades private school.



LIFESTYLE



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"We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are." — Anaïs Nin

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*"Baseball is 90% mental. The other half is physical."
— Yogi Berra*

Photo: Teresa Fong





Settle
Down!

Anonymous



One thing I notice when I talk to newcomers to Japan is that most of us feel a mixture of excitement, anxiety, and a curious combination of anticipation and apprehension—all the feelings that collide together when you're a tourist trying to embark on as many exciting adventures as possible before you have to go home.

I can't speak for the countryside, but the towering and sometimes claustrophobic city of Tokyo is so filled with tourists, noisy nightlife and—these past few months especially—huge, booming festivals, that it's easy to get swept up amongst the frantic atmosphere and feel like you've got to do as much as possible in as little time as possible.

But that's it. We *have* time.

I need to write it on a piece of paper and stick it onto my mirror so I see it every morning. "Slow down, you *have* time"—a year or more of it. Breathe in, breathe out, and learn to live in the moment of your daily life. Not everything has to be an *experience*. Or simply, "Settle down, fool!"

When my first month of freedom ended and my teaching job began, I found myself thrown into a busy school week that ate up most of my free time and left me stressing that I didn't have *enough* time to do the exciting things I *needed* to do.

The initial rush of emotions had begun to settle down. You'd hope it would be like sediment drifting to the bottom of a pond, leaving the water crystal clear—but reality will always stay a little bit muddy, won't it? I was left antsy and anxious.

Which was why I started my little experiment around the beginning of September.

The cafe was cosy and warmly lit, the rich aroma of coffee wending its way through the air. A raised stage, upon which stood a single chair and empty music stand, faced the small seating area. The place was deserted, save for the elderly man standing behind the cafe counter.

"*Irrashaimase*," he called out, his hands busily polishing a glass. He set that down when I approached and scooped up a menu, offering it out.

My stammered thanks elicited a wry smile from him and he returned to drying the freshly washed mugs, patiently eyeing me as I wrangled my way through the list of kanji and katakana. *Coffee, coffee, more coffee ...* Being late afternoon, caffeinating myself would lead to a sleepless night. Oh, there it was: "homemade cake." Only one type, but cake is cake! I gestured at the menu, awkwardly placing my order.

With that out of the way, I found a seat tucked in the corner and let myself calm down, ruminating on the quiet cafe interior. The emptiness, perhaps unusual for a Saturday, wasn't lonely. It was comforting—a peaceful spot in the hustle of the working week. It felt like my brain could finally stretch out and relax.

Deciding this cafe to be the place where I'd carry out my experiment had been a good idea, I felt. (And I certainly wasn't opposed to the resulting delicious tart and rich matcha latte, either.)

I came back the following week, same day and time. There was maybe a faint glimmer of recognition in the cafe owner's eyes, but he didn't say anything to confirm it. The cafe had two other patrons today but the table I'd taken before was empty, so I settled into that one with a grateful sigh.

The third time was similar. The fourth, I was in the middle of making some lesson plans when I subconsciously realised it was nearing 4:30 p.m., which meant it was time to take a break. Onto the cafe, and—

"*Irasshaima*—ah, good afternoon! How are you?" the owner asked in Japanese, his smile warming.

And it was that simple greeting that made everything truly click into place.

It may seem like something small, and it was, but it wasn't inconsequential. This purposeful routine



I'd created lent structure to my everyday life when I was drifting, confirming my experiment was paying off. However, the mere fact the owner recognised me created a layer of familiarity, which suddenly made me feel a little more grounded.

When I take a step back now and examine my situation and my feelings, I find that while life may pull or push me in several directions at once, in themselves these little trips to the cafe remain a reassuring constant. It's done wonders to keep my mental health on the right track.

Asking other international residents for their advice has also shown me that routines may very well depend on your location in Japan. Those who live in the countryside have easier access to public yet quiet places, Kate Lofthouse in Osaka says. She recommends using Google to find a community park or centre. On the other hand, if you're getting too lost in solitude, volunteering is a great path to follow. "I think it helps to be a part of something bigger than yourself and for me, volunteering [in the community] helps me to feel connected to others. AJET has a [great list of places](#) that you can volunteer with, all throughout Japan."

Mark Feehily in Kobe has an outside-the-box suggestion that I'd never considered—signing up for a library card. Mark thinks it "helps you to feel like you're a part of the wider community, not just the local expat community (the blog [Surviving in Japan](#) has a useful [post](#) about this!) In getting a routine itself started, though, he suggests finding your city's international exchange centre in order to "connect with other (non-ALT) foreigners and have your questions about life here answered." Japan Visitor has a very useful list of [different centres](#) throughout the country.

When it comes to the first steps you take after actually relocating, Lisa-Anne Pacheo's advice is to "learn your area!" Having moved around a lot and now situating herself in a busy Tokyo area, she has found that she's immediately put at ease once she explores the area thoroughly enough to know where all the shops and landmarks are, and can safely get by without Google Maps.

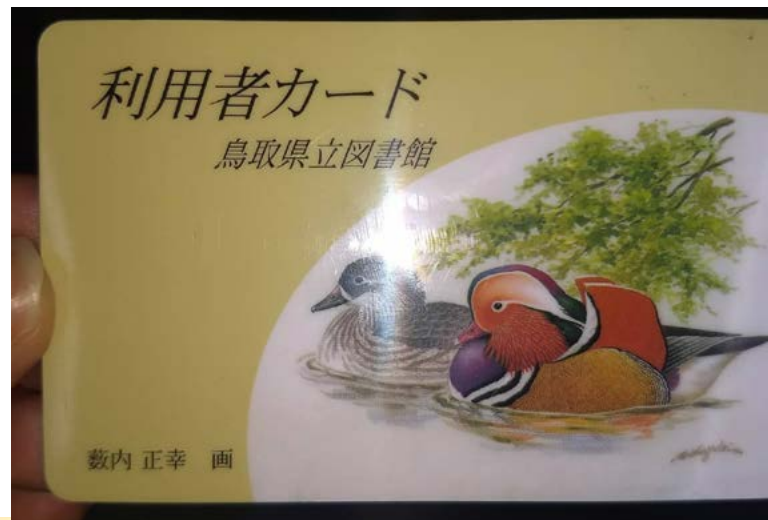
Developing a routine came easier when she involved other people, due to the aspect of social connection. "Including someone in your chosen routine is a great way to build companionships you can rely on. My



co-JET and I usually meet up in the station in the mornings and walk together to work—it's especially nice having someone you can talk to and go through all the adjustments with."

For some of you readers who may be travelling to Japan (or even overseas!) for the first time, it can be easy to feel the world is spinning by you and you're missing out on countless events and opportunities, even when you aren't. Even easier to feel lost, displaced, or that you don't quite belong.

My advice is to settle down and consciously remind yourself that you've got the time to breathe. Set out to create a routine that you enjoy, whether that be by yourself or with a wider community. Even if it's one thing, stick with it, making it into a regularity you can rely on whenever the tumult of life becomes overwhelming.



Kenjutsu

*The
Ancient
Art that
Balances
Both Mind
and Body*

Daniel Mulcahy (Kyoto)





What is Kendo?

Kendo, meaning the way of the sword, is a distinctly Japanese martial art: smelly, loud, and full of navel-gazing.

Based on traditional schools of swordsmanship going back hundreds of years, kendo was consolidated into its modern form at the turn of the last century, bringing various techniques together under a single banner. Although simpler in style than its predecessors, to this day kendo has kept the dual benefits of deep spiritual thought and full-contact combat that draws participants from every corner of the globe.

A cursory Timeline of Kendo History

Long ago in a distant land called Japan (temporally distant, at least), samurai killed each other—a lot. They killed each other so much, in fact, that it became a very good idea to learn how best to protect yourself and to dish out death and dismemberment for your lord. Thus, the various forms of *kenjutsu*, or sword fighting, developed organically over centuries, many of which were consolidated into schools called *ryu*. These schools were often secretive and based on succession—basically primitive forms of an ALT clique. Fighting with real swords is risky, so many schools opted for wooden swords instead. Padded armour and bamboo foils were introduced in the 1700s and were generally well-received.

The times a-changed, and with the coming of a more peaceful society, samurai training turned introspective, then was banned, and then came back as a kind of *fin de siècle* WWE, with full-contact matches earning the by-then-defunct warriors a means of survival. In the late 1800s, the philosophy and techniques of various schools were combined with this crowd-pleasing sport, and modern kendo was born—for the most part. First there was militarization, war, a decade-long ban, underground training and a Westernized facsimile of the sport to keep it alive, all before kendo was reintroduced as a softer, more simplified but still highly codified and martial art. A few more decades of internationalization, anime and terrible puns that “you ken-do it” later and here we are!



My First Taste of Kendo

Many of you probably had some exposure to kendo before coming to Japan. When I first encountered it back home in Galway, Ireland, my immediate impression was “Awesome, swords—how do I get one?” I’m fairly mad, though, and most of those faced with the cacophonous orgy of flailing limbs and bamboo sticks that is a kendo match think, “Nope: nope nope nope; thank you kindly and good day to you, sir.” Despite its air of unrestrained violence, however, kendo is actually a safe and highly enjoyable exercise in both mental control and, well, exercise.

Becoming a Master

Case in point: Hidehisa Nishimura, three-time All-Japan Champion, a man with calves like uncut kebabs. When I was fortunate enough to see him fight at last year’s World Kendo Championship, his stomp shook the floor like thunder. Of course, not everyone who practices kendo has such brute athleticism, but it’s been my experience that anybody who gives a little time to this addictive martial art ends up fitter, more sure on their feet and even, dare I say it, graceful.

Through repetition of the basics, folks who train from an early age naturally acquire bodily coordination and serious core strength, until by their teenage years they’re built like rapiers — lean and springy. Not only that, but kendo is also one of those rare sports that can be practised at any age, and along with the ability to trounce all comers, elderly teachers develop unnerving power and flexibility. I once did *kata* with the renowned Sumi Masatake-sensei, who often visits Europe for seminars. Pushing against him felt like trying to shift the Golden Gate Bridge. When he warmed up, he would perform a full split, pick up his sword and proceed to generously distribute ass-whoopings.



Kendo is a Great Way to Get Fit

Kendo is an accessible way to get fit, regardless of age, gender, or ability. The techniques are easy to grasp but difficult to master and exhausting to apply. Aside from the baseline aerobic and physical conditioning required to swing a sword while screaming and sprinting around a room, kendo drills are designed to build stamina. One exercise in particular strikes fear into the hearts of the wise: *kakarigeiko*. Imagine attacking your opponent, continuously and at top speed, never pausing, not even when the teacher blocks, counters or outright pushes you to the ground. A minute or so of this punishing ritual is enough to leave the average person on the verge of throwing up. In Japan, some dojo practice *kakarigeiko* for forty minutes at a time. It is a kind of self-imposed hell on earth.

Good Even for Beginners

Don't let that put you off, though! No one starts with such advanced drills. Beginners first master the basic strikes before being crammed into bulky armour. Even moving around with three full kilos of padded cloth and leather slung onto you is tiring, and by the time you're fairly used to wearing the equipment you will have already gained sufficient fitness and, more importantly, the grit to fight on when the going gets tough. I'd wager that anyone who does kendo for a year or more could hold their own at traditional sports from track and field to basketball—anything that requires endurance and nimble footwork. More than the benefits to health and mobility, however, kendo also emphasises sharpness of mind.

Kendo Emphasizes Sharpness of Mind

Kendo done well is blindingly quick and with just four targets but infinite ways to make an opening, a match between experienced players becomes a kind of 3D chess—with swords. Being repeatedly hit over the head cultivates an unwavering mentality that can spot threat and opportunity in an instant and respond with snapshot reflexes. Underneath all the screaming and stomping, kendo is a form of mental and spiritual training unlike any other. When the first lesson you learn is to fight to the death, you learn to better appreciate life.

It was this underlying philosophy that took me beyond “Cool—swords,” to studying kendo as a means of bettering myself. While you are in Japan, I wholeheartedly recommend that you drink from the source and give it a try, inside or outside school. Your calves will thank you!

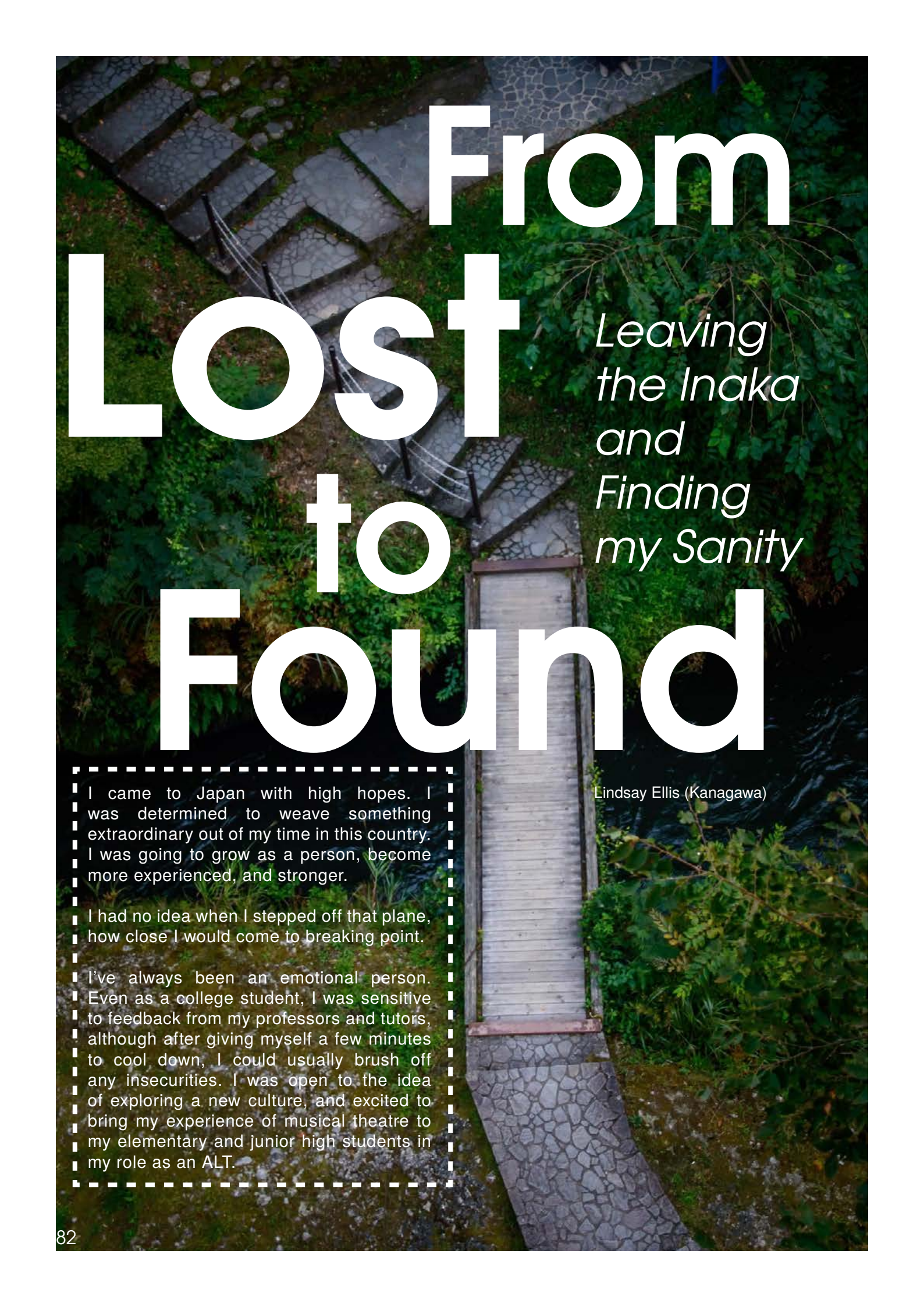
Resources

For a much more systematic and academic breakdown of kendo's rich history, I highly recommend kenshi247.net. It is a trove of insight into the development of this fascinating cultural treasure.

(Incidentally, if you find yourself in Kyoto and feel like giving kendo a shot, hit me up at danemul@gmail.com. I'm always happy to help a fellow nerd).

Daniel Mulcahy is a first-year ALT from Ireland based in Kyoto prefecture. His hobbies include becoming a kendo master, anime and exploring Japan. You can follow his adventures on his blog at shingaimumon.wordpress.com.





From Lost to Found

*Leaving
the Inaka
and
Finding
my Sanity*

Lindsay Ellis (Kanagawa)

I came to Japan with high hopes. I was determined to weave something extraordinary out of my time in this country. I was going to grow as a person, become more experienced, and stronger.

I had no idea when I stepped off that plane, how close I would come to breaking point.

I've always been an emotional person. Even as a college student, I was sensitive to feedback from my professors and tutors, although after giving myself a few minutes to cool down, I could usually brush off any insecurities. I was open to the idea of exploring a new culture, and excited to bring my experience of musical theatre to my elementary and junior high students in my role as an ALT.

Not Thrilled with my Inaka Placement

I've always been interested in music (I majored in singing and performance studies at university) and I was hoping to find my niche in the Kansai music scene. I imagined myself discovering cool new live houses and hitting up gigs. When I discovered that I had been placed in Shimane prefecture, second only to Tottori in terms of isolation, I was not thrilled, but hoping to make the best of it.

I walked around my new, small town for the first time, trying to shake off the feeling of disappointment that struck me. My apartment—ancient, draughty—was similarly a letdown. But I was still determined to make the most of my new life. I photographed and posted every bowl of ramen and cute vintage clothes store I encountered. I posted videos of me jamming with my new friends. I sent cheerful messages to friends back home. I was ready. I could do this.

Everything Went Wrong

At the risk of sounding dramatic, let's just be clear: everything went wrong. I tried so hard to love my small town but after a month of dealing with a long commute, my limited Japanese ability and coworkers who seemed indifferent at best, I was well and truly done. I had really made an effort; I tried to talk to every teacher at the school, to incorporate music into my lessons, and to be as genki as I could manage, but it seemed like nothing was good enough. I felt like a huge burden to everyone, always coming up short of expectations.

It was a mix of culture shock, battling a new working environment and being truly on my own for the first time, in a completely foreign country no less. It led to a period of depression, when I struggled with knowing who I was and what my purpose was here.



Power Harassment

The biggest problem came in the form of my supervisor. Her expectations were daunting and the precedent set by my predecessor was too much for any sane person to manage. He was basically a superstar ALT—always going above and beyond any reasonable expectation, (and I mean *far* beyond). From attending teachers' meetings to organizing after school lessons, and working every minute of the day from the morning bell through to lunch time “English Announcements,” he was almost godlike to my homeroom teachers.

My supervisor thought I should fill his shoes. I made it clear—politely, sensitively—that although I intended to do my job to the best of my ability, I had limits and I was going to respect them. She took this as a sign that I wasn't serious about the job and I could sense her demeanor turn icy. Little did I know that this was the start of the poor relationship I went on to have with my JTE. From then, it only got worse.

I always asked for feedback from all the teachers I worked with. Most were distant but polite, and offered suggestions on how to improve as a teacher. However, it was three months later, when assessment time rolled around, when I felt a change. The principal had given me a good report, telling the Board of Education official that I was always professional and had a warm smile for everyone and a good effort. But my supervisor threw me under the bus. She said that I was lazy and that I didn't care about my students enough, that I often appeared to be too tired to do my job effectively, and that I was immature and I had a bad attitude.

The BOE decided to listen to my principal and offer me the chance to renew my contract with the school, but there was no chance of that happening. From then on, things were even more frosty between the two of us.





The SDC from Hell

My supervisor was invited to speak at our prefectural SDC. She gave a talk on being a good elementary school ALT. She spoke at length about my predecessor, highlighting the many great things he had done for the school, how lucky they were to have him, how loved he was by the children. She concluded by saying “Now we have Lindsay. We have had to make some changes . . . I hope the children start to enjoy her lessons soon.” That broke me. While having drinks with some other ALTs after the conference, I burst into tears. I was humiliated and felt like coming to Japan had been a big mistake.

That was the moment that I vowed I was going to make something of this experience on my own terms. I started going to Osaka more and more regularly, to check out bars and events. I met more local people at a hip-hop dance class. I bonded with other foreigners at AJET events. I mentally checked out at work but I started to look forward to other things—seasonal events, learning more about the local stories, being invited to parties, and discovering new things all the time. Eventually I started to feel more like myself, and I even found moments of joy and excitement in my job, just before I left.

A New Start with Interac

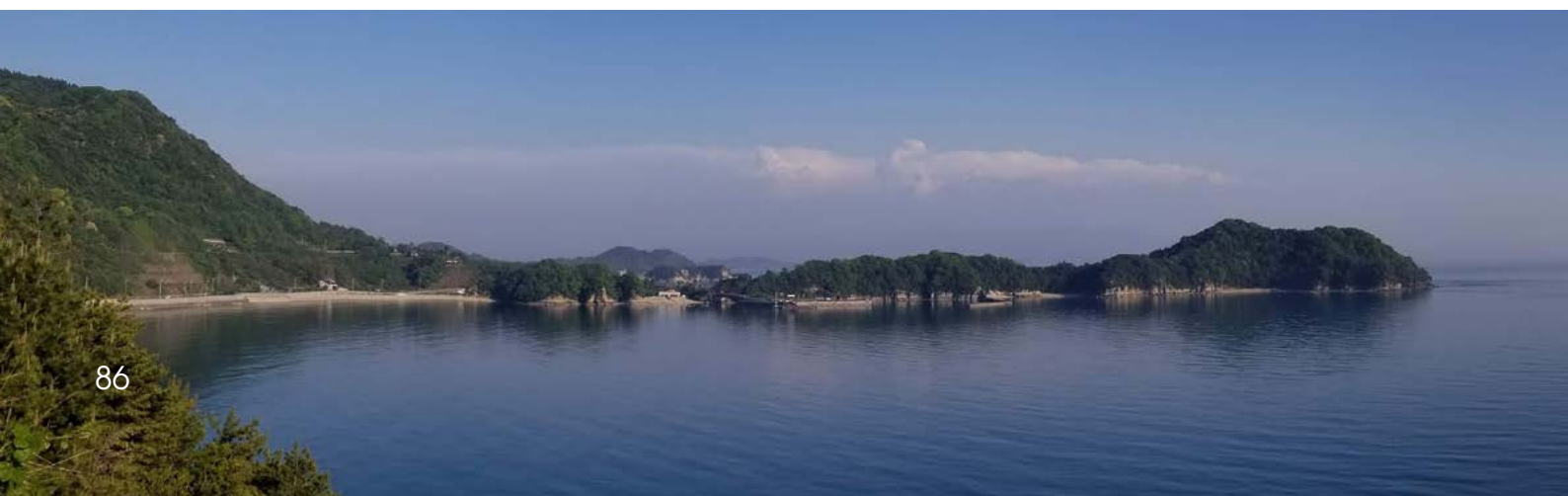
Knowing that I wasn't going to recontract, I started looking at other jobs in Japan. With my limited language skills, I knew I was more than likely to continue English teaching. Within a month, I had heard back from a branch of Interac in Kanagawa prefecture. They offered me an interview and within a couple of weeks, I heard back from them. I was offered the job, and with it, a chance at a new life.

Now I've been here a couple of weeks and I'm still settling in. However, I know that no matter how hard things get, I've been through it all before. I know I've got inner reserves of strength and resilience that I can call on to get me through whatever life throws at me. Here, I can gaze at the city from my window. And I've heard there might be an open mic night this weekend. Here's to a fresh start and a shot at sanity.

*Lindsay Ellis is a Canadian ALT working in Kanagawa prefecture. When she's not posting envy-baiting shots on Instagram, she's perfecting her vocals in a karaoke booth somewhere (strain your ears and you can hear her). She's also a jet setter who loves to explore Asia whenever she can take **nenkyuu**—Taiwan here she comes.*




NARA  TO 
HIROSHIMA
A PEDAL-POWERED ADVENTURE Khanh Nguyen (Gunma)





Learn by doing. This bit of wisdom led to my many, almost impromptu, stupidly dangerous solo adventures—and I don't regret them at all. I've ridden across the United States on a motorcycle, toured the Kanto Region of Japan on a dirt bike, and have now cycled almost half the length of Japan—all solo with barely any serious riding experience. I did my first motorcycle tour with only a month of riding experience and a 24-year-old bike, and my first bicycle tour was done with fewer than 5 hours of serious planning and packing. Now I can call myself an experienced biker with many miles of two-wheeled touring under my belt.

You may be an experienced cyclist looking for some insight into cycle-touring in Japan or a fitness enthusiast curious about how I got my body to crank out 100 kilometers per day on a plush gravel bike. Or you may just be eager to vicariously experience a journey through my pen. Regardless, the best advice I can give you is put down the phone, close your laptop, get on your bike, and learn by doing.

This article is about my first-ever bicycle tour from Nara to Hiroshima. I used this tour as a proof-of-concept for my crazy idea to cycle half the length of Japan in twenty days. Over the course of this journey, I learned a lot about the ins and outs of navigating Japan on two wheels.

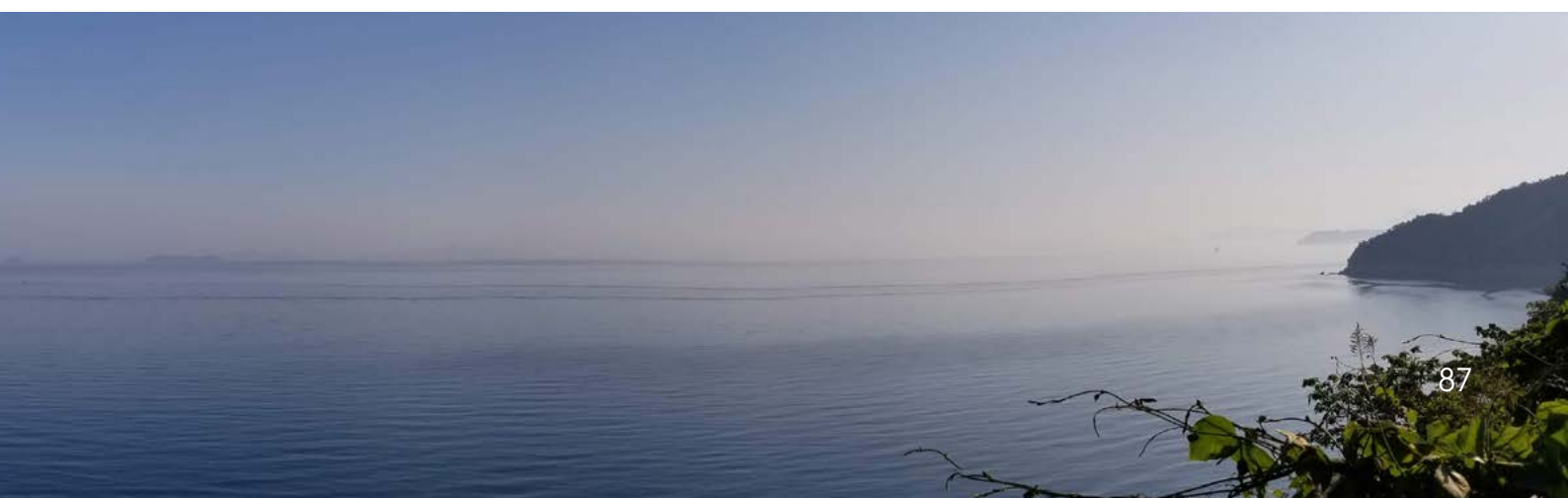
FIRST TOUR • GOLDEN WEEK, NARA TO HIROSHIMA

In April of 2019, I was preparing for another crazy Golden Week adventure. During Golden Week of 2018, I did a motorcycle tour of Gunma, Niigata, Ishikawa, Nagano, Toyama, and Gifu but due to a few complications involving blind intersections, my steed was cruelly ripped from my hands. I was uninjured, but I was left without a motorcycle for Golden Week.

However, I didn't let that, an expired international driver's licence or a lack of funds keep me from my two-wheeled adventures. Two weeks before Golden Week of 2019, with a little help from Craigslist and Paypal, I bought a used Giant Toughroad from an Australian who had left it in Japan after touring Hokkaido. At the time, the thought of bringing it back to

the land of its maiden voyage was still a pipe dream, so I wanted to see if I could survive a week on this bike before I committed to a month.

My first tour on two wheels was a crazy two-month freedom-fueled post-graduation adventure from upstate New York to San Francisco via Charleston, South Carolina and



Big Bend, Texas—but that was on an enormous 1100 cc behemoth that weighed four times more than I did and could reach 0-60 MPH in about three seconds—the antithesis of my new-to-me bicycle which I stuffed in a bag, slung over my shoulder, and brought back to Gunma on the Ryomo Line.

Packing my for my first bicycle tour was also quite different than what I was used to. While I am used to cramming things into saddlebags and backpacks, every extra gram that I packed would be another extra gram I would be lugging up mountain passes, including Japan's steepest national road, Kuragari Pass (Nara to Osaka). I decided to use “bikepacking bags” for this tour: a handlebar bag, top tube bag, frame bag, and saddle/seat bag. While this kept my luggage streamlined and aerodynamic, packing space was an issue—I couldn't bring many extra layers of clothing (fortunately, it was already quite warm) and I had no good way of carrying the bags off of the bike to enter accommodations or ride the train, which I quickly and painfully learned hauling the bike and its bags onto a *shinkansen* from Tokyo Station. After a series of transfers, made even more difficult by a heavy bike bag and luggage, I decided to sleep at a hostel in Nara I found on Google Maps earlier that day and prepare for my first big tour.





NARA TO KOBE

I spent six days riding from Nara to Hiroshima, during which I took five ferries and two trains (not including the shinkansen that got me to and from western Japan). I used a combination of Komoot (a popular route-planning app) and Google Maps to plan my routes but lacking experience in bicycle touring, I didn't know enough to avoid my first obstacle—the Kuragari Pass.

After running into deer in Nara Park and passing by the Heijo Palace remains, I headed west for Osaka and Kobe—but Komoot sent me up this devil of a *touge* (mountain pass) that I had never heard of. It was a gorgeous route—I was surrounded by farms and coffee houses—but even with gears designed for touring and climbing, I wasn't able to pedal a single meter. Of course, now that I'm more in shape and have a larger rear cog, I could probably manage at least half or 3/4 of the pass—but at the time, I had to swallow my pride and walk the whole thing. The descent wasn't enjoyable either; with a 30% grade at the

top, I was dragging my brakes the entire time. The second obstacle came in the form of rain; I realized that I had forgotten my rain pants at home. Not wanting to cycle in wet shorts, I stopped by a Don Quijote in Osaka to grab a pair of cheap rain pants that weren't entirely waterproof or breathable, but did its job. Then, I continued to Kobe.

I didn't want to wait in the ridiculous queues for Kobe beef, but I found some excellent roast beef *donburi* at a small restaurant in downtown Kobe. My favourite part about cycling is definitely how hungry and tired I get afterward—there's nothing like filling your stomach and getting a nice deep sleep after a long day in the saddle. And at the Asahi Sauna and Capsule Hotel I stayed at that night, I experienced the joy of taking a nice long bath after riding through the rain and the soundest sleep I'd gotten in a long time.

SHIMANAMI KAIDO, TOBISHIMA KAIDO, AND HIROSHIMA

The next stop was the Seto Inland Sea, or more specifically, Shodoshima. While seemingly the main attraction at the time was the Art Triennale, I enjoyed cycling the mountains above the coastline, exploring eerily deserted roads, shrines inside caves, and the absence of people. After taking a ferry to Shikoku, I took a train over to Imabari where I started the highlight of my trip—the Shimanami Kaido.

The Shimanami Kaido is a chain of bicycle paths and bridges that connect the six main islands in the Seto Inland Sea. In typical Khanh fashion, I only researched the route on my phone hours before deciding to ride it, having forgone proper planning at the beginning of my trip.

But despite the rather spontaneous nature of this jaunt (or maybe because of it), I still had some of the best fun I've ever had on two wheels. The Shimanami Kaido's tall bridges naturally present steep climbs, but the entire island chain has special cycling infrastructure which make riding this route a breeze. There are painted paths around the islands which lead riders around two routes: a shorter, more direct route and a meandering beachside route around the archipelago. Leading to the bridges, there are bike-only slopes that carve curves into the bridgeside mountains that

make for easy climbs and twisty, exhilarating descents.

However, while the sweeping ocean views from these bridges and cliffs were unforgettable, it was not a sight but rather a person that left the greatest impression on me during this seaside adventure.

I had met a foreign exchange student from Italy studying at a university in Kyoto the night before I partook on my two-day Shimanami Kaido adventure, and we decided to ride together for a day. Both of us were touring, and had all of our sleeping gear and luggage on our bikes. However, while I was riding a well-maintained sports bicycle with clipless pedals and all the bells and whistles for comfortable touring, this young man was riding a single-speed *mamachari*. He had bought his bicycle for his Kyoto to Hiroshima journey, self-supported by cheap camping gear from Amazon and food from grocery stores. His equipment did not hold him back at all, as he was keeping up with me on both ascents and traverses. His resolve and personal energy inspired my future tours as it reminded me that the equipment does not make the rider.

Parting ways with my Italian friend, I swung by Okunoshima to pet some adorable rabbits and then took a ferry to Okamurajima, where I began my tour of Shimanami Kaido's quieter, shorter cousin—

Tobishima Kaido. The bridge paths were steeper and not a single convenience store was to be found for the roughly 50 kilometers I rode.

But that added to its charm and beauty. Quiet oceanside fishing villages melted into mountainside *mikan* farms as I pedaled along the coastline (I bought a kilogram of mikan from an unmanned roadside stand for 200 yen—an amazing deal for some of the freshest clementines I've ever tasted). Fewer than a dozen cars passed me during the half-day I cycled this road while a small art festival run by students from Hiroshima University filled the streets in one of the towns.

The remainder of my trip was spent doing touristy things around Hiroshima, including visiting Miyajima and the Atomic Bomb Dome. While in Hiroshima's Peace Park, I happened to stumble across Hiroshima's Flower Festival, a *gyoza* festival, and another cyclist that was going on an even more epic adventure than me: a Kyushu-to-Hokkaido tour. Seeing another foreign face next to a fully-packed bike roused my curiosity, and we quickly became friends. I would later offer him a place to stay at my apartment in Gunma, and tales of his adventures would further inspire my next great journey—more on that in another article!



LEARN BY DOING

I will end this article by restating my philosophy: learn by doing. So many of us are paralyzed by fear of the unknown. It's not due to a lack of travel information—nowadays, anyone can learn so much about a place through a quick Google search. I think we're afraid of not knowing our physical limits: "Can I really cycle this far?" "Gee, that's a really big mountain . . ." "I don't know if I can sleep outside . . ."

Thoughts like these are common among inexperienced travelers, and often limits us to the well-beaten path. The best part about adventure is there's no definite failure. There are no "winners" or "losers." We as travelers often set goals for ourselves: to bring more meaning to our accomplishments, to push ourselves, and also to learn more about ourselves. Not meeting my targeted daily mileage or summit is always a disappointment, but it also gives me an update on my abilities to better plan my next adventure.

My struggles with equipment and route planning brought less disappointment than it did confidence in my preparation for my next even bigger tour: Gunma to Hokkaido.

Khanh Nguyen is a music teacher at the Gunma Kokusai Academy. When he's not dancing around a classroom or tooting his saxophone, he enjoys riding two-wheeled vehicles, skiing, and exploring mountains.



Niall Devine (Tokyo)

iVAM TOKYO CARA

A year of hope
and heartbreak
following F.C Tokyo,
the J-League and
Leeds United

LOS YO AJO!

I get very romantic when I talk about football. It's pretty much been all I've talked or cared about since I was four years old. Nothing makes you more ecstatic, but nothing quite breaks your heart like it. I come from a family where following Leeds United could be described as cult-like, even through almost two decades of watching batshit insane owners run wild, driving an infamous club into obscurity. Every even-numbered year was spent soundtracked by Los Campesinos!, Three Lions, and World In Motion on repeat with the foolish optimism that this is the summer England finally does it . . . before seeing them lose to Iceland or go out in the group stages. Football often hurts a lot, but I'm forever a pig chasing a carrot on a stick.

When I found out that I got on the JET Programme and I was moving to Tokyo, the first thing I did was to look for somewhere to watch football. I booted up FIFA on the Xbox and chose F.C Tokyo, and that's where it all started. When I finally got to Japan, I started going to games at

Ajinomoto Stadium in September, and fuuuuuck—it was dreadful: 4 games played, 4 games lost, 0 goals scored.

Fantastic. Great. Nice one.

The Japanese season finished in December. Then came a winter of staying up way past midnight to watch a magical Argentine transform the disappointing club I grew up watching into world-beaters overnight, making me giddy like a 4-year-old over football again. All the while, I waited for the J-League to start again the following spring.

March came around and I started going to the football again. F.C Tokyo were suddenly . . . good. Really good. Top-of-the-table good. An 18-year-old named Kubo was playing out of his skin, tearing apart defences like an overly excited labrador on a new couch. The opening home game of the season was

against Sagan Tosu, which we won 2-0. Granted, we were fortunate that Tosu had a man sent off, but they still had Fernando Torres (although he actually played like shite).

My dad and our friend visited from Leeds in April and I took them to a game. One of the Tokyo fans clocked that we were a group of *gaikokujin*, and gave us each a sheet of paper that told us about the club, who the players were, what the songs were, and even how to ask for a pint from one of the beer ladies roaming the stands. I think I actually saw my dad's heart swell when he was given the sheet. Kubo was on fire, the Tokyo ultras were screaming for the whole game and F.C. Tokyo put away a poor Matsumoto Yamaga side easily. We stood up and clapped the players as they made a lap around the pitch after the game had finished. For the first time, I got it—F.C Tokyo had me hooked. I wanted in properly.

Some fans launched an English Twitter account for the club, and I asked for some advice about watching the game in the stand with the ultras for first time. In a top-of-the-table clash, F.C. Tokyo came from behind to smash Yokohama F. Marinos 4-2, but the result was secondary. I bounced, got drenched in rain and sang about Diego Oliveira for all 90 minutes. And after the final whistle, I got to see the club send off Kubo as he moved away to Spain to become the Japanese Messi (if he's not great in 10 years, this is probably gonna come back to bite me on the arse).

Tobitakyu Station always gets stupidly congested after a game but it does also have a 7-Eleven outside it, so I did the sensible thing and hung outside with a Premium Malts whilst waiting for the crowds to die down. As luck would have it, I bumped into the crew behind the [F.C Tokyo Twitter](#) account—who come from England, Canada and the USA. We talked exclusively about football—about F.C Tokyo and clubs from our home countries. After swapping LINE details, I finally got on the train home.

The following week was the Tamagawa Classico: F.C. Tokyo vs Kawasaki Frontale. Kawasaki are F.C. Tokyo's bogey team and a tough team to beat—defensively strong and decent on the counterattack. I asked the folks I met the week previously if they wanted to go for a beer beforehand (Ajinomoto Stadium has a fan park that is open for a few hours before each game which serves decent beer and food). They introduced me to the people they stand with each game, and I tried (and failed badly) to converse with them in Japanese. They're honest-to-God the sweetest, nicest people though. And decent drinkers, too.

シャイトハウス[shitehouse]
ダーティープレイヤーを指す言葉

After drinking for what seemed to be ages, my bladder gave in and I needed to use the gents' room. On the way there, we were stopped by a Kawasaki fan and he interviewed us for his [YouTube channel](#). I was very drunk, talked about my love of Leeds United and Diego Olivera and taught the very kind gentleman a new swear word.

This is the best thing about the J-League: there is no aggression between opposing fans. You can waltz between stands and fan groups easily, have a chat, and nothing will happen. Do it in England and you'd probably be glassed or at least punched.

I met back up with my new group of friends, and we went into the stadium. They snuck me in to the area where they were standing, and we got even more drunk and even rowdier. Kawasaki beat us 3-0. I didn't care though as I still bounced and sung for the best part of two hours. I almost spewed on the train too, but I didn't.

If choosing F.C. Tokyo on FIFA was akin to swiping right on Tinder and the first four losses were like stumbling through awkward dates at cheap cocktail bars, then the games against Matsumoto and Yokohama were accepting that you actually loved them. And the game against Kawasaki was knowing that they're the one.

Because of the Rugby World Cup, F.C Tokyo's scheduled was heavily adjusted as their home stadium was going to be occupied for the better part of three months, which meant that Tokyo had to play eight straight away games. I was distraught as that meant three months without a home game. It didn't mean I had to go without football, though.

The club arranged for a public screening of their game at Kashima Antlers, which was the biggest of the season as it pitted the top two teams in the league. If Tokyo won, they would have a 7-point lead ahead of second place Kashima. But if Kashima won, that lead would shrink to 1 point. I met the people I had gone drinking with before the Kawasaki game at Sunshine City in Ikebukuro, and they suggested we run away at half-time to somewhere we could get beer and food. F.C Tokyo should have come away with at least a point for all the attacking they did, but a goal conceded from a corner two minutes into the game and a sucker punch towards the end of the game meant that Kashima took all three points.

I had watched Leeds bottle promotion to the Premier League four months prior, England get knocked out in the semis of the last World Cup, and now it felt as if the season was about to run away from us. Never have I seen my team win a trophy, and now it feels as if that carrot is being pulled away ever so slightly.

My parents had me christened when I was a baby but in hindsight, there's a possibility that it may have been Bela Guttmann cursing me to a life of trophyless football.

I slumped back into my chair of the *izakaya* we were in, fearful of watching another team slip towards the business end of the season. But the people I was with plied me with more food and beer and (slowly) cheered me up. It was probably the beer, mind you.

A couple of weeks later, I was on a *shinkansen* to Matsumoto for my first away game with Tokyo. Matsumoto's stadium is in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by mountains and an endless sea of greenery. It abuts the airport, so you have planes passing over the stadium quite loudly every hour or so. The club is also famous for its green beer, which went down like water on a very humid September afternoon.

Tokyo's fans travelled down in significant numbers, taking up almost a quarter of the ground. The club placed flags in every seat of our section, turning a corner of the Sunpro Alwin into a sea of red and blue. The game was nothing special—a toothless nil-nil draw between the two sides with the referee making some absolute howlers, but Kashima also drew which meant Tokyo still ended the weekend at the top of the table.

I've had a few people ask me why I decided to start following F.C. Tokyo in particular, and thinking back on the reason becomes messier than a Jackson Pollock painting. It's some parts "they're my local club," a little bit of "I can get a ticket from Stubhub which is easier than other clubs," other parts "because Urawa play in the exact same colours of Manchester United, so fuck that," and a tiny bit of "they're on FIFA." But honestly, I didn't expect to care as much about or be as enamoured by F.C. Tokyo and the J-League as I have been.

I think about the 2018 World Cup and Marcelo Bielsa's first season at Leeds United as the strongest my love for football has ever been, and compared to that, this F.C. Tokyo season is up there with it. For all the heartbreak, bottlejobs, and sadness, football is fucking great.

If there's one thing you should add to your bucket list before leaving Japan, it's to go to a J-League game.

Niall is a second-year ALT in Tokyo from Leeds, UK. He's into sports (not rugby), weird music, vegetarian food and making niche Simpsons references. Follow him on Twitter @NiallDevine #screwflanders





My Epic 208-Kilometer Adventure 'Round Sado Island

Sheila Mulherin (Hokkaido)

For the past year or two, I've been looking for the perfect 100 mile ultramarathon race to run. So I settled on Sado Island's 208 km race, mostly because of the incredibly generous time limit: 48 hours! It was 48 km more than I had hoped for, but I realized 48 more kilometers wouldn't be so difficult. After all, I could get a full night's sleep at an *onsen* midway through the race.

Also, it was low-cost, without any bells and whistles like T-shirts, finisher medals, or timing chips. The scenery is also breathtaking, as the course runs along the perimeter of the whole island before cutting inland a bit to farms and cute little villages. Sado is also famous for many temples, shrines, and old, untouched architecture.

My heart raced after registering for the 208 km race. I had never run a race longer than 100 km. What if I permanently injured myself during the race? That was something I'd pondered during my previous 100 km races. Usually at about the 70-80 km point, both my knees and ankles radiate intense pain. If grandpas were out there doing this, then maybe I had a shot at completing this relatively unscathed as well. Besides, I always turned out to be totally fine in the past. I needed to stop catastrophizing. I did consider that if I developed

a sharp, continuous localized pain and I started limping, it would probably be an injury and I should pull out of the race to mitigate any further damage and give myself the chance to toe the starting line in future races.

Despite my worries, I decided to take the scary leap into training. I printed out a 100-miler training schedule from the internet, similar to the 50-miler training schedule I'd been using for my 100 km races, except for it being 11 weeks longer. I altered the plan to include more speed work, as well as shorter ultramarathons and trail races into my training.

As for fueling myself, it took some trial and error to find proper food and drinks I can stomach during an ultra. For instance, I vomited after the 43 km trail run in Asahikawa, due to the heat and/or my choice of fuel (Maybe V8 during a race wasn't the best option). And since I'm vegan, finding granola bars, energy gels and protein bars in Japan can be difficult.

But as race weekend came closer, I grew optimistic as I had done everything possible to prepare. I flew to Niigata on the Thursday before the race, and I took a ferry the next morning to Sado. That evening, all 188 runners attended a meeting to discuss the

race course. A nice man who was both staff and race participant himself translated for me. Then for dinner, the omnivores had crab while a vegan-friendly meal had been prepared for me.

The general demographic of the runners was typical of ultramarathons in Japan: mostly men old enough to be grandfathers. The youngest runner was a 27-year-old woman while the oldest was in his 80s. I shared a tatami room with three sweet older women (one of whom spoke English very well).

The race started at 6 a.m. the next morning. We waited excitedly with our backpacks, each one filled with water bottles, snacks, a first-aid kit, a map, a change of clothes for the onsen, a raincoat, long sleeve shirts, and our phones for emergencies and photos. As for attacking the course, my strategy for ultramarathons—including this one—consists of intervals of running 20 minutes and walking 5 minutes, and walking up any hills. This would be my first time running again the day after doing 100 kilometers. I had no idea how my body would respond so I had no expectations.

Many runners stopped at vending machines and little shops along the way to refuel. I stopped at bathrooms to refill my Camelbak and Nalgene. Along the way, some cute little grandmothers sat on their doorsteps and cheered me on. Whenever I appeared at the aid stations, the staff started talking about preparing the vegetarian option for me. At this, runners stared at me with huge eyes and gaping mouths, saying “Vegetarian? *Sugoi!*” I’m sure they expected a malnourished weak being. Lo and behold, I was full of life, smiling and had enough meat on my bones. My mere existence blew their minds.

The course took runners to a stony path alongside the beach which was beautiful and a refreshing break from the pavement. The new scenery also introduced me to a cave with many Buddhist statues. Better yet, a very kind woman followed us in her van along the course, with a cooler full of cold drinks, fruit, tomatoes and snacks such as coffee jello and Pringles. She actually appeared twice on Saturday evening and once the following morning—I appreciated her offering me refreshing green grapes and cherry tomatoes.

On Saturday evening, I ran 93 kilometers to the onsen where the runners can eat, wash up and sleep. I arrived at 8:15 p.m. after doing the first 93 km in about 14 hours and 15 minutes, but I was hobbling around in pain. The resting room resembled a scene of carnage, as if the runners were wounded soldiers lying in battle. People put medicine on their feet and legs, stretched, ate ramen, or sat staring off into space. Some noticed me and said, “You’ve survived!” I sang a bit from the Bon Jovi song “Living on a Prayer” and some people smiled. Some runners spoke English well and we chatted a bit. I unpacked my own can of lentil soup, and ate the *wakame ramen* and snacks the race director had kindly given me. There was plenty of *kombu* and *ume onigiri* as well.

I took a bath at the onsen, where one woman noticed my broken state. “You know we’re running another 100 kilometers tomorrow,” she said. “I’d rather not think about it,” was my reply. I was only focused on accomplishing the immediate tasks: getting lots of calories down, taking a bath, brushing my teeth, and getting to bed. I saw many runners drop out of the race there. That wasn’t surprising—at the race meeting Friday evening, the race director had said about 51% of runners will finish the event. But dropping out of the race didn’t cross my mind at all as I had faith my condition would improve after some sleep.

Upon entering the women’s napping room, one woman was already snoring. Then she abruptly woke right up, efficiently packed her backpack and dashed out the door. Some women said to her, “*Hayaku. Gambare!*” I fruitlessly tried to sleep, but my legs were restless. Around midnight, I’d woken up to hobble to the bathroom, and a race staff member gave me an enthusiastic affirmative nod and a thumbs up as if to say, “You’ve got this!” He lifted my spirits.

I shuffled back to bed but when I woke up at 3 a.m., I felt noticeably less pain. I walked more easily after my blood started flowing, so I prepared to get back out on the road. I used roll on liquid pain reliever on my knees and ankles, and put medicated pain patches on my knees. At 4:30 a.m. Sunday morning, I set off again in the dark. My legs moved with ease for a couple hours. Although a wave of fatigue hit me hard, I kept mechanically moving forward. A dose of



caffeine helped. Still early in the morning, one man walking his dogs enthusiastically shouted to me “Hey! *Sugoi! Gambare! Fighto!*” He shouted “Fighto!” again as I ran further down the road. The inside of my legs had started chafing severely, so I stopped at many bathrooms to tend to it throughout the morning.

I saw the friendliest cat around the 130 km mark and I had to stop and cuddle it. It was sad to see me go but I figured it might not want to follow me for 70 more kilometers. After a short time, I arrived at an aid station and two men there said “Hayaku!” They boosted my confidence—I wasn’t doing so bad after all. The staff encouraged me to sit down, but sitting is the devil during an ultramarathon (unless you’re using the toilet of course). I ate some *onigiri*, *daifuku* and bananas, and downed some Aquarius. I was tired, but I carried on in high spirits.

The course passed through little port towns. The race director had recommended a ship museum and onsen to stop by and enjoy along the way. I declined the recommendations as I was on a mission to finish.

The last aid station sat at the 160 km mark. I loaded up on onigiri, Pringles, sweets, green grapes and cherry tomatoes, which rejuvenated me. As I left the aid station, my legs felt light and I was ready to finish this race, so I picked up the pace. The sun set so I put on my headlamp.

Then with about 30 km to go, a rainstorm hit and it rained hard for the next 15-20 km. Sleepiness also hit me as the night wore on, and I passed some enclosed bus stops with empty benches that looked enticing for a nap. I didn’t want to be in the race through the night and not get any sleep at the hotel, so I pushed on. I passed a few groups of runners, then I ran completely alone for the rest of the race. The wind blew powerfully through the woods and the trees banged loudly against each other. I worried a branch would come crashing down on me. Some trees had fallen on the course, but no runners were injured thankfully.

My knees, ankles, and heels hurt, and my toes felt swollen but the finish was nearing so I attempted

a sprint. It was 1:20 a.m., and the finish proved surprisingly anticlimactic—absolutely no one stood outside, and there was no finish line to cross. I stopped, looked around outside the hotel, and climbed the stairs inside where two sleepy people looked at me. I said “Where’s the finish line?” in Japanese, then one man hesitantly gestured towards the entrance I’d just came in, saying “Well, this doorway is the finish line.” Then I heard a woman say, “Amazing! She did it.” A man took a picture of me with a disposable camera, which he said he would send in the mail (along with a finisher’s certificate) in a month.

My finish time was 43 hours, 20 minutes. Minus the time I rested at the onsen, I had been on the road for 35 hours and 5 minutes. I had trouble walking, which is a natural response to running 208 km. Because of my struggles walking, some people expressed concern for my knees. One woman questioned my choice of footwear: Vibram FiveFingers shoes. (“It’s her shoes,” said within earshot in Japanese). I hobbled to the onsen, came back and slowly ate some curry. A man gave me bags of ice to put on my legs and I shuffled gingerly back to my room (where there were three other women fast asleep on their futons who had already finished) and I eventually slept nicely for a few hours.

Next year, I want to do another race of this caliber. Ultramarathons always push my mental and physical limits and make such amazing experiences.

There are some valuable lessons to be learned from ultramarathon running, which can also be applied to other activities that require short-term and long-term goals, whether that be travel, learning a new skill, or even higher education. Faith in yourself and faith in the process is so vital. Do your research, set a goal, and take that big scary leap into the unknown. Go through the motions, stick to the plan (with a little flexibility, because there will surely be little setbacks along the way), and you’ll start to see results. We’re all capable of accomplishing more than we imagine. When we throw ourselves into the thick of it, it’s either sink or swim. I hope you’ll dig deep and find the willpower to swim in whatever venture you set out on.

Sheila is an English teacher in Hokkaido. Originally from Boston, USA, she can be seen hiking, reading, trying out new vegan recipes, playing with her adorable cats Bailey and Maisy, or running obscenely long distances on the roads and trails. She also looks forward to the Hokkaido winters when she can cross country ski.

COMMUNITY



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"Mist is when the sky is tired of flight and rests its soft machine on ground" — Craig Raine, A Martian Sends a Postcard Home

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Hoong Shao Ting

"There must be quite a few things a hot bath won't cure, but I don't know many of them."
— Sylvia Plath

Photo: Ashley Hirasuna







Flower Power

Breaking Records in Hita

Charky Watts (Oita)

Many of us have a home away from home in Japan, somewhere that will always hold a special place in our hearts. Mine is Hita—a beautiful region with a rich history set amongst flowing rivers and green mountains in the west of Oita Prefecture. The people there are amazing too! I lived there for three years and fell absolutely in love with the local community. I was also in love with a certain someone named Leon. We had been together for seven years before he proposed in the rainforests of Yakushima Island.

After the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes, our existing wedding plans turned in a new direction and became part of a community project to lift spirits, spread joy, and shine a light on the region. We joined forces with some friends, and after consulting community members and officials, we agreed on a goal: to attempt a Guinness World Record title for “Most flower girls in a wedding.” It was planned to take place in Hita approximately a year after the earthquakes, with the girls marching down the aisle and into spring—a time for reflections and new beginnings.

Word spread around town and we soon had plenty of girls joining the bridal party. I was teaching at nine schools, so I knew a lot of kids! An enthusiastic team of friends, neighbours, students,

and parents worked together to plan out the big day and take on the challenge. We were dubbed “Team Flower Girls in Hita” and worked on everything from the logistics of breaking records to hand-making dresses. Everyone had an amazingly positive attitude and worked well together, bonded by our experiences and a spirit of togetherness.

We were finally married in a riverside park on Apr. 2, 2017. We celebrated alongside 253 flower girls, one ring bearer, and two pageboys! Team Flower Girls in Hita had achieved a Guinness World Record and we were married in a place we love surrounded by people we love. We broke open a barrel of sake and enjoyed a hanami-style picnic, making memories to last a lifetime.

Charlene Pearson and Leon Watts' record for most flower girls in a wedding is featured in select editions of Guinness World Records 2019, out now. For more information visit www.guinnessworldrecords.com

Charky Watts lives in Australia with her husband Leon and their dog Murphy. She stays connected to her friends in Hita with regular video calls and visits. She enjoys festivals, road trips, potato chips, and magic shows.

Finding Commu Against the

Rhema Baquero (Hyogo)

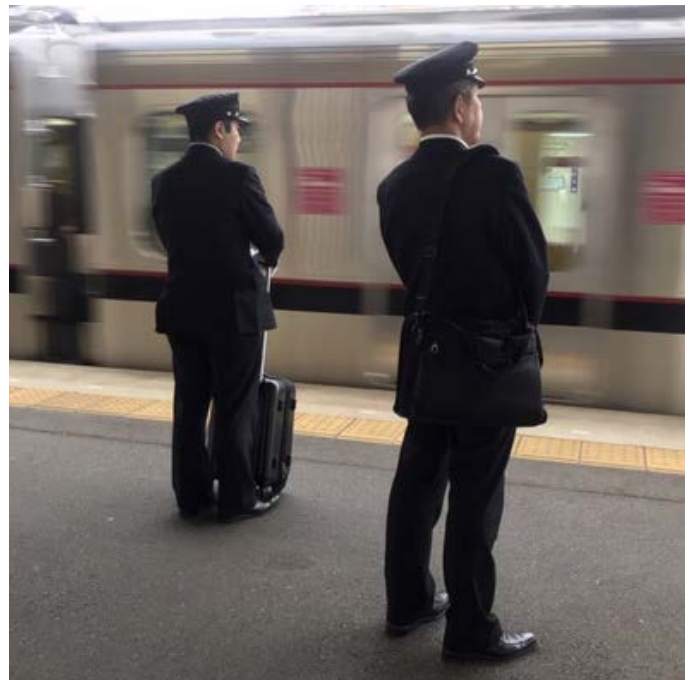
The train slows to a stop and fresh passengers step through the opening doors. The car is crowded during rush hour and across from me the bench packed full of commuters. The new passengers look to the empty spaces on either side of me, wide enough to fit two people each. They look at each other and choose to stand for the next eight stops.

I rise from my seat at the coffee shop and meander to the women's restrooms. A woman steps out and sharply gasps at the sight of me. Throwing her gaze to the ground, she skitters past me to safety.

A child of three or four walks down the hill of my neighborhood with his hand in his mom's. He looks up from his teetering steps and freezes. "黒外人! 黒外人! こわい!" *Black foreigner! Black foreigner! SCARY!* He screams and points directly at me. I can still hear him over the music in my headphones as I pick up my pace.

On the train home from my birthday dinner, a Japanese man approaches my husband and I as we quietly chat by the door. He shouts at us in Japanese. Then he slurs in English, "Japanese only! Train for Japanese!" The doors open to the station before ours and he pushes my husband off the train. He tries to touch me as well, but my husband is back and in between me and the man. I look to the car for help, but everyone keeps their heads down.

A year into living in Japan, I should be used to these common occurrences, but it is not always easy to be reminded that you are and always will be an outsider. I expected this before making the decision to move here. I read accounts, spoke with current POC residents and watched YouTubers tell their stories. I constantly face racism and microaggressions in America, so I hoped that I would be prepared for what I would face in Japan.



nity Odds



Finding Communities

In order to not feel isolated here, I knew I had to find people who have similar experiences to mine. In my foreigner community, I found other melanated people who go through the same reproaches that I do. When a group of us with sepia shades of skin ride the train or walk together, we definitely get looks. But it is much easier to ignore when you are not alone. We talk about our lives here and back home over dinner, drinks and desserts. Even if our experiences may vary, sometimes it is rejuvenating to be around people who get it and don't dismiss our unique experiences as just something that happens to all 外人 *foreigners*.

For a further reach, I joined Facebook groups for people of color who live in Japan. I purchased my tickets for the annual [Black Women In Japan](#) conference, and I am more than excited to make more connections with the women+ who live across the country. At Tokyo orientation, I went to the [JETs of African Decent](#) dinner, where I spoke with senpai JETs about their lives, got advice, and made new friends in and around my city. It is important to know that you are not alone in what you are living day to day. There are many groups online for marginalized people, including but not limited to [JET PH](#), [Asian Pacific Islander JETs](#), [Indians in Japan](#), [Black in Japan](#), [Jamaicans in Japan](#), and the new [Viva JETS+!](#). Anytime someone posts in one of my groups that they will be visiting my city, I reach out and try to connect with them.

I also enjoy time with friends from other countries who are not black or brown. It's interesting to talk about culture acceptance (or lack thereof) in their countries and to share experiences from my own. It's wonderful that they are willing to listen instead of discounting what my life is like here. I also like to listen to their experiences as a foreigner in Japan, because sometimes it is just cathartic to talk and release.

And of course, it is important to make connections with Japanese people here. Whenever my husband and I go out with friends to *izakaya*, he is great at initiating conversations with the local patrons. When I hear “それは僕の奥さんです” *that's my wife!* I join in with my fledgling Japanese skills and have a good time making new single serving friends. We also have Japanese friends with whom we love to go to karaoke and battle between a medley of Japanese and English songs.

“It's in between the *Country Roads* and *A Cruel Angel's Thesis* that we all feel the cultural exchange.”

Teachable Moments

Being a foreigner in Japan is one thing in a land of willful homogeneity, but to be a foreigner with black or brown skin brings another set of challenges. Children and adults unabashedly touch our hair, make comments or mock our skin tone. Darker skin is not a standard of beauty here. Skin whitening products are marketed as beautiful. We have to stand against stereotypes put out by Western media and perpetuated in the Asian media. And there is still the sanctioned Black face you can see on the NHK. I came to Japan knowing what I could face. But it's one thing to know and another to experience it.

“My job in Japan is to literally serve as cultural exposure in the classroom and daily life.”

I use pictures of people of color with ethnic names in my activities. I talk about what it is like to be a minority in America. When I understand that a student is making a rude comment about a person in the textbook, I alert the Japanese teacher in the room. When a coworker asks a question that is not acceptable, I let them know why. When someone reaches to touch my hair, I remind them that I am human and it is not ok to touch someone without their permission. I try hard to see someone's negative reaction as based on lack of exposure and curiosity. However, this is a battle minorities cannot do on their own. Ultimately, it will have to come down to Japan's

willingness to make a change. But for the time being, *all foreigners* can plant the seeds for each other while we are here.

But despite the negatives, I really do love my life here and experiencing all that Japan and its people have to offer. For every unfortunate interaction, I have had many, many positive ones. When senior citizens stop me to talk and practice their English; when people go out of their way to help me find a location; when someone doesn't just ask where I am from for the sake of knowing, but seems genuinely interested in learning about my background, I feel like Japan could be home. Even when a friend and I were stopped in the bank lobby for legitimately thirty minutes by a Japanese man who gave us an entire half English speech (with iPad pictures!) about his life in America back in the 80s. It is wonderful to have these moments of engagement and inclusion. And what helps the most is the readily available love and acceptance I receive from the students that I teach.

This past summer, as I sat in the ward office helping new ALTs register with the city, an older woman approached me and asked about my black and blue braids. She told me she found my hair beautiful and asked if she could touch it. Ninety-nine percent of the time I reject this request, but she had no ill intention behind her smile. She touched the ends of my hair so gently, and told me she had only seen hair like mine on TV. She seemed genuinely excited to see something different in real life. Her friend walked up and respectfully admired me, but did not reach up to touch me as well. As the general reaction is to grab at me, I appreciated it. I was happy to give these two women a small personal experience with my culture. It was one that I will certainly remember.



Rhema Baquero is a second-year ALT from America in the great port city of Kobe. She can often be found in a coffee shop either reading, writing, drawing, or studying Japanese. After playing rugby at university and graduate school, she was excited to finally attend the Rugby World Cup.



BRIDGING THE GAP: MAKING FRIENDS ABROAD

Şenol Hasan (Fukushima)

The prospect of moving to a new country and making new friends can be a daunting task—especially when moving to a country as culturally different as Japan. Ultimately, new friendships will largely define our experience living away from our home countries, which is why it is important that we start our new lives with an open mind and an open heart. This is what I set out to do.

The friends that we make can be grouped into two main categories: international residents such as ourselves, and those who are native to your new country. For better or for worse when I came to Japan last year as part of the JET Programme, I consciously decided not to restrict myself to the expat community. I wanted to immerse myself in Japanese culture as much as possible and felt that this

would be hindered if I only mixed with other English speakers.

I decided to focus on integrating with my Japanese work colleagues and other Japanese friends that I made along the way. Ultimately, I achieved this by making a conscious effort to speak to my colleagues and perhaps even more importantly, ask them for advice. Whether it would be a question about how to say something in Japanese or where to find something in the supermarket, I would ask them. I believe this played a big role in building relationships with them.

In hindsight, choosing to focus on only making Japanese friends was a choice that I didn't need to make. I could have just as easily made friends with other English-speakers too and balanced both groups of friends together. Throughout my first six months in Japan, I made wonderful friendships with Japanese friends, many of whom I now consider to be friends for life. At the time, however, I felt like something was missing.

In the following six months, I decided to mix more with the expat community and I found and made connections that I didn't even realise I was looking for. As obvious as it may seem, I found that they were going through essentially the same experiences and emotions that I was going through. Everything from missing friends and family back home to wondering what career to pursue after teaching in Japan—these were all things that only they could relate to.



The only people who can truly understand the difficulties of being away from home are the ones that are away from home themselves. That being said, these difficulties are not always on the surface from the start.

Like many who move to Japan, I hit the ground running with a very busy schedule. On the first day after landing, I attended a two-day orientation before I was whisked away to my new home in Fukushima Prefecture. When I arrived there, a few days were allocated for sorting out my new bank account, mobile phone and gas and electric suppliers. Then in between all of the different welcome parties and other gatherings, I started my new job—all before I ever had a moment to process that I had left my home to start a new life on the other side of the world.

It wasn't until I took annual leave around Christmas time that I actually processed everything for the first time—it was also the moment when the excitement of living somewhere new started to wear off.

■ ■ THIS IS A
MOMENT THAT
ALL EXPATS GO
THROUGH AND IT
IS ONLY THEM
WHO TRULY
UNDERSTAND AND
CAN HELP YOU
THROUGH IT. ■ ■

After one year living in Japan, I am happy to say that I have made strong connections with other foreigners, as well as Japanese friends, and I am now doing a better job of balancing and even mixing both groups of friends together. Several months ago, I invited some English teachers along to a dinner with some Japanese friends and we had a wonderful evening as we laughed and joked about cultural differences over a traditional Japanese BBQ. My only thought after dinner was that I should have mixed these groups of friends sooner.



Throughout this past year in Japan, I have made friends from other English-speaking countries such as America and Canada and it has been an absolute joy discussing the different words that we use to describe the same thing, despite speaking the same language. I have also made Turkish friends in Japan, which has been a blessing as this is a side of my culture that I haven't been able to share as much as I would have liked to in my life so far. To be able to talk to them in English, Turkish and Japanese (and sometimes a combination of all three) has led to some of my most precious memories here in Japan.

DON'T LET LANGUAGE BE A BARRIER

On the surface, you may think that not being fluent in Japanese puts you at a disadvantage with making new friends in Japan. In fact, in many instances, the opposite is actually true as many Japanese people would love the opportunity to connect with someone from abroad.

Generally speaking, Japanese people are a bit more reserved than people from Western countries, but this is by no means a roadblock to making new friendships. It just means that you may need to be the one to make the first move to initiate the relationship. When you start working in Japan, you will be shown a very warm welcome at the start and perhaps will even have a welcome party.

■ ■ **HOWEVER AS YOU WOULD EXPECT, THE ROCKSTAR TREATMENT WILL START TO FADE AWAY AND IT WILL BE DOWN TO YOU TO MAKE MORE EFFORT WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES, NOT THE OTHER WAY ROUND. ■ ■**

You may also find departmental barriers at your workplace too but these may not necessarily be unique to Japan. At a work *enkai* in my first year, I started speaking with one of the teachers and over time we went on to become good friends. Out of curiosity, I asked him if he had spoken to other English teachers from abroad in the other schools that he worked at and his answer was quite interesting. He said he hadn't spoken to the English teachers before because they were not part of his department.

In all honesty, the same scenario could play out in any line of work anywhere else in the world. I took this example as another healthy reminder that it should not always be left down to the other person to start a conversation. A little effort on your part can go a long way, don't miss out on making friends through fear of standing out.

It's also important to recognise that communication goes beyond language alone. Some Japanese people can be excellent communicators and get their point across using keywords and gestures. Others, however, may know a bit more English than they initially let on, but may not have the confidence to speak with you at first.

In both cases, striking up a conversation with someone about your own study of Japanese is an effective way to start talking to someone new in Japan. In fact, everyone in Japan can remember how hard it was to learn kanji, so when I meet new people I often bring it up in conversation and it helps us form a mutual respect for each other. Asking for recommendations is also a great way to start a conversation. For example, asking where the best ramen restaurant is or where the best place to view the cherry blossoms is, are two questions that anybody would be more than happy to help you with.

Making friends with other international residents, however, is a process that can be almost instantaneous, as you are already connected by the fact that you both took a leap of faith and moved to Japan. Meeting one another couldn't be easier in the modern-day, especially with social media groups in place to connect people and arrange meetups.

For example, here in Fukushima we have *FuJET*, an organisation run by Fukushima residents on the JET Programme, however, it is

open to all international residents. *FuJET* have a Facebook group which they use to arrange trips and events both inside and outside Fukushima and I have found it to be a great way to meet other international residents here who work in different types of jobs outside of teaching.

Each region of Japan will also have various international associations, language exchange meetups or even tours arranged by the members of the community. In Koriyama City in Fukushima for example there is the Clover Ladies tour, which is a fine example of locals getting together to help teach expats about the local area and its history. Any one of these paths provides a chance to meet so many different types of people from all walks of life that you would otherwise not have the opportunity to engage with.



A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

One of the most important things that I will remember about my time in Japan is my own journey of self-discovery and the realisations that I have come to while being away from home. In my life, there are three facets that I feel are very much central to my core—my Londoner side, my Turkish side and the side that lives in Japan. Each culture in its own right has shaped the person that I am today. Did you notice how I mentioned London specifically and not the UK? The reason for this is because I have seen virtually nowhere outside of London. Since moving to Japan, I have met many other expats from all over the UK, each from places that I have



heard of but could never pinpoint on a map. I've learnt much about the UK's varied regions and vast cultural differences despite being in Japan. It does feel strange that I know how to navigate Japan more than the place where I spent the first 30 years of my life. This is something that I plan to change, and it took me moving to Japan to come to this realisation.

It's merely a roll of the dice that determines where you are born on this planet of ours; don't let that limit your experiences. The different cultures and different languages of our world may separate us, but they can also be what bring us together.

I'm sure when I look back on my time in Japan, I will have nothing but fond memories of my experiences, but the truth is they wouldn't be half as memorable without the friends that I have made along the way. If I could pass on one piece of advice to you, whether you are already in Japan or planning to move here in the future, it would be to *be open*. Be open to bonding with both expats and Japanese people, be open to meetups and other events and be open to new experiences. It is only when you are open that good things will come to you.

The world has never been smaller and more connected but by making friends from other countries, your

world has the opportunity to be wider. Embrace these friendships and see where your journey takes you.

Şenol Hasan is an English assistant language teacher (ALT) for Motomiya City in Fukushima prefecture. In August 2018 he left his former life in London, where he worked on construction projects for an NHS Hospital, to embark on a new adventure in Japan. When Şenol is not in the classroom, he is out on the road exploring Fukushima and Tohoku. Şenol was born and raised in London, however, his family are originally from North Cyprus.





PLANTY TO DO IN JAPAN

Three expat gardeners
share their experiences

Natalie Andrews (Tokyo), Sarah Breault (Yamaguchi),
Ezra Fleisch (Mie), Damien Levi (Tokyo)
edited by Eli Ferster (Kyoto)

When it comes to filling up that empty space on your balcony, in that front yard plot, or simply by your window, the idea of cultivating plants can be as intimidating as it is enticing. Not only will you be getting your hands dirty, you're going to be responsible for maintaining your little (or large) leafy friends and making sure they don't get devoured by pesky insects or simply drop dead of their own accord. But for Sarah, Ezra, and Damien—three international residents tackling their first gardens in Japan—it's clear that all it takes is patience, care, and research to make their gardens, and their relationships, grow and flourish.



Sarah came to Yamaguchi Prefecture from Canada already a seasoned gardener. With a background in environmental economics and horticulture, she didn't hesitate to begin poking around the unused yard in her apartment block and looking for ways to fill up her balcony.

figured I could try—and this is how I ended up with a balcony full of vegetables!”

Her favourites so far, she says, are her strawberries. “Strawberries reproduce via runners like spider plants. Very quickly, your plant grows and starts reproducing itself and soon, your balcony is full of plants. My husband always laughs because I never have the heart to prune them, and just buy more pots until I cannot contain them anymore.”

And it's not just her plants that have been thriving.

“The Canadian climate is very harsh and in the winter, unless you have a heated greenhouse or expensive infrastructure, your garden is pretty much dead,” Sarah explains. “In comparison, the winter climate in Yamaguchi is a lot kinder to plants. So, as soon as I arrived in town, I contacted the city to rent a community plot.”

“Since I arrived and started helping around the community plot, as well as setting up my hydroponic balcony garden,” she said, “I've noticed my neighbours have started to do the same. The lady next door started planting flowers; the kids upstairs are amazed by my strawberries . . . I happily gave them runners because I had too many at that point, anyway. My Japanese is not very good and I'm more of a plant person than a people person, but I really feel like my gardens have opened a communication between myself and the community here. I also make sure to grow stuff they have never seen, like big beets, pumpkins and Brussels sprouts. And I always share my crops.”



She progressed steadily until December of 2018, when a back injury made it impossible for her to do much of the heavy work needed. Deciding to instead work on her Japanese, she went on down to the bookstore and happened across a book (all written in Japanese!) called “Easy Hydroponics”.

“[The book] was filled with pictures and mentioned all the material was available at Daiso. Since hydroponics (a method of growing plants in sand, gravel or liquid, adding nutrients without using soil) doesn't require much lifting, I





Across the country in Mie Prefecture, co-veteran gardener Erza's passion for gardening has also helped him put down roots in his school community. "I work more on the school's gardens since I have more tools to work with and more infrastructure in general," he admitted. "Although, I have recently started working on my garden in earnest."

Ezra's love of gardening was born from a childhood spent in South Africa where gardening was a way for his family to spend time together. "When I moved to Canada, I couldn't do much gardening, so that became a part of my life I missed," he reflected. "When I moved to Japan, I was delighted to find that I could garden again!"

When Ezra first arrived, he discovered that although he had been blessed with a front yard, the previous tenant of his house had left it in a mangled, debris-filled state—a state Ezra lacked the tools to take care of.

"This forced me to get outside my comfort zone to request gardening tools from my schools and make new friends with people other than my JTEs (Japanese Teacher of English)," he said, recounting how he tackled the neglected plot. "My garden saved me in the first couple of weeks of being here, since working on it gave me peace of mind during the hectic culture shock of moving to Japan."

With a healthy mix of the new and familiar, it's not hard to see why.

"My *Bougainvillea* (thorny ornamental vines) plant is my favourite. We had a big one at home, so having it here reminds me of home. I've also come to love the gourds I'm tending to in the school gardens. I'd never grown a gourd before, but they're lovely."

Unlike these two expats, who brought over pre-existing passion and experience for working the earth, Damien hadn't acted on his interest in gardening until he moved to Japan in 2018 and "decided that [he] wanted to develop new hobbies that gave [him] a sense of accomplishment." He has indeed drawn together a wonderful houseplant collection . . . and laughingly confessed his preferred plants "are the ones that thrive on neglect."



All jokes aside, Damien has obviously dedicated a good amount of time to research.

“The most difficult factors to contend with are adequate light and space. There’s only so much space next to glass sliding doors before you must consider hanging planters and bookshelves. I also have a bay window perfect for plants, but it gets so hot and bright that most end up scorched.” And during the winter months, the dry air threatens to turn his tropical-climate plants into brittle husks.

Like Sarah and Ezra, Damien isn’t a gardener to throw in the towel (trowel?) when things get tough. Even though one may not have significant gardening experience, it’s the willingness to get dirt

under your fingernails that drives a would-be gardener to success. Some research and a humidifier later, those tropical plants were saved.

“If something unexpected happens, try not to freak out” is his message of caution. Indeed, starting as an amateur in a space full of problems, Damien now has a house full of plants, each with their own unique story.

“One of my favourites would have to be my beefy peacock plant (*Calathea makoyana*),” he said. “I originally bought it from a local nursery. It was in a bit of a bad way, but I nursed it back to health with perseverance and research. Unfortunately, it’s recently been stricken down with a case of spider mites, which I’m trying to manage

while keeping it isolated from my other plants.”

In contrast with Damien’s roadblocks, Ezra’s major difficulties are local. The heavy rain in his prefecture makes his weeds grow “like wildfire”, and in amongst these weeds, copious amounts of spiders lurk. Ezra’s lucky to have nerves of steel and maintains he isn’t bothered by creepy-crawlies, but he *is* worried about another creature-related issue that’s very unique to his coastal/mountainous region.

“Apparently,” he divulged, “*tanuki* and macaques are both famous for stealing food from family gardens!”

Macaques (a type of Asian monkey), and *tanuki* (raccoon

dogs) are well-known in Ezra's region for, as it seems, being irritating little thieves. "When I told a fellow teacher I was planning to grow radishes and gourds," Ezra said, "he threw up his hands in exasperation and warned me in very fast Japanese to be wary of the macaques, as they don't fall for the tricks that other animals do."

He's safe for now, though, because in his own words: "I don't have anything worth stealing . . . yet."

As for Sarah, facing down an unfortunate injury and a looming language barrier has seen her gardening efforts bear fruit, both literal and figurative.

"I hate plastic packaging with a passion. Everything is wrapped three times in plastic in Japan, so keeping a garden lowers the amount of garbage we have. I can also grow vegetables unavailable here to buy—it's very hard to find beets and orange pumpkins in Ube. Finally, the fruits in Japan are so expensive. I personally am disappointed they don't make ugly crops available because I feel like there might be a lot of waste somewhere if you only sell perfect strawberries!"

But even more than the environmental points she's scoring, the feeling of producing by oneself is a powerful one. "The week I realised my gardens produced enough that I didn't have to buy as much at the store is my most memorable achievement," she said. "It was, and still is, a very empowering feeling."

Ezra's gardening ventures allowed him to reconnect with his South African childhood and discover he had the power to exceed his self-expectations. "A major part of why I am so proud of creating a functioning garden is because I

found I had the physical capability to clear and nurture [it]. Getting up-and-close to the earth and having a beautiful garden to come home to every day does wonders for my mental health."

Damien's pride lies in seeing the results of his physical labour, which has culminated in the welcoming ambience of a plant-filled house.

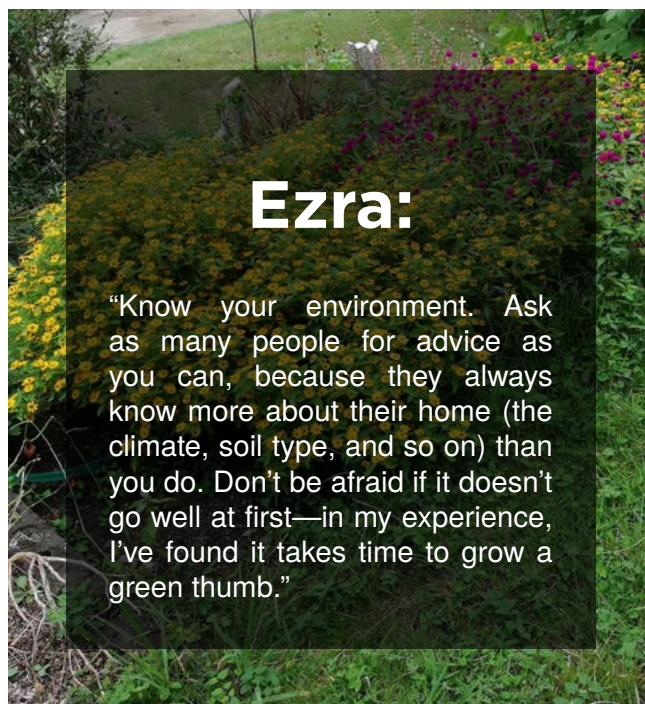
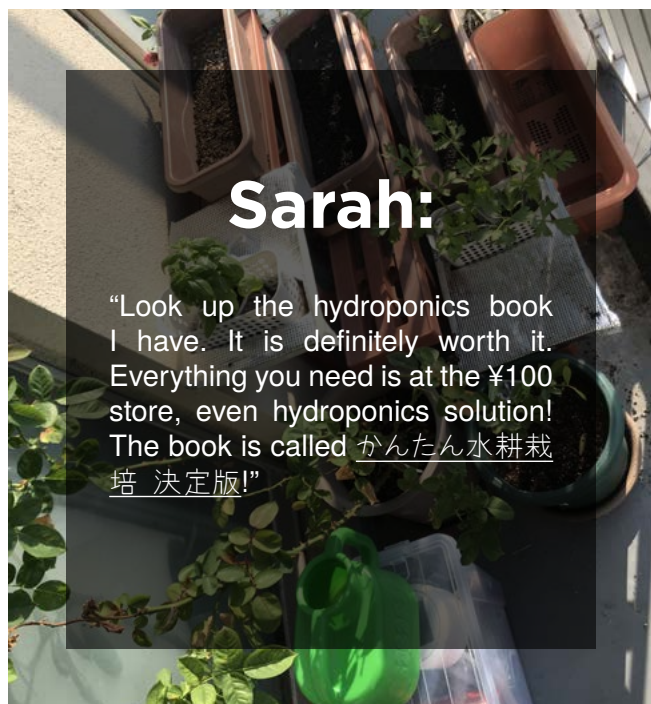
"When people come over to my house, they say that my plants add a brightness to the place that makes it feel more like a home! It's so rewarding to see plants that were tiny when I bought them grow double, triple and even quadruple the original size over the course of a year."

Without that initial peacock plant, he may not have been able to get to where he is today. Restoring it from a "small, sickly burnt-looking plant to a specimen that actually fits the name" gave him the confidence to tackle plants more difficult to care for.

Caring for something and watching it grow lends a sense of empowerment—a sentiment that these three gardeners share. This pride and happiness has made its way into their daily lives, affecting their relationships with others and with themselves.



In closing, each has their own tips to offer amateur gardeners.



Take them up on their advice, go buy some pots and plants, and get ready to create your own green space in Japan.

Mother of two from Ottawa, Canada, Sarah moved to Japan with her husband and two children after receiving her bachelor's in economics from Carleton University. Passionate about sustainable agriculture, environmental economics and horticulture, she spends most of her free time farming and gardening. You can follow her work on Instagram @ [SARA_MAMAS_GARDEN](#).

Ezra is a Canadian/South African first-year JET based in Mie Prefecture, specifically the deep south. He enjoys photography, traveling, reading and nature in general. He focuses mostly on film photography and has two nature-focused Instagram pages: @ [moyashitake](#) (for film photography) and @ [nimbus wanderer](#) (for cloud photography).

Damien is a second-year Kiwi JET based in Tokyo and a copy editor for CONNECT. He's recently unlocked the level of adulthood where you turn off a movie halfway through and go to bed because you don't want to be tired the next day. Check it—@ [damien_levi](#) on Instagram!

Bathing Bare in Hot Spring Heav

Hoong Shao Ting (Nagano)

Autumn's finally here, and as the temperatures drop, what better way to fight the cold than a steaming hot bath? This month, we check out recommendations for some of the 'hottest' (pun absolutely intended) *onsen* spots across Japan, as well as the *CONNECT* team's personal picks! Before we delve into that, let's pick up some vocabulary you'll need to know in the land of hot springs that sits right on the Ring of Fire:

OUR READERS' PICKS

Gero Onsen (*Gifu*)

Allison Lee (Gifu)

What's special?

A famous Edo-period philosopher named Gero as one of the top three onsens in Japan, praising it for its high-quality water. Although Gero is well-known by Japanese people, it's not visited as often by foreign tourists.

Even when the hotels are full, it never feels crowded. A crystal-clear river runs through the town which is nestled in the Japanese Alps, making it a refreshing escape from city life.

Best time to visit?

Winter is a great time to visit Gero Onsen, especially if you bathe in an outdoor rotemburo. Being able to watch the snowfall from a warm bath is fantastic. Additionally, Gero has a fireworks show every Saturday night in winter (11 Jan. to 28 Mar. 2020).

Tips?

Gero is situated in the Hida region of Gifu Prefecture, which is famous for Hida beef that is on par with Kobe beef. Be sure to try it on a skewer or in sushi!



Yumeguri deals?

A 'Yumeguri Tegata' wooden pass that can be purchased at most hotels for just 1300 yen is good for entrance to three different onsens. It's a great deal, and you'll be able to bathe at some of the most expensive ryokans in central Japan!

Fun fact!

"Gero" sounds like the noise frogs make in Japanese, so the town is filled with frog murals and decorations—we even have a frog shrine!

Onsen

KEYWORDS

- **Onsen** 温泉: Hot spring
- **Rotemburo** 露天風呂: Outdoor bath
- **Yumeguri** 湯巡り: Onsen-hopping
- **Ashiyu** 足湯: Foot bath
- **Higaeri onsen** 日帰り温泉: Day-return onsen
- **Konyokuburo** 混浴風呂: Mixed-gender bath
- **Kashikiriburo** 貸切風呂: Private baths you can rent out
- **Sentou** 銭湯: Public bath with heated, regular water
- **Ryokan** 旅館: Traditional Japanese inn often found in onsen towns
- **Yukata** 浴衣: Lightweight cotton robe for wear in the summer, commonly provided at ryokans—you can often stroll around onsen towns in these paired with *geta* (下駄, wooden clogs) while onsen-hopping!



Tsuru no Yu (Nyuto Onsen, Akita)

Phyllis Chua (former Sendai JET)

What's special?

Tsuru no Yu is rated number one among foreign travelers to Japan, and it's really popular among locals too!

It's famous for its mixed-gender outdoor bath! It was really nice to see that the ryokan took the privacy of its female customers into extra consideration. Women enter the bath via a sheltered path by the side and can slowly wade their way to the center. With the extremely milky water, even the shy would be able to have a relaxing and stress-free bath.

Best time to visit?

Winter!

Tips?

I recommend staying overnight because the dinner spread features Akita's local dishes like [kiritanpo](#)! Also, to get to Nyuto Onsen, you'd probably get a bus from Tazawako Station. There are bus tours from the station to the [deepest lake in Japan](#) and the Statue of Tatsuko. The view is so beautiful, there's no reason not to do the bus tour before/after heading to the onsen!

Yumeguri deals?

There is a 'Yumeguri Pass' available for 1800 yen, which includes admission to the seven onsens in the area and a one-day bus.

Any interesting episodes?

It was my first time to a mixed onsen and I wasn't sure if I was up for the challenge. However, I decided to do it anyway and, surprisingly, two women whom I spoke with earlier in the women-only outdoor bath came in one after the other! I guess seeing other women enter gave them the courage to do it too!

Check it out!

I made this [video](#) on my visit to Tsuru no Yu!

Hakone Onsen (Kanagawa)

Sonali Dutta (Tokushima)

What's special?

Hakone is near Mount Fuji. It is a popular onsen area about an hour away from Tokyo. People have been visiting Hakone to soak in the hot springs for centuries.

Visit [Hakone Kowaki-en Yunessun](#). This is an all-ages onsen theme park where you can bathe in swimming costumes. It also has coffee, green tea and red wine baths.

Best time to visit?

April to June is best as it's not too hot nor crowded then.

Tips?

Take a trip on the ["pirate ship"](#) that sails across Lake Ashi. You get an amazing view of the trees, the lake and the mountains. See if you can spot the pirate onboard! Check out [Hakone Shrine](#), an ancient Shinto shrine that was popular with the samurai. Walk through the ancient cedar forest. Get the [ropeway](#) up the mountain for stunning views you can't see any other way. Maybe you'll get lucky and see Fujisan! Eat a [black egg](#)—Hakone's famous black eggs are cooked in the hot springs. They are said to add seven years to your life.

Any interesting episodes?

While holidaying in Hakone, I ate at the restaurant Leonardo DiCaprio had visited and sat where he sat. So I technically had lunch with him!

Dogo Onsen (Ehime)

Caitrina Caira (Miyagi)

What's special?

Dogo Onsen, an Important National Cultural Asset, has a number of baths housed in a historic building. You can purchase tickets for different packages, with the cheapest being less than 500 yen, but I recommend spending the money to try them all. There is also a small museum on the second floor. This onsen is most famous for being the inspiration for the Ghibli movie Spirited Away.

Best time to visit?

Any time.

Tips?

You will need to bring your own soap or buy it separately before you go into the baths as they do not provide amenities in some of them. You can buy whatever you need at the small gift shop.

It is all about the building and historic baths. I cannot recommend this experience enough—the baths were amazing.

Unfortunately, the onsen is currently undergoing restoration works and only the first floor baths are open at the moment.

Arima Onsen (Hyogo)

Sophie McCarthy (Hyogo)

What's special?

Located deep in the Rokko Mountains and boasting a 1000-year old history, Arima Onsen is considered one of the top three onsens in Japan. Unlike other onsens, the spring water rises out of cracks in the underground bedrock from the active Earth's mantle and is said to have many healing properties, including helping joint and skin disease. It is also the only hot-spring town in Hyogo where *geisha* still work actively. Only a 30-minute train ride from Kobe-Sannomiya, a stay at one of the 20 inns or ryokans in Arima makes the perfect day trip or weekend getaway.

Best time to visit?

With a plethora of events all year round, any time is the best time to visit Arima. In spring, come see the *sakura* and take part in the Arima Cherry Blossom Festival. In summer, dip your feet in the river and watch the performances on floating stages at the Arima Ryofu Kawazashiki and Summer Festival. Or perhaps visit in autumn, when you can see the lion dance parade at the Autumn Festival. Finally, in winter, perhaps you can see snow blanket Arima while you watch Setsubun-e, a day when men dress as *geisha* and walk around the town.

Tips?

A popular food to eat while strolling the streets of Arima is the minced meat cutlet from the [Takenaka meat shop](#). They are made from 100% black-haired wagyu and are only around 250 yen per piece. If you want to try local Arima craft beer or sake, make sure to stop at [Sake Ichiba](#) or [Cinq Bar du Sake](#). For the best burger or hotdog in town, try [Flowers](#) which is located near the [Gosho Hot Spring Source](#). If you're looking for a great restaurant, café, or bar, head over to [Brücke hostel & café](#). Finally, the most popular omiyage from Arima Onsen is carbonated rice crackers made with carbonated water from its springs.

Many ryokans in Arima have their own onsen. However, there are two public onsens that are must-visits—[Kin no Yu](#) (金の湯) and [Gin no Yu](#) (銀の湯). The two public baths feature the two types of hot spring water found in Arima—the first being *kinsen* (金泉, “gold spring”), which has yellow-brown colored water from iron and salt and the other being *ginsen* (銀泉, “silver spring”), which is clear and contains radium and carbonate. You can buy a ticket to visit both onsens for a discounted price of 850 yen (650 and 550 yen respectively if you pay separately). They are also *tattoo-friendly*! If onsens are maybe not your style, there is a free outdoor public foot bath at Kin no Yu. Even if you do not particularly enjoy bathing in onsens, Arima Onsen is a beautiful and historic resort town with a plethora of activities to enjoy.



Kinosaki Onsen (Hyogo)

Elaine Ho (Tottori)

What's special?

There are seven onsens across this quaint little town. They all have individual charms and are supposed to grant various kinds of wishes, like hopes for luck in love, fertility, and etc. But if you're talking about health benefits, Kinosaki Onsen is said to be rich in sodium, calcium and chloride, which can alleviate fatigue, digestive pains, nerve and muscular pains. My absolute personal favourite is [Gosho no Yu](#), solely because its interior is absolutely grandeur, and gives off the vibe of a luxurious cabin with indoor and outdoor baths facing a waterfall.

Best time to visit?

Like all onsens, the best time to go, in my opinion, is in the fall and winter.

Tips?

There are cafes that sell soy sauce ice cream (pictured) and, although it may sound weird, it totally works and gives you the perfect sweet and salty blend. If you're looking for an affordable eatery, check out [Kana](#), a cute and tiny mom and pop which sells *okonomiyaki*, *yakisoba*, and delicious *yakiudon*.

Yumeguri deals?

If you stay at any of the ryokans, you get a pass to visit all seven of the onsens included in your stay. Alternatively, if you are not staying, you can buy a "yumepa" day pass to visit the onsens for the price of 1200 yen. It's important to note that the onsens have different hours of operation and not all of them are open on the same days.



Any interesting episodes?

It was here at Kinosaki Onsen that I learned how to wear a yukata properly. The first time I arrived in Japan back in 2014, I didn't know how to wear a yukata so naturally, I made the mistake of wrapping the right side over the left and even happily asked the ryokan ladies to snap a photo of me. When I went into one of the onsens' changing room, a group of older Japanese ladies laughed at me and said that I looked like a "dead person". Thankfully they helped to resurrect this silly foreigner by wrapping the left side over the right. In addition, there are stamps outside each of the onsens to help commemorate your visit to this magical place.



Akan Onsen (Hokkaido)

Caitrina Caira (Miyagi)

What's special?

Akan-Mashu National Park boasts a number of onsens. The main onsen by [Lake Akan](#), [Akan Tsuruga Yuku no Sato](#), has a rooftop rotomboro overlooking the lake.

The onsens over at [Lake Kussharo](#) are much more famous, though. Lake Kussharo is actually a hot spring-fed lake, so you can go to the beach and dig yourself a [foot bath](#) (pictured) if you want. Be careful as the water is quite hot!

Best time to visit?

Any time. But the Ainu festival (pictured) in October dedicated to the *marimo* (a kind of algae that grows in balls) is a great opportunity to mix onsen-ing with cultural experiences.

Tips?

This entire national park is amazing. There is an Ainu village with dance shows and a short hiking path through the woods to see [boiling mud pits](#). You can try Ainu foods at some of the local restaurants, and the area is famous for marimo which is only found in two places in the world.

There is also [Lake Mashu](#) nearby, which is famous for its beauty, as well as [Lake Onneto](#), where a hot waterfall generates manganese (the only one of its kind in the world), and Kaminoko Pond, one of the most beautiful water bodies in Japan.

This area is a bit hard to get to by public transit—a car is recommended.

CONNECT TEAM'S PICKS

These might not be the most famous spots, but they are our personal faves! Who knows? Maybe you'll bump into one of us bare in the baths.

Ofuro Cafe Hakuju Hot Spring (Saitama)

Alice Ridley, Head Editor

What's special?

The baths themselves are fairly standard for an onsen. There is one large indoor bath and a smaller open-air bath. However, the relaxation area is why this onsen is my favourite. To list a few things available in this area: a nap room, free massage chairs, free coffee, vast bookshelves of Japanese books and manga, study pods and even hammocks! (Pictures are the best way to show this area). I not only go to the onsen to bathe but also then spend additional time unwinding in this communal area.

Best time to visit?

Any time of year is great for onsen! Though, winter is prime time. Nothing is better than walking out of an onsen radiating warmth. The best time of day is to visit after 9 p.m. as it is discounted at half price to 450 yen! (This is when I usually go.) It should also be noted that the closing time is 11 p.m., so be prompt arriving at 9 p.m. as you will want to spend a good amount of time in the relaxing area!

Tips?

For ladies, they provide mud masks for you to try out! This makes the experience a little more special. You can find the mud to put on your face outside, usually by a mirror. I would recommend doing this about 10 to 15 minutes before you leave. I loved the feeling of lounging looking up at the night sky with my mud mask on.

Takaragawa Onsen (Gunma)

Clare Braganza, Community Section Editor

What's special?

The resort offers four unique outdoor baths, positioned on either side of a mountain river with crystal-clear water. The surroundings are the beautiful mountain forests of Gunma, and maple trees hang over the onsen, shading you from the sunlight. The baths are made from boulders, so it looks like a part of the landscape, and a wooden bridge connects them across the river. There is a private female-only onsen and three other mixed onsen, but you wear a brown shift for the mixed onsen so there's nothing to worry about. By far the best onsen I've ever been to!

Best time to visit?

I went in late summer/early autumn when the trees were beginning to turn gold. In the winter would also be lovely, because everything would be blanketed in snow.

Tips?

The hotel is famous for its "Dam Curry", where rice shaped like a dam separates the curry sauce from the rest of the dish.

Any interesting episodes?

I think we were meant to wear flip flops on the forest paths between the onsen, but us foreigners just went barefoot. We thought nothing of it until every Japanese person that passed us commented on our bare feet!

Yamanaka Onsen

(Ishikawa)

Megan Luedtke, Assistant Designer

What's special?

Yamanaka Onsen, a small resort along [Kakusenkei Gorge](#) (pictured), is one of four hot spring towns that make up the larger [Kaga Onsen](#). In addition to the hot springs, Yamanaka Onsen is full of beautiful traditional architecture (pictured) and is home to many different shops, many of which boast hand-crafted items.

Yamanaka Onsen is said to have healing waters, which help ease muscle and joint pain, speed up recovery from disease and improve one's health in general. The town is also home to many wonderful hotels and ryokans for travelers coming from farther away who hope to soak in Yamanaka Onsen's waters.

Best time to visit?

Late October/early November—you can see the gorge with fall colors at this time).

Tips?

Kakusenkei Gorge is a must. It is right in the area and has an absolutely gorgeous walkway by the river with a stunning view. Visitors can follow the path, which winds through the trees, crosses the river via cute stepping stones, and passes by small waterfalls.

Along the path, you may find Kawadoko riverside café (open from April to October), a simple platformed space along the river. It's a perfect spot to stop for some refreshing tea while you sit under the shade of the umbrella and trees, and watch the river as it flows by right next to you.

Any interesting episodes?

I originally traveled to the small town on the outskirts of Kaga City to see Kakusenkei Gorge. Little did I know that I would end up in what was probably one of the most beautiful towns I ever set foot in. My first time there, I spent almost twice as long as I planned! I was thoroughly enjoying myself and ended up taking my time as I walked through various stores and explored all the different back alleyways. I didn't count but I'm pretty sure I said "wow" more than a hundred times.

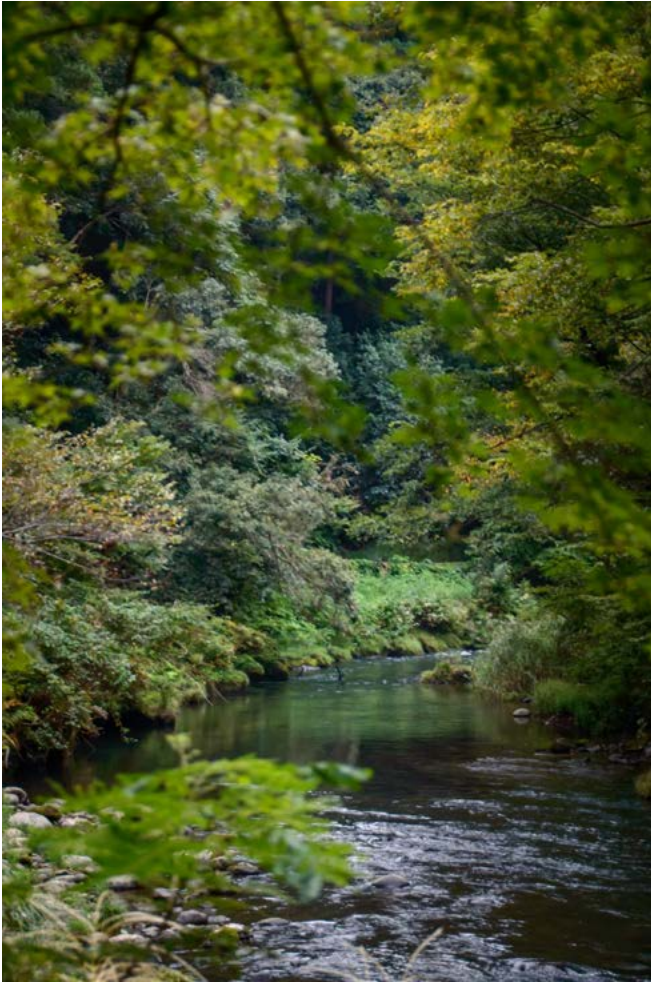




Photo: Rana Sawalha on Unsplash.com

TATAMI SURFING

A timeshare
by JETs for JETs!

Abbie Philpott (Nagasaki) and Monica Aguilar-Scion (Okinawa)

Have you ever wanted to travel through Japan and around the world without spending anything on lodging? Although Japan is in Asia, usually known for cheap accommodation, it is one of the most expensive Asian countries to travel in. This is where Tatami Timeshare comes in to help with free lodging! As in, completely free! An added bonus of choosing this type of lodging is that you are able to get very localised recommendations straight from the horse's mouth. If this sounds appealing to you, you need look no further than the AJET's Tatami Timeshare, or TT for short.

The catch is that you must also be willing to put your place up on the Tatami Timeshare Google Map, state how many people you can accommodate and your living

situation. Additionally, it's helpful to include transport options—more on that later. You must also be a current or former JET Program participant. If you are a little nervous about couch-surfing in Japan, you can feel a little more reassured that all participants have been vetted by the JET Program, and thus have gone through various security checks. After you've added your pin on the map, you're ready to go tatami-surfing. So how you do add your pin on the map?

HOW TO JOIN TT

It's really easy to join TT. You just have to fill out an application form—and there are two ways to access it. The first is to go to the [AJET website](#). Click on AJET Services and then Tatami Timeshare, where you will see the link to the application form. Another way is to join the AJET Tatami Timeshare group on [Facebook](#). Click the application form link posted in the description.

Once you have accessed the application form, it's just a case of filling in some information about

yourself, your placement and your accommodation. Hit send and *voilà!* You have finished applying.

After a short wait, you will receive an invitation to the TT map and that's it, your pin is now live and viewable to other TT users. Then you will be able to browse the other pins and start planning your next adventure!



Photo: Megan Luedtke

ABBIE'S EXPERIENCE USING TT

I have used TT a few times, most recently in early October. Two friends and I managed to get tickets to the New Zealand versus Canada rugby match in Oita. As soon as we had the tickets secured, we set about looking for accommodation for the night as the game had a 7:15 p.m. kick-off. All we could find was eye-wateringly expensive hotels that we really couldn't afford after spending big yennies on the match tickets. Not wanting to travel over four hours back to Nagasaki or sleep in my tiny *kei* car, I decided to try my luck on TT.

Luckily, I found a lovely Oita ALT named Robert who was more than willing to let me and my two friends stay for the night. Even better,

he is also a rugby fan and was volunteering for the World Cup, so an excellent source of information too. Thanks to him, we were able to enjoy our short time in Oita, save a lot of money, learn some inside knowledge about Oita and make a new connection. All advantages of using TT.

There can be issues if you are not organised. We had some drama getting to Robert's house, because of poor planning on my part. Due to delays in leaving the stadium, we missed the last train to Robert's town. While we were figuring that out, I didn't keep Robert up to date and tell him we were going to arrive much later than intended. It was while waiting for a taxi at midnight that I realised

I didn't know Robert's address! He didn't answer any messages for about thirty minutes because he had accidentally fallen asleep (it was a school night and very late) and so we spent those thirty minutes brainstorming what to do and trying not to panic. Luckily, he woke up and immediately sent us his address and was still very friendly, kind and willing to let us stay, even though we didn't turn up at his door until 1:30 a.m. (Thanks Robert!)



MONICA'S EXPERIENCES AS A TT HOST

Since becoming a member of AJET's Tatami Timeshare, my family and I have had the unique experience of hosting eight JET travelers since March of this year. I live in Okinawa with my husband, Jonathan, and 4-year-old son, Tristan, in the only landlocked town of Haeburu. Living only five minutes away from the capital of Naha, we have gotten many a request through TT.

I first heard about Tatami Timeshare at the 2018 Tokyo Orientation when another Hawai'i ALT mentioned that there was a dedicated and entirely online lodging group limited only to JET program participants (current and past). I was fascinated with the idea and thought,

“why not host other JETs, make new friends, and in return also have lodging for free when we travel throughout Japan and across the globe?”

With that in mind, I asked my husband if he was also interested in joining TT—he agreed, and here we are!

Through Tatami Timeshare, we have established friendships that I'm positive will last a lifetime. Thus far, we've hosted JETs from America, Australia, Canada, Northern Ireland, the UK, and Singapore. Not only do we meet new people, but it is an amazing opportunity and experience to learn about each other's JET placement and home culture(s). On a side note, most JETs who have stayed with us usually stay for a couple of days to a week.

We once had three people utilizing TT at our home at the same time and it was interesting to hear four different English accents (American, Australian, British, and Irish) in our 3LDK apartment. Everyone who has stayed with us has become family to us. In the Okinawan dialect, *Uchinaaguchi*, there is a phrase that perfectly portrays this relationship, it is “*ichariba chode*”—which means once we have met, even though by chance, we are brothers and sisters. “*ichariba chode*” is also similar to the Hawaiian word for family which is “*ohana*.”

AUTHOR'S TIPS:

Abbie

So in order to make the best of your TT experience, and not be like me, here are some of my top tips:

- Ask if they have bedding and are willing to let you use it
- Ask about the transport to their place and when the last trains are etc.
- If you're driving, ask where you can park
- Get a contact number
- Make sure to keep your host up to date about your plans, especially when you will be arriving

Also, while not a requirement, I would highly recommend bringing a small gift! TT hosts are saving you money and going out of their way to accommodate you, giving a gift can show your appreciation and is also an easy way to share some the culture of your area with them. I like to give my hosts some Castella cake, a Nagasaki specialty.

Remember TT is not a hotel service, be polite and respectful, don't make too much noise and leave the accommodation as tidy as you found it. Follow these simple tips and using TT will be an enjoyable experience for you and your host.

Monica

I have some tips for those who are considering joining Tatami Timeshare.

The first tip is to check your email regularly. If not, you may have missed an opportunity to host someone. This happened to me when I had some storage data issues, but it worked out after buying more space, so it's also important to make sure that your email inbox is not completely out of space or nearing it.

The second tip is to make a spare key to give to your guests if you're comfortable enough. We usually give our guests a key to our apartment which makes it easier for them to go in and out

(especially if they are leaving before sunrise or coming back around midnight). JET Program participants have been thoroughly background-checked so we feel pretty safe doing this.

The third tip is to make a list of recommendations to give them, which can include any popular tourist spots or places to experience the local culture and traditional food. I usually give this list to them the day they arrive or email them the recommendations beforehand. I also let our guests know about the transportation options in Okinawa. I live about a three minutes walk to the nearest bus stop; however, the bus here is the slowest option and it is much easier to get around by car in

Okinawa; so I always recommend renting a car.

Lastly, the fourth tip is to give your guests your address, phone number, and other pertinent information, like when you'll be available to initially meet. I also ask if they need a ride from the airport since I live around 17-minute drive away. With these tips in mind, I think it will help you to further enjoy your time being a TT host!

When we decide to end our time in Japan and return home to Hawai'i, or wherever we are off to next, it is our plan to continue hosting people through Tatami Timeshare. It's been such a wonderful experience! We hope to see you soon!

Photo:



Stil on Unsplash.com

Monica Aguilar-Scion is a second-year ALT originally from Mililani, Hawai'i, and is currently living with her family in Haeburu, Okinawa. She teaches at two senior high schools and a special needs school in the southern part of the main island of Okinawa-Honto. She graduated from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) and a Minor in Music. It has been her dream since high school to live and work in Japan through the JET Program and she is forever grateful to be given the opportunity to live and work in Okinawa. She plays the viola in the Okinawa Symphony Orchestra and is currently learning eisa (an Okinawan folk dance) with the Okinawa City International Association (OCIA) and the sanshin (an Okinawan string instrument) at the Well Culture School in Naha. When she's not busy with work, she enjoys exploring Okinawa, mainland Japan, and the neighboring Asian countries with her family and friends.



Abbie is a fifth-year British ALT working at two junior high schools in Minami Shimabara, a small inaka town in Nagasaki. She enjoys hosting other ALTs and showing off her area's beautiful beaches, relaxing onsens, scenic hikes and yummy food. You can find her details on the TT map.

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

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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, Ashley Hirasuna, at ashley.hirasuna@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.

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