

AJET

CONNECT

News & Events, Arts & Culture, Lifestyle, Community

FEBRUARY
2020

Riding the Jiu-Jitsu Wave

Working for the Kyoryokutai

The Changing Colors of the Red and White
Singing Battle

Journey Through Magic

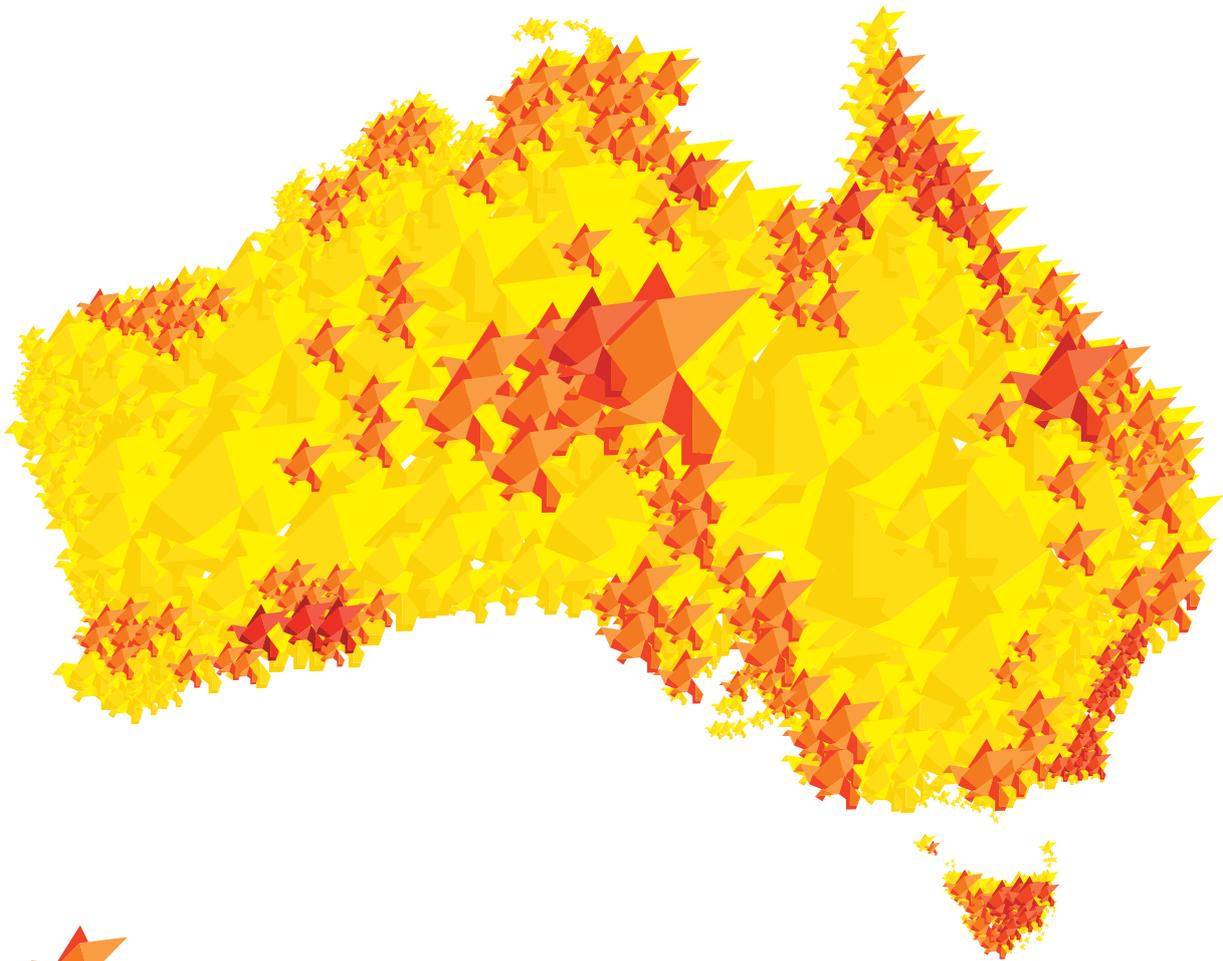
Embarrassing Adventures of an Expat in Tokyo

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





In response to ongoing global news, the team at Connect Magazine would like to acknowledge the devastating impact of the 2019-2020 bushfires in Australia.



Our thoughts and support are with those suffering.





Since [September 2019](#), the raging fires across the eastern and southeastern Australian coastal regions have burned over 17.9 million acres, destroyed over 2000 homes, and killed least 27 people. A billion animals have been caught in the fires, with some species now pushed to the brink of extinction. Skies are reddened from air heavy with smoke—smoke which can be seen 2,000km away in New Zealand and [even from Chile, South America](#), which is more than 11,000km away.



Currently, massive efforts are being taken to tackle the bushfires and protect people, animals, and homes in the vicinity. If you would like to be a part of this effort, here are some resources you can use to help:

 **Country Fire Authority**
 In Victoria

 **Country Fire Service Foundation**
 In South Australia

 **New South Wales Rural Fire Service**

 **The Australian Red Cross**
 Fire recovery and relief fund

 **World Wildlife Fund**
 Caring for injured wildlife and habitat restoration

 **GIVIT**
 Donating items requested by those affected

 **The Animal Rescue Collective Craft Guild**
 Making bedding and bandaging for injured animals. Craft makers are being sought after to assist in sewing, knitting, making supportive garments, etc.



Attention Artists!

Want to get your artwork an audience
in Japan?

2020



submissions open

C the art issue for 2020
c-theartissue.tumblr.com

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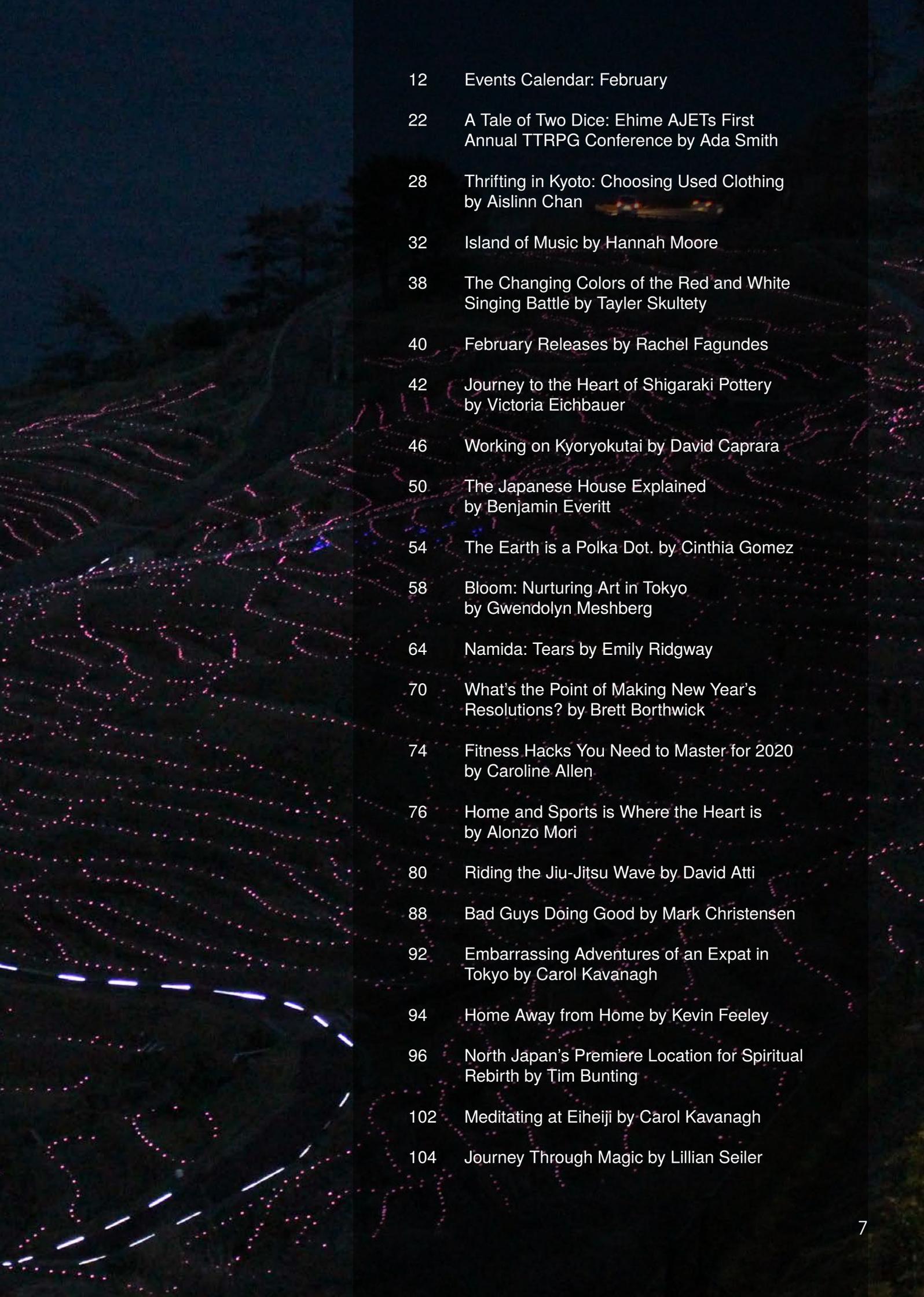
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

On behalf of all *CONNECT* team members, we wish you a happy 2020! If you are an aspiring traveller, alumnus, or currently living in Japan, I hope that *CONNECT* will continue to provide your monthly Japanese fix and that you are able to achieve all your Japan-related goals for the year. If you are inclined to make New Year's resolutions that is!

Before getting into my top picks for February's issue, I would like to take a moment to talk about the Australian bushfires. This current news event needs *no* introduction. You probably know someone from Australia or may have even visited the affected areas. My own parents sent me images of how close these fires reached their home in NSW. I would like to take an alternative route from the media's current spin on things. I'm taking a page from one of my favourite YouTubers, Currently Hannah, an Aussie who currently resides in Tokyo. She uploaded a video titled "Feeling sad doesn't change anything - Australian bushfires" (Video can be found [here](#)). Rather than focusing on the bleak facts, she highlights the positive things which the *people* have done in reaction to the fires. She spotlights the grassroots movements of people coming together during a time of catastrophe, because feeling sad and reading extensive news doesn't change *anything* but fuel further panic. These communities will eventually recover but in the present moment, the volunteer services need the rest of the world's help. If you have financial stability please consider donating to assist these strained services. More information is listed on the next page courtesy of Australian staff member Natalie. If you haven't clicked that video link already I highly recommend you do so!

Now for February's top five articles:

1. Sports presents a surprisingly heartwarming piece about a new ALT finding his dojo in "**Riding the Jiu-Jitsu Wave**".
2. Culture presents an excellently written article featuring a journalist's journey back to the deep *inaka* through the rural revitalization program in **Working for Kyoryokutai**.
3. Entertainment presents an article written by *CONNECT* Culture Editor Tayler Skultety about the experience of watching Japan's notorious New Year's television program in **The Changing Colors of the Red and White Singing Battle**.
4. Travel presents a Ghibli enthusiast's dream holiday to the lush island of Yakushima in **Journey through magic** where travellers can be immersed in the landscape that inspired Hayao Miyazaki.
5. Community presents something a little different with a poem of a traveller's blunders during a trip to Tokyo in **Embarrassing Adventures of an Expat in Tokyo**.

I hope you find something you fancy in this month's February issue! As always if you are interested in seeing your own work published please contact me at connect.editor@ajet.net.

Alice Ridley
Head Editor
2nd Year Gunma ALT



Photo: Ashley Hirasuna

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"I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying."—Oscar Wilde

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Eli Ferster

油断大的 (yudandaiteki) *Unpreparedness is one's greatest enemy* —Japanese saying

Natalie Andrews

"The more I learn about people, the more I like my dog." —Mark Twain

COPY EDITORS

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"Over and over, we begin again." —Yoshimoto Banana, *Kitchen*

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"Road work ahead? Uh, yeah, I sure hope it does!" —Drew Gooden

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Ashley Hirasuna

"Great things never came from comfort zones."
—Anonymous

ASSISTANT DESIGNER

Rhema Baquero

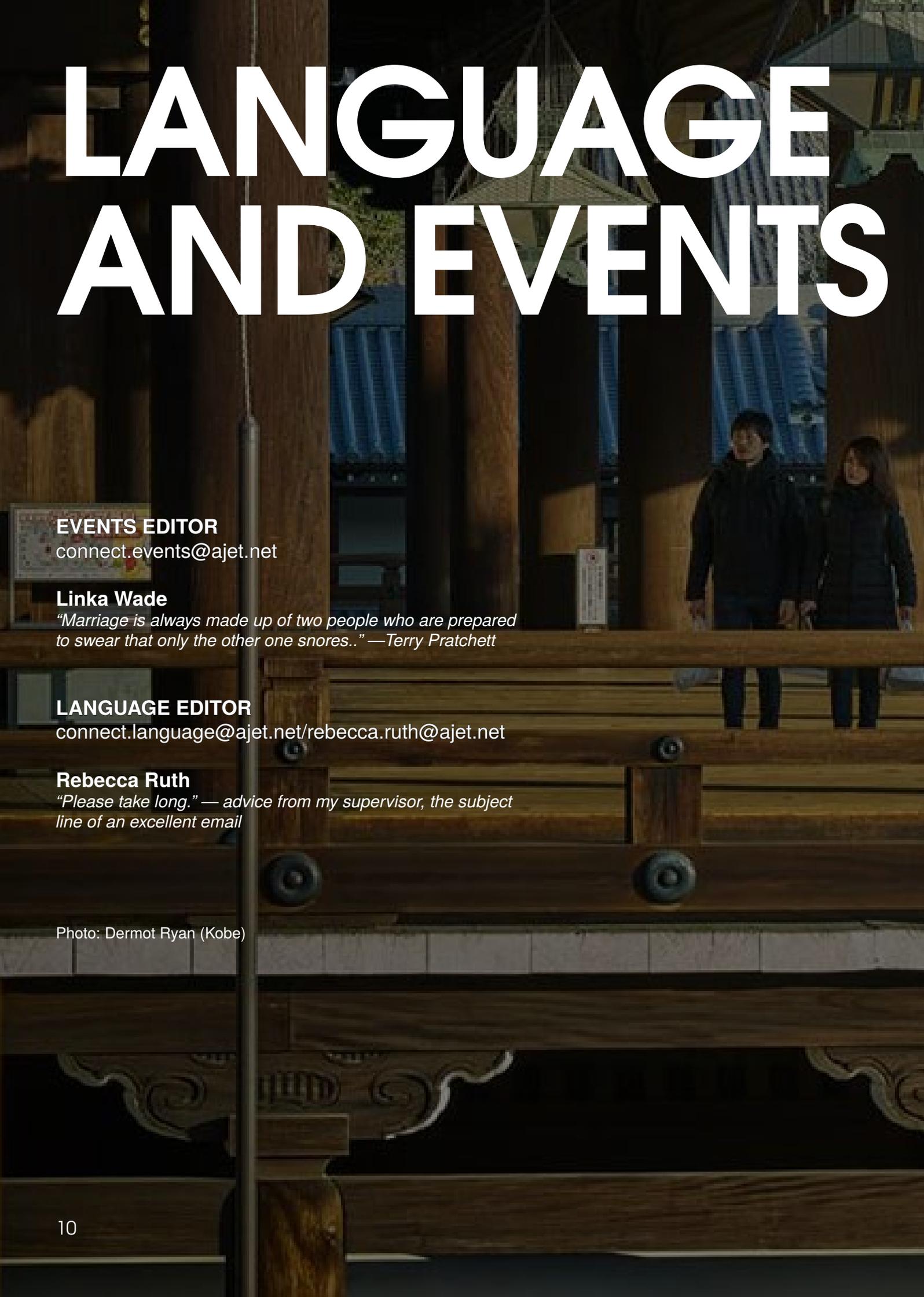
"I believe in second chances, I believe in redemption, but, mostly, I believe in my friends."
—Superman

SOCIAL MEDIA

Hannah Lysons

"the brain is a wonderful organ; it starts working the moment you get up in the morning, and does not stop until you get into the office"
—Robert Frost

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"Marriage is always made up of two people who are prepared to swear that only the other one snores.." —Terry Pratchett

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Rebecca Ruth

"Please take long." — advice from my supervisor, the subject line of an excellent email

Photo: Dermot Ryan (Kobe)



Events Calendar:

February 2020

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

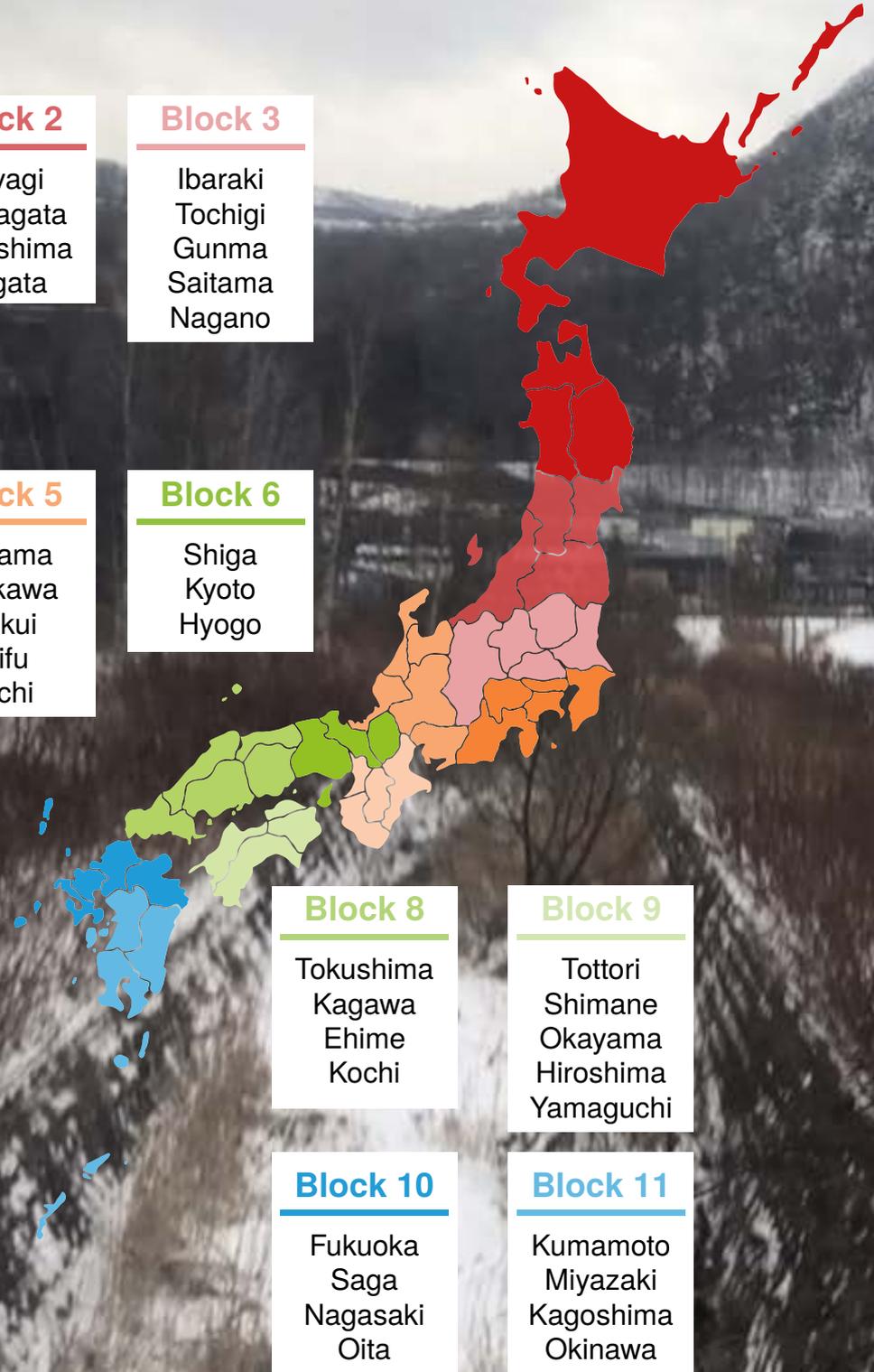
Tottori
Shimane
Okayama
Hiroshima
Yamaguchi

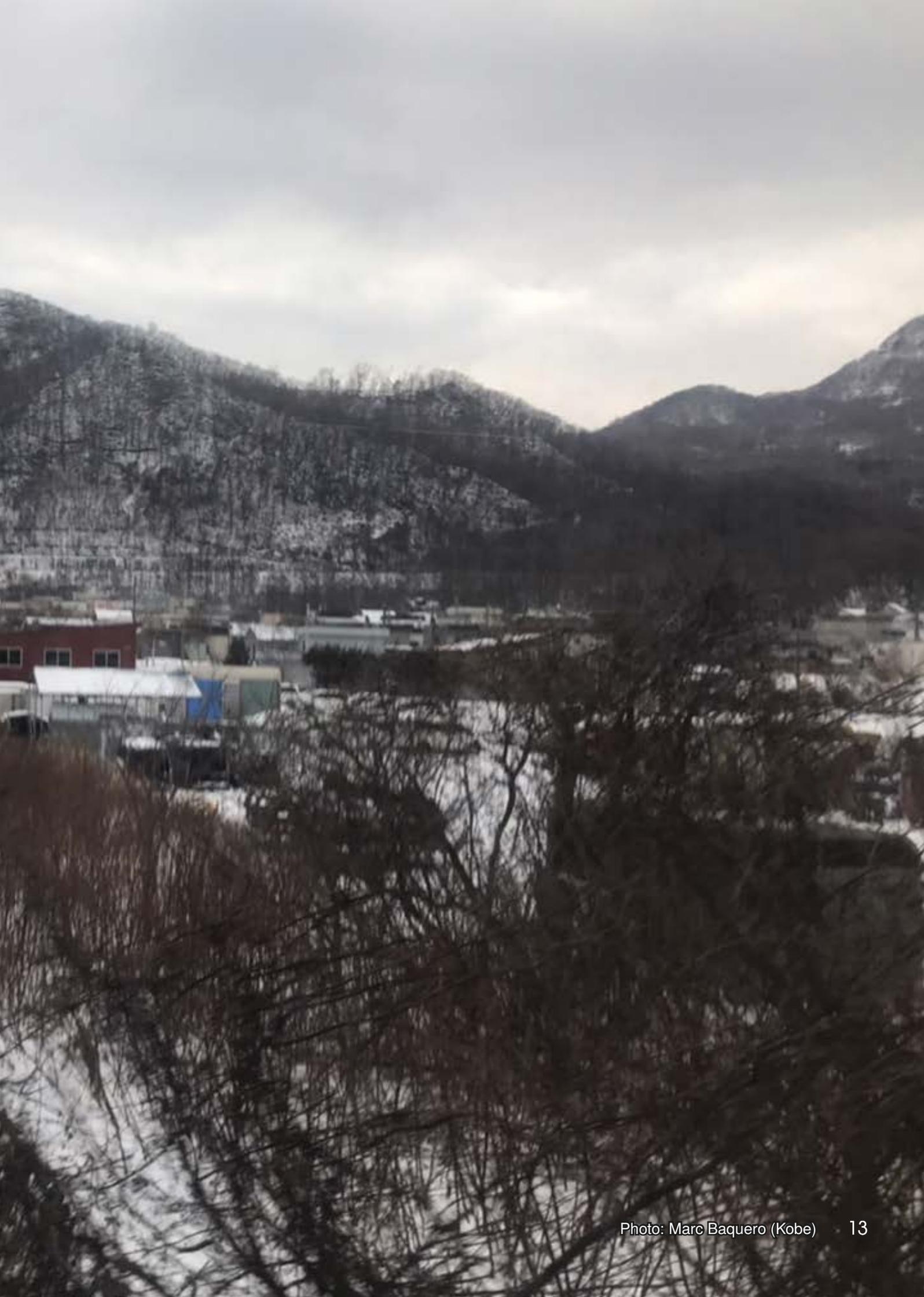
Block 10

Fukuoka
Saga
Nagasaki
Oita

Block 11

Kumamoto
Miyazaki
Kagoshima
Okinawa







Block 1

Sapporo Snow Festival

February 4 - February 11

Sapporo City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

61st Asahikawa Winter Festival

February 6 - February 11

Asahikawa City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Otaru Snow Light Path

February 9 - February 16

Otaru City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

53rd Iwate Snow Festival

February 7 - February 11

Shizukuishi, Iwate Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

62nd All-Japan Wanko Soba Tournament

February 11

Hanamaki City, Iwate Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Morioka Snow Light 2020

February 6 - February 8

Morioka City, Iwate Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yokote Kamakura Festival

February 15 - February 16

Yokote City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Amekko Ichi

February 8 - February 9

Odate City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Namahage Sedo Festival

February 8-10

Oga City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Hirosaki Castle Snow Lantern Festival

February 8 - February 11

Hirosaki City, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Hachinohe Enburi Festival

February 17 - 20

Hachinohe, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)



Block 2

Yonekawa Mizukaburi Festival

February 9

Tome City, Miyagi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

24th Aone Onsen Snow Light

February 9

Kawasaki Town, Miyagi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Koide International Snowball Fight

February 9

Uonuma City, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yukishika Matsuri

February 15 - February 16

Nagaoka City, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

71st Tokamachi Snow Festival

February 14 - February 16

Tokamachi City, Niigata Prefecture

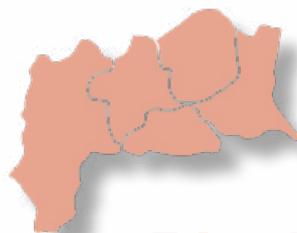
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yamagata Snow Festival

February 1 - February 3

Sagae City, Yamagata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 3

19th Takahata Winter Festival

February 8 - February 11
Takahata, Yamagata Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

43rd Uesugi Snow Lantern Festival

February 8 - February 9
Yonezawa City, Yamagata Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nihonmatsu Sake Matsuri

February 15
Nihonmatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tadami Snow Festival

February 8 - February 9
Tadami, Fukushima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

20th All Japan Ramen Festa

February 8 - February 9
Kitakata City, Fukushima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

8th World Chocolate Festival

February 6 - February 9
Mito City, Ibaraki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Mito Plum Festival

February 15 - March 29
Mito City, Ibaraki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Showa Village Winter Festival

February 8
Showa Village, Gunma Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

28th Kita-Karuizawa Festival of Flame

February 8
Kita-Karuizawa, Gunma Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Matsumoto Castle Ice Sculpture Festival

February 1 - February 2
Matsumoto Castle, Nagano Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

38th Iiyama Snow Festival

February 8 - February 9
Iiyama City, Nagano Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Oku Nikko Yumoto Onsen Snow Festival

February 1 - February 8
Nikko City, Tochigi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yunishikawa Kamakura Festival

January 31 - March 1
Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Konosu Bikkuri Hina Matsuri

February 19 - March 8
Konosu City, Saitama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Ogose Plum Festival

February 15 - March 22
Ogose, Saitama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)





Block 4

Flowers by Naked 2020 - Sakura

January 30 - March 1
Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Some no Komichi

February 21 - February 23
Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kita City Tako-ichi

February 9
Kita City, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Bunkyo Ume Matsuri

February 8 - March 8
Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Katsuura Big Hinamatsuri

February 22 - March 3
Katsuura City, Chiba Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Winter Wonder Festival 2020

February 9
Chiba, Chiba Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

50th Odawara Plum Festival

February 1 - March 1
Odawara City, Kanagawa Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sankien Garden Plum Blossom Viewing

February 8 - March 1
Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Yokohama Chinatown Chinese New Year

January 25 - February 8
Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kashiwaya Hinamatsuri

February 8 - April 5
Fujieda City, Shizuoka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kawazu-zakura Cherry Blossom Festival

February 10 - March 10
Kawazucho, Shizuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Yamanakako Mt. Fuji Snow Festival

February 1 - February 16
Yamanakako, Yamanashi Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Saiko Ice Festival 2020

January 25 - February 16
Fujikawaguchiko, Yamanashi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 5

33rd Mt. Tsurugi Snow Festival

February 11
Kamiichi Town, Toyama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nyuzen Ramen Festival and Sweets Festival

February 22 - February 23
Nyuzen Town, Toyama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nagoya Ramen Matsuri 2020

February 1 - February 17
Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

19th Seto Hina Display

February 1 - March 8
Seto City, Aichi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

29th Souriike Plum Festival

February 8 - March 8
Chita City, Aichi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

19th Gujo Takasu Snow Festival

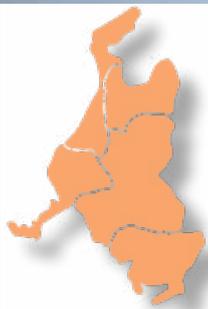
February 15 - February 16
Gujo City, Gifu Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Imao Sagicho

February 9
Kaizu City, Gifu Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 5

Hirayu-Otaki Keppyo Festival

February 15 - February 25
Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Falling Star Lantern Night

February 8
Ono City, Fukui Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Katsuyama Sagicho Festival

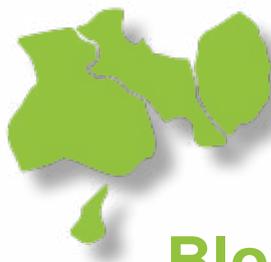
February 22 - February 23
Katsuyama City, Fukui Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shiramine Snowman Festival

February 8
Shiramine, Ishikawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Foodpia Kanazawa 2020

January 25 - February 29
Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 6

Ikuta Shrine Setsubun

February 3
Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

27th Kobe Suma Rikyu Park Plum Blossom Viewing

February 7 - March 1
Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Godai Rikison Ninno-e Festival

February 23
Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

47th Agon Shu Hoshi Matsuri

February 9
Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Yasaka Shrine Setsubun

February 2 - February 3
Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kitano Tenmangu Shrine Plum Festival

February 25
Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tamura Festival

February 17 - February 19
Kouka City, Shiga Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 7

Next Generation World Hobby Fair

February 9
Osaka, Osaka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Dojima Yakushido Setsubun Omizukumi Festival

February 3
Osaka, Osaka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Domyoji Tenmangu Shrine

February 9 - March 13
Fujidera City, Osaka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Iga Ueno Castle Town Hina Festival

February 22 - March 3
Iga City, Mie Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Owase Ya Ya Matsuri

February 1 - February 5
Owase City, Mie Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

17th Yamatokoriyama Bonbai Exhibition

February 2 - March 10
Yamatokoriyama City, Nara Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 8

Nara Rurie

February 8 - February 14

Nara, Nara Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Setsubun Mantoro

February 3

Nara, Nara Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kishu Ishigami Tanabe Bairin

February 8 - March 8

Tanabe City, Wakayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kumano Otou Matsuri

February 6

Shingu City, Wakayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nanaore Ume Festival

February 20 - March 10

Tobe Town, Ehime Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Henjoin Temple Yakuyoke Big Festival

February 3

Imabari City, Ehime Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Seigo-ji Yama Festival

February 9

Uwajima City, Ehime Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Dou no Kuchiake Festival

February 23

Tsuno Town, Kochi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kashima Shrine Big Festival

February 3

Tosashimizu City, Kochi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Zentsuji Temple Daieyou

February 22 - February 23

Zentsuji City, Kagawa Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

21st Shikoku Sake Matsuri

February 22

Miyoshi City, Tokushima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

32nd Big Hina Matsuri

February 22 - April 4

Katsuura, Tokushima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 9

Hagi Camellia Festival

February 15 - March 20

Hagi City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hagi Doll Exhibition

February 3 - April 3

Hagi City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Atsuki Shinmei Festival

February 11

Yanai City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Akiyoshidai Mountain Burning

February 16

Mine City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Dance Fes1

February 8 - February 9

Yanago City, Tottori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

13th Himeji Park Kamakura Festival

February 22 - February 23

Yazu, Tottori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hinase Oyster Festival

February 23

Bizen City, Okayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Saidaiji Eyo

February 15

Okayama City, Okayama Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Miyajima Oyster Festival

February 8 - February 9

Hatsukaichi City, Hiroshima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Mihara Shinmeiichi

February 7 - February 9

Mihara City, Hiroshima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 10

Next Generation World Hobby Fair

February 2

Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Iizuka Hina Matsuri

February 1 - March 24

Iizuka City, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Ofurosan Matsuri

February 9 - February 11

Okawa City, Fukuoka City

[Website in Japanese only](#)

31st Yume Tachibana Plum Viewing Festival

February 15 - February 23

Yame City, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hikari no Valentine's Day

February 9 - February 9

Takeo City, Saga Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Ureshino Onsen Lantern Festival

January 25 - February 11

Ureshino, Saga Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 11

Huis Ten Bosch Tulip Festival

February 8 - March 12

Sasebo City, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nagasaki Lantern Festival

January 24 - February 9

Nagasaki City, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Unzen Hikari-no-Hanabouro Illuminations

February 1 - February 22

Unzen City, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Goto Camellia Festival

February 22 - March 1

Goto City, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Usa Shrine Chineki Festival

February 13

Usa City, Oita Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tenryo Hita Hina Festival

February 15 - March 31

Hita City, Oita Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

18th Tamana Bonbai Exhibition

February 7 - March 1

Tamana City, Kumamoto Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yamaga Winter Lantern Festival

February 7 - February 29

Yamaga City, Kumamoto Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

43rd Sengoku Higo People Festival

February 9

Nagomi Town, Kumamoto Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sengan-en Hina Matsuri

February 15 - April 26

Kagoshima City, Kagoshima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

6th Kagoshima Ramen King

February 22 - February 24

Kagoshima City, Kagoshima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Naha Cherry Blossom Festival

February 8 - February 9

Naha City, Okinawa Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yomitan Pottery Market

February 22 - February 23

Yomitan, Okinawa Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Okinawa International Orchid Show

February 1 - February 11

Motobu, Okinawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Nobeoka Hanamonogatari

February 1 - April 5

Nobeoka City, Miyazaki Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

35th Kenkoku Matsuri

February 11

Takachino Town, Miyazaki Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

A Tale of

EHIME AJETS FIRST ANNUAL TTRPG CONFERENCE



Two Dice:

Ada Smith, Ehime



“Your party is camped out at the edge of the Forest of Doom and night is falling. Suddenly, you all hear something coming through the forest. Not on the well-trodden road just off to the right of your camp, but crashing through the underbrush as though running from someone, or something. As you ready your weapons and spells, you see a small dwarven man break his way through the tree line. Some of you recognize his scarred and bent armor, stocky features, and magnificent beard. This is Lieutenant Bigleg, second in command to General Gilibran of the dwarven army. He manages to tell your party that the great warhammer of Gilibran has been shattered into two, and the pieces are lost in the Forest of Doom. He gives you the task of finding the pieces and returning them to the city of Stonebridge before the rising troll army can crush the now demoralized dwarven forces. His last words are cut off as he falls forward, poisoned arrows protruding from his back. Your party now sees three trollkin, the enemy Bigleg was fleeing from, readying their weapons for an attack.

What do you do?”

This was the general premise that was set for the first annual Table-Top Role Playing Game (TTRPG) Conference in Matsuyama, Ehime. The rented room was filled with seven groups of three players and one GM (game master) each. The event was organized by AJET Event Coordinators Kate Flake and myself, Ada Smith. When picking a game and a theme, we wanted something that would be accessible and enjoyed by veterans of TTRPGs and first-time players alike. *Dungeon World*, a fantasy game similar to the infamous *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*, was an obvious choice. One of our favorites, the system focuses less on battle strategies and leveling up, and more on collaboratively telling a narrative. Though each group had the same basic premise; find the hammer pieces and return them to the dwarven army, as well as the same list of monsters, everything else was left up to the GMs and, more importantly, the players.

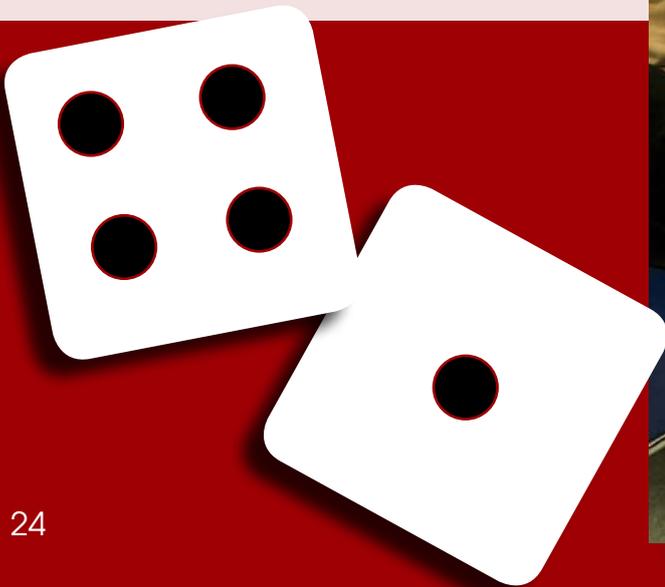
The event was open to the island of Shikoku, but due to timing and size restrictions, only people from Ehime

attended. Players traveled from the far reaches of the prefecture, though, and the different groups were a mix of people from every region. The purpose of the event was to bring people interested in interactive games together and hopefully foster new friendships and future campaigns. "I really enjoyed how we were one large group made of smaller groups. . . . it felt like there were more opportunities to interact with people because of the smaller groups making up the tables," said Michael Havarty, a GM for the event, "Then we could come together as a larger group and share our experiences."

The event ran for about five hours, and we encouraged participants to bring their own drinks and food (though most parties seemed to sustain themselves from coffee and corn soup from the vending machines outside the room). The first hour of the event, after introductions were made and expectations were set, was dedicated to world-building and character creation. Statistics for charisma, strength, dexterity, and wisdom were divvied up, and flavor such as religion, alignment, weapon of choice and appearance were written down and shared. Then the GM asked the players some simple questions to guide their game; what rumors have you heard of the evil in the forest? What treasure lies there? What is so special about this hammer of Gilibran's? This free form storytelling is what allows each game to have it's own individual outcomes and narratives, despite starting with the same basic premise. It's also thrilling for players to feel like they have some control over the story. The excitement and recognition on a player's face as they realize that the monster they described way back at the start of the game is what they will be facing off with in the final battle has always been one of my favorite parts of running these games.

Dungeon World still uses dice, but not the iconic 20-sided die used for D&D. For most of the moves and decision making, only two six-sided die (like you would find in a Monopoly set) are required. By leaving moves up to chance, surprising things can happen, like convincing an enemy to join your party, or an unexpected heroic moment changing the tide of battle. The simplicity of the characters, moves, and the open style of the gaming system means that the rules themselves are relatively easy to explain and quick to grasp. Many people came to this event as first time players, and they had no problems picking up the mechanics alongside the veterans of the game. It was heartening to see people explore and connect through this event, and I met many people who I hope will be encouraged to come out to future events. I was pleasantly surprised by the turnout, and I hope it bodes well for other gaming events we may plan. One event goer even said that it was the best attended AJET event that they had been to, and they've been here for five years!

Ada Smith is a third-year JET living in a mountain town in Ehime. She is the RA for Nanyo-A as well as the Event Coordinator for Ehime. In her free time, she loves to explore the beautiful Japanese countryside, attempting to cook, and playing games with her friends. More of her writing can sometimes be found on the Ehime blog, [The Mikan Blog](#).





ARTS AND CULTURE

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*"Life is short,
And pleasures few,
And holed the ship,
And drowned the crew,
But o! But o!
How very blue
the sea is!"*

—Clive Barker, *Abarat*

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Thrifting in
Kyoto:
Choosing
Used
Clothing

Aislinn Chan (Kyoto)

With ever-growing concern over the health of our planet, it's no wonder people are looking into ways to preserve and protect our environment. Not surprisingly, people are highly concerned about the environmental impact of fashion. According to [Business Insider \(2019\)](#), fashion production is responsible for 10% of the carbon emissions created by humans. This impact includes not only production, but emissions created on the consumption side. According to this article by Business Insider, that equals more than all the emissions created by international flights and maritime shipping combined.

Moreover, with all the carbon emissions created in the production of clothing, 85% of all textiles (roughly enough to fill Sydney Harbour) go to landfills each year. The fashion industry is also the second-largest consumer of water, responsible for roughly 20% of industrial water pollution, as textile processing is highly water-intensive and textile dyeing is often water-polluting. This isn't even taking into account the amount of water used in and during consumer consumption. So what is being done about this?

Sustainable fashion is currently a trendy movement in an effort to help the planet, increase production transparency and increase producer-to-consumer trust, while still trying to make a profit. Despite the industry's negative footprint on the

planet, it is also one of the highest employing industries, providing nearly 300 million jobs across the production chain. As defined by the founder of [Mamoo](#), sustainable fashion “refers to the design, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal of apparel with respect and consideration for the health and longevity of our natural environment, and the welfare of the animals and humans involved.”

Many companies have launched their own green initiatives, such as [H&M's Conscious](#) collection. However, it's very important to be wary of greenwashing. Recycled material is actually more labour intensive and difficult to reuse and produce. As production reports often lack detailed information, it is actually quite likely that less than 5% of the material used is actually recycled[VG10]. A good majority of the production cycle is still not transparent enough—especially concerning large companies. However, many smaller companies with transparency and sustainability as their focus are pushing for a green movement in the industry.

“Who made my clothes?” This is one of the most important questions to consider when changing to a more sustainable fashion lifestyle. In 2013 “Who made my clothes?” started as a movement by Orsola de Castro and Carry Somers after an incident in Bangladesh where a clothing factory with known structural issues collapsed

killing or injuring thousands. With preventing these types of incidents the 'Who made my clothes?' movement has goals to unite the industry and provide equality for all levels of the industry, the people involved, and the environment. But this transparency comes at a cost. So why not give old clothes a second chance?

The second-hand clothing industry has steadily been gaining popularity this past decade. As an alternative to often higher-priced slow fashion choices, choosing second hand can also save clothing from going to the landfill.

I highly recommend thrift stores in Japan. Thrifting in Japan is just better. Japanese people tend to keep their belongings in fantastic condition, ensuring that the items offered still have a long lifespan. In addition, thrift shops are carefully organized and displayed, unlike charity shops in Canada (from my personal experience). Rather than finding clothes haphazardly thrown onto racks, items are organized by type, style, colour and fit. Many thrift shops also combine new and old clothing, as well as upcycled collections. In Kyoto, many thrift shops can be found in the Teramachi-dori area.

JAM

JAM is one of the popular... It offers a wide selection of clothing, but also new items. JAM is a chain and that is even bigger, located...



Kanful, while a smaller store, is a cute thrift shop recognizable by its cute cat mascots. It's a two-story shop with a wide variety of blouses and tops. Its overall selection may be more limited than that of a large store like JAM, but it has its own unique charm.

Kanful

ar thrift shops in Kyoto.
ion of not only used
ems and consignment
d has an Osaka branch
ed in Amemura.

3 Star



My personal favourite thrift shop in Kyoto is 3 Star. It's a beautiful space with a friendly atmosphere. The entryway is a lovely gallery space that leads up to the second floor, where the actual thrift shop is located. There are two main sections to the store. The larger, main room offers a wide variety of clothing, shoes and accessories for both men and women, while the second room contains higher-priced items, specialty, locally designed products, and a small selection of house decorations. What I especially appreciate about 3 Star is the exhibition space both downstairs and upstairs where they have local artists' work on display. These are often also for sale and occasionally are done in collaboration with 3 Star as a special collection. In the summer, there are weekend flea markets on their veranda space out front. If you are interested in giving your old clothes a second chance, they also offer sellback opportunities. Even if you are not looking for anything in particular, I highly recommend checking out this lovely space (and the trendy people that shop there).



The beauty of thrifting is the possibility. Price ranges vary widely, as do styles and fits. You may find the most beautiful piece of clothing for an unexpectedly reasonable price, or be disappointed when you find something that would be perfect if only it was in your size. If anything, I hope thrifting becomes an enjoyable opportunity, while saying no more to fast fashion.

I am a Canadian living in Kyoto city. While I am currently teaching English to high school students and loving it, being a fashion designer is my dream. I love all things cute, squishy and quirky. My Instagram handle is [@aislinn_elmo](https://www.instagram.com/aislinn_elmo).

Island of Music

Hannah Moore (Okinawa)



When people think of Okinawa, they generally imagine beautiful beaches. As Japan's most southern prefecture, the island chain certainly has its fair share of sparkling coastline and inviting tropical currents. It also boasts impressive castles and a unique culture from its many years as the separate Kingdom of Ryukyu. Less well known however, is that it is also home to a unique and thriving music scene and disproportionate number of Japan's successful musicians.

When I was first told I was going to Okinawa, I was honestly very upset. After the tears from my broken dreams of *kotatsu* and *sakura* cleared, I began to research Okinawa and the first thing that jumped out was the quintessential Okinawan musical instrument, the *sanshin*. The pride of Okinawa, the *sanshin* holds an important place in Okinawan life and culture, past and present. Traditionally, the family *sanshin* is displayed in the *tokonoma*, where Japanese mainland nobility would display their family sword. As a long term music nerd, The island where music took the place of *bushido* suddenly seemed like the place I was meant to be. My own journey, learning this instrument, filled my three years on JET with rich experiences, brought me closer to the Okinawan community, and gave me insight into the culture and identity of the people around me.



Sanshin is a three-stringed, unfretted instrument. A relative of the mainland *shamisen* and the Chinese *sanxian*, it is thought to have been imported from China some time in the 16th Century. It has a long neck attached to a wooden drum, and is covered in a python skin membrane that gives it its distinctive sound, often likened to a guitar or a banjo. The pick is called a *bachi* or *tsume*, traditionally made of water buffalo horn, and fits over the finger.

Traditionally, the *sanshin* player is the singer in any ensemble and still today qualifications are available only for *uta sanshin*, *sanshin*-playing and singing together. Traditional Okinawan music is usually divided into two main styles, *koten* (classical) and *minyou* (folk music).

Originally, only the richest nobility owned *sanshin*, and they cultivated the type of music known as *koten*. The Kingdom of Ryukyu had no army and survived entirely by diplomacy, and *koten* is closely tied with the development of *Kumiodori*, a musical theatre

tradition created to entertain foreign dignitaries. As is often the case with “upper class” music, *koten* is more of an acquired taste. It is often slow and much of the tension is created by the way that the *sanshin* and vocals move in and out of unison, sometimes clashing in sharp contrast, sometimes following each other, sometimes lagging one behind the other for a beautiful flowing effect. When I went to my first lesson I must confess it felt random, since the norms and concepts of western harmony and western rhythmic patterns do not apply to this music. It is not only complex but played in *seiza*, sitting completely still, eyes directly forward. For me, this is the most difficult type of Okinawan music to learn, but it was an extremely rewarding pursuit.

Minyou covers a wide variety of styles. Roughly translated as folk music, it includes popular traditional songs passed down orally for generations but also includes some more modern songs that were written in living memory. Many *minyou* songs have lively, singable tunes and the *sanshin* often closely follows the melody of the voice, making *minyou* a much more accessible style than *koten*. Unlike *koten*, it can be played standing up, as it is also the music of festivals and parades.



Okinawan sheet music or *kunkunshi*

The mode or “scale” used in Okinawan music is distinct from those used in Japanese folk music. If you are musically inclined, you may notice the addition of what Western musicians might call the 7th note, but Okinawan musicians call *shaku**. This note is almost always absent from traditional Japanese music. Though I use western terminology here it is somewhat inaccurate. Because traditional Okinawan music has no need for equal temperament (which is a European invention), the tuning was unfamiliar to me. Finding the pitch of these notes is one of the biggest challenges for a non-native musician, but the reward is a musical flavour that is distinct from Europe and even the rest of Japan.



There are three or four levels of exams for both *minyou* and *koten*. Students must perform one or two pieces from memory in front of an audience and panel of judges. In this photo, my fellow students and I are about to take the first *minyou* exam. We are wearing our kimonos in *ushinchi* style in colours which signify our teacher’s lineage. This is the traditional style of Okinawa which does not require an *obi* and is therefore much cooler than the mainland style. My hair is in a traditional bun known as a *kanpu* with a hair pin called a *jifa*. The *jifa* could apparently be used as an emergency weapon by ancient Okinawan women and it is still suitably sharp and hefty for this purpose!

There was a time, however, when these beautiful instruments were highly stigmatized, and Okinawans were discouraged from the study of *sanshin* as well the use of their traditional language. During the Second World War, a third of Okinawa’s population was killed, and many cities decimated by large scale bombings. The post-war years were a difficult time of great poverty, even compared to mainland Japan, and ordinary people couldn’t afford to buy basic necessities such as shoes. During this time, the *sanshin* and other symbols of Okinawan culture were associated with low social status and therefore devalued. There was a large cultural push from the Okinawan community for children to speak in mainland Japanese rather than the Okinawan dialect.

My *koten* teacher, Seiji Nakasone sensei, told me about the “dialect board” from his school years. The wooden board which simply said “dialect,” hung around a student’s neck when they spoke in Okinawan dialect. He smiles nostalgically as he tells stories of students purposely stepping on other student’s toes to make them blurt out “Aga!”, the Okinawan equivalent of “Ouch!”), in order to pass the board on to the next student to get rid of it. As

*Technically Okinawan music is written in a type of tablature and *shaku* refers to a finger placement not a note. It is not always the 7th note, however for the most common tuning and scales it is.

sad as this story makes me, he has not let these things make him a bitter man. He has maintained his proficiency in his native tongue and a deep connection with the music of his people, and has now been recognised as a *hojisha*, a possessor of important intangible cultural properties. Because of people like Nakasone sensei, Okinawan culture survived into the modern era, and has made a surprising and dramatic comeback.

More recently, Okinawa has become something of a symbol of Japan's long-lost past. Idolised as a "simpler" way of life, this image of Okinawa as a glamorised rural utopia has spread across Japan. With this image came a renewed interest in all aspects of Okinawan culture. The diet, once blamed for Okinawans' relatively short life expectancy, is often credited with what is now the longest life expectancy in the world. Ears too began honing in on the sound of the sanshin which, along with Okinawan melodies and singing techniques, made its way into many popular acts by Okinawan musicians and mainlanders alike. In 1992, lead singer of The Boom and Yamanashi native Kazufumi Miyazawa wrote "Shima Uta," a hit song about Okinawa that my teacher still plays to this day. Despite not being written by an Okinawan, there seems to be a wholehearted acceptance of this song into modern Okinawan culture. My friend once explained it to me; "I think he has an Okinawan soul."

This time of increased interest in Okinawan culture is sometimes referred to as the "Okinawan Boom". Even now the once-stigmatised sanshin is well loved all over Japan; many mainlanders still prefer to learn it over the local shamisen! More importantly, this widespread acceptance and appreciation allowed Okinawans to take pride in their unique arts and traditions again. Nakasone sensei was discouraged from pursuing sanshin in his youth, but now students at Haebaru Highschool, where I was placed during

JET, thoroughly embrace the sanshin. It is the pride of Okinawa!

Today in Okinawa, traditional music is always close by. Though not all Okinawans can play sanshin, you will find that almost everyone knows someone who can. Weddings and other celebrations often end in enthusiastic *kachashi*—a joyful celebratory dance performed while mixing with strangers and friends alike. During their middle school years, almost all Okinawans at least learn basic *eisa*, a traditional drum dance of Okinawa danced by community groups. The island becomes alive with performances on everyday streets all over the island during the week of Okinawan *Obon*.



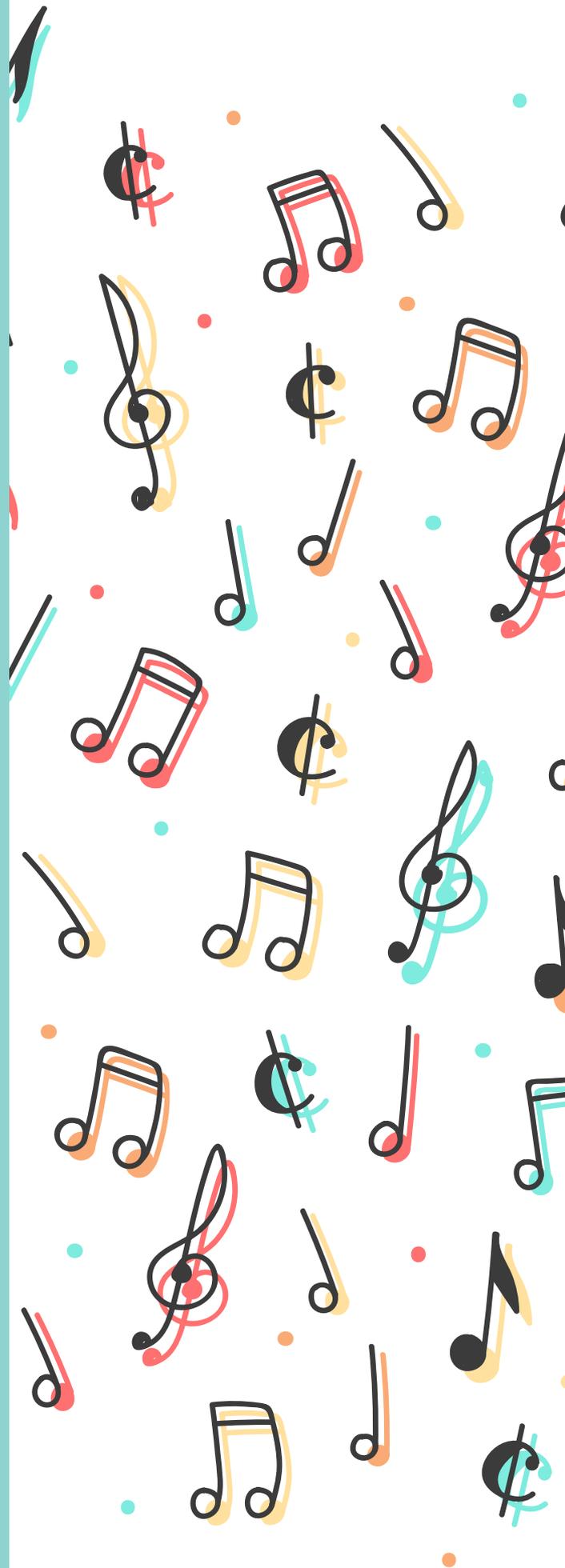
Sydney based eisa group Eisa Champroo perform in traditional Okinawan costumes.

Eisa is a traditional drum dance of Okinawa. Even basic community eisa is an exciting affair. The sound of bass drums en masse causes tingling vibrations throughout your whole body! The sharp precision of the karate-like poses and the improvised free shouting of rhythmic calls make for a dynamic and vibrant dance unlike any I have seen elsewhere. High-level eisa can also have acrobatic jumps and tumbles and is my top recommendation for things to see whilst in Okinawa.



I recently went back to Okinawa for Nakasone sensei's concert to celebrate his 40th anniversary and becoming a hojjiisha. I went out with friends in the famous drinking district, *Sakaemachi*. Within the modest bars that line the back alleys, you will find a sanshin hanging on almost every wall. When the other patrons heard that I had returned for my teacher's concert, they instantly warmed to me, buying me drinks and sharing their food. The bartender initially refused to allow me to play for them due to noise regulations, but the whole bar began to chant completely unprovoked to let me play. He eventually caved. Under that much pressure I was nervous and reverted to my comfort favourite of "Asadoya Yunta." It was originally a rice planting song, featuring a long story sung by a soloist while workers planting rice in the field chanted in response. To my surprise the whole bar and even passers by came alive with their response to my voice. In the electricity of the moment, I let out an enthusiastic "Eeeeeeya!!", a semi-improvised call that can be inserted into almost any song, and the thundering reply was perfectly in unison, "Haiya!"

This is what I most love about Okinawan music—how alive it feels, and how everyday Okinawan people live with it in an organic and natural way. Sanshin, eisa, and kachashi are all cultural practises that have survived this long through Okinawa's turbulent history for a reason. In my opinion, the thing that really sets Okinawan music apart is how joyfully it is practised. It is not simply stiff music for scholars and empty music halls, but a warm music to be lived, in homes, at celebrations, and in the tiniest *izakaya*. It is music to bring people together, still treasured today because of how easy it is to enjoy. During your time in Japan, I hope you will take the time to experience it for yourself.



Where can you experience Okinawan Music?

Sanshin

Sanshin will accompany almost any musical act in Okinawa. You can find players at festivals and on the tourist street Kokusai Dori in the middle of Naha. **Live House Mion** on Kokusai street often has famous musicians and a great atmosphere, but book in advance. There are shows at the [National theatre](#) if you are looking for something a bit upmarket. Or try for something more organic in drinking district **Sakaemachi** where most bars have a sanshin. You might catch a free gig and make a new friend.

Kumiodori

“Discover Kumiodori” includes a small demonstration and workshop, and provides explanation for the show, which can move slowly at times. I also recommend getting the English audio guide. There may be Japanese subtitles but don't expect your Japanese listening skills to help you here—it is all in the Okinawan dialect!

Check the schedule [here](#).

Eisa

Eisa is traditionally danced during Okinawan Obon, which occurs on July 13th-15th of the Lunar Calendar. During this time local groups can be seen all over the islands dancing in the streets, welcoming the spirits of their ancestors.

My top recommendation is the [All Island Eisa Festival](#) which is held on the first weekend after the lunar-calendar Bon Festival in Okinawa city. It's a lot of fun and has a great atmosphere.

The [10,000 Eisa dancers parade](#) happens on the first Sunday of August and is a great way to see many local groups dancing in their own unique styles down Kokusai street in the middle of Naha.

If you can't make it to these don't worry; eisa is so popular it is performed all year round. Catch it at tourist attractions like [Okinawa world](#). It can be a little touristy but the eisa is still quality.

There is also an eisa festival in Tokyo, but as a proud OkiJET I recommend you see it at its source.





Youtube

If you aren't travelling to Okinawa or would just like to experience some music right away I can recommend some things from youtube.

One of my favourite modern Okinawan songs is by **Daichi Hirata** who I had the pleasure of working with recently, and is an absolutely mesmerising musician and stand up guy. "[Dynamic Ryukyu](#)" is the name and here is a version sung by **Akira Ikuma** (Hirata performs the Okinawan "rap").

Begin is a band from the Yaeyama region within Okinawa, known for their Okinawan fusion with nostalgic yet modern themes. "[Sanshin no Hana](#)" is one of my favourites.

Singer **Rimi Natsukawa** uses her beautiful voice to sing both modern Okinawan pop as well as traditional folk songs, and performs all over the world. Here, she sings the traditional classic, "[Asadoya Yunta.](#)"

A hauntingly beautiful, personal favourite of mine is the song "[Futami Jowa.](#)" This version is sung by **Kazumi Tamashiro** and **Takeshi Yamauchi**.

For a bit of excitement try this rendition of "[Honen Ondo.](#)" a traditional kachashi song for dancing to, the final song sung in this video by famous Okinawan group **Nenenes**.

Those adventurous or nerdy enough may wish to check out some **koten** sanshin. The most famous piece that opened nearly every concert I have ever played in is "[Kagiyadefu.](#)" It can be slow but I think it is well worth the effort to appreciate.

If you want to check out **eisa** here are some nice examples. There are many types of eisa, this is a style of **modern eisa** to the song "[Dynamic Ryukyu.](#)"

Here is a more **traditional eisa** done by a local *seinenkai* which is more like the type you will see on the streets during Okinawan Obon.

Hannah Moore is from Australia and spent three wonderful years teaching at Haeburu High School in beautiful Okinawa. During this time, she formed a lifelong bond with sanshin teachers, Asuka Nakamoto and Seiji Nakasone. A music nerd from way back, she now spends her free time playing with the sanshin club she founded in Australia. She dreams of finding a job that will allow her to return to Okinawa one day. In the meantime, she tries to get back often to continue her sanshin studies.

Other links

[National Theatre Japan Okinawa](#)

[Visit Okinawa: Performing Arts Information](#)

[Visit Okinawa: Events in Okinawa](#)

[Kokusai Dori Website Events](#)

[10,000 Dancer Eisa Festival \(Japanese\)](#)



THE CHANGING COLORS OF THE RED AND WHITE SINGING BATTLE Taylor Skultety (Nara)

One of the biggest nights for the music industry in Japan happens on New Year's Eve. On December 31st, folks turn on their TVs around 7p.m. to watch the most popular musical artists of the year compete in an over-the-top men vs. women singing competition. This is *Kouhaku Uta Gassen* (red and white singing battle), an NHK production that has been happening in Japan for the past 70 years. If you're one of the people who doesn't have the time (or NHK subscription) to watch this four hour long crash course in Japanese pop culture, don't worry because we're here to fill you in on all the idols, anime, and less-tropey happenings that you may have missed.

Men and women on the show are divided into two teams; the white team (men) and the red team (women). Each team is represented by a captain. Singer Haruka Ayase represented the women's team while Sho Sakurai, of

Arashi idol group fame, represented the men. Judges are also hand-picked to appear on the show and various Japanese celebrities are peppered in among past contestants to round out the judging panel. This year included Daiya Seto, an Olympic swimmer, Maya Nakanishi a track-and-field paralympian, as well as Akira Yoshino, who won the 2019 Nobel Prize in Chemistry, just to casually name a few. The theme centered around the Olympics and sports featured prominently throughout the night, including the suited up Japanese Rugby Team who were in attendance.

For many musicians appearing on *Kouhaku*, as it is affectionately known, is a sign that they have made it. Artists with sustained popularity in the music business can be invited to appear on the show dozens of times during their careers. *Enka* singer Hiroshi Itsuki was this year asked to return for the

49th time. A slow, melo-dramatic crooning style of music endemic to Japan, *enka* has retained its popularity with older generations.

This year, there was a new attempt to appeal to lovers of this old style of music. Artist Misora Hibari, who didn't miss a single appearance on the show for the entire decade of the 60s, was brought back to life through AI. Through the power of science, her image was digitized on stage and she sang a new song created with sound learning technology. Lucky for you, dear reader, this performance is available to watch on the [NHK YouTube page](#). She addresses the audience fondly in a gentle and only vaguely robotic voice: 'I have always been watching you, you have worked hard, please do your best on my behalf.' Cut to close-ups of audience members weeping.

Kouhaku is not only for old-school viewers. NHK does its best to make the show appealing to all ages. Popular animation characters and songs are there to entertain younger viewers. The anime character *Oshiritantei*, or Butt Detective (he's just like a normal detective except he's a butt), performed his opening theme song dancing next to a sinister-looking anthropomorphic poo. Pikachu naturally got an invite. The group Kanjani8 danced with ten giant Pikachus as part of their act, dozens of digital background Pikachus creating a disorienting (though not unpleasant) visual effect of near endless dancing Pikachus. When the Disney songs started, I was excited for the chance to finally sing along but my hopes were dashed as the first lines of "A Whole New World" came out in Japanese. Songs from Toy Story, and Frozen 2 were also performed.

And Japan's influence overseas was demonstrated too. AKB48 is one of the most popular idol groups to come out of Japan, hardly qualifying for an introduction at all, this year appearing for the 12th time. Their wide appeal has resulted in international sister groups being founded in other Asian countries. A representative member was sent from each of these groups to appear on Kouhaku. JKT48 (Jakarta), BNK48 (Bangkok), MNL48 (Manila), TeamSH (Shanghai), TeamTP (Taipei), SGO48 (Ho Chi Minh City), CGM48 (Chiang Mai), and DEL48 (Delhi) were all in attendance. It was a refreshingly diverse group of thin, attractive, likely-lip-synching young women. Other international performers included the South Korean idol group TWICE, and I finally got to have my sing-along when freaking KISS showed up to perform with Yoshiki Hayashi, drummer of X Japan.

The final songs of the night were performed by Arashi for the white team and solo artist MISIA for the red team. MISIA undeniably stole the show with an impactful

performance, introduced by Haruka Ayase with the words "Love crosses age, gender, and even borders." The first song "Ai no katachi" (The Shape of Love) was soft and accompanied by two dancers embracing and flitting across the stage behind MISIA, who wore a red dress and large golden beehive shaped headpiece. In the next song two DJs joined the stage, DJ Noodles from Taiwan, who legally married their partner when the country changed its laws to allow same-sex marriage in May of 2019, and DJ EMMA, popular in the *ni-chome* (Tokyo's gay district) night life scene. As MISIA belted out the opening lines of "Into the Light," drag queens in shiny silver armor made their way onto the increasingly crowded stage; Rachel D'Amour, Junko Edamame, Hossy, Margarette, Mondo, and LiL Grand-Bitch. A rainbow flag backdrop appeared and the celebrities standing side-stage were shown waving small rainbow flags. It was a huge demonstration of pride on one of the largest stages in Japan. NHK simultaneously tweeted out "crossing age, gender, and borders, we will deliver a stage with passion."

The cookie-cutter dances of Arashi could not follow such an emotional act.

Although the white team won in the end, MISIA and the performers who stood with her on stage sent a strong message that was undoubtedly heard across Japan. A message that will hopefully be carried forward into the new era of Reiwa.

Sources: 1. [OutJapan](#) 2. [Yahoo!Japan](#)

*Taylor Skultety has been living in Japan for three and a half years. She is the Culture Editor at **CONNECT** and one day hopes to sing the Neon Genesis Evangelion theme perfectly at karaoke.*



FEBRUARY RELEASES

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

MOVIES

February 7

- Hustlers (2019)
- The Peanut Butter Falcon (2019)
- The Good Liar (2019)
- Disobedience (2017)
- Gringo (2018)
- Lifechanger (2018)
- Antrum: The Deadliest Film Ever Made (2018)
- Project Gutenberg (2018)
- The Drone (2019)
- Stray (2019)

February 14

- 1917 (2019)
- Domino (2019)
- The Man Who Killed Hitler and Then The Bigfoot -(2018)
- The Golden Glove (2019)
- El Chicano (2018)
- JT LeRoy (2018)
- Malibu Road (2020)

February 21

- Bombshell (2019)
- Charlie's Angels (2019)
- A Hidden Life (2019)
- Primal (2019)
- And Then We Danced (2019)
- Come to Daddy (2019)
- The Pretenders (2018)
- Dauntless: The Battle of Midway (2019)
- The Cleansing Hour (2019)
- An Easy Girl (2019)
- Swing Kids (2018)
- Prem Ratan Dhan Payo (2015)

February 28

- Just Mercy (2019)
- Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark (2019)
- The Call of the Wild (2020)
- Escape Room (2019)
- Les Misérables (2019)
- Long Day's Journey Into Night (2018)
- First Love (2019)
- Take Point (2018)

February 29

- For Sama (2019)

GAMES

February 4

- **Zombie Army 4: Dead War** (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- **Monster Energy Supercross – The Official Videogame 3** (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Stadia)
- **The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance Tactics** (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

February 11

- **Yakuza 5 Remastered** (PS4)

February 13

- **Necronator: Dead Wrong – Steam Early Access** (PC)

February 14

- **Darksiders Genesis** (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- **Warriors Orochi 4 Ultimate** (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- **Street Fighter 5: Champion Edition** (PC, PS4)
- **Dreams** (PS4)

February 18

- **Bayonetta & Vanquish 10th Anniversary Bundle** (PS4, Xbox One)

February 20

- **Devil May Cry 3 Special Edition** (Switch)

February 25

- **Two Point Hospital** (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- **Conan Chop Chop** (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- **Infliction: Extended Cut** (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

February 27

- **Overpass** (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

February 28

- **Marvel's Iron Man VR** (PS VR)
- **Romance of The Three Kingdoms 14** (PC, PS4)
- **One Punch Man: A Hero Nobody Knows** (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

Unspecified Date

- **Dungeon Defenders: Awakened** (Switch)

Sources

<https://www.imdb.com/calendar/?region=jp>
<https://www.vg247.com/2019/07/15/video-game-release-dates-2019/>

Photo

Romain Mathon on Unsplash.com

Journey to the Heart of Shigaraki Pottery

From Testicles to Tea Ceremony

If you have never heard of the animal turned Japanese monster, raccoon dog (often known as tanuki), then you might not be aware of its two biggest . . . assets. Since ancient Japanese times, tanuki have been associated with mischief and indulgence. In more modern times, households have used statues of tanuki as a way to bless a newly established home or business with good fortune and protection against natural disasters. (3)

These statues are formed, fired, and created in one place, Shigaraki in Shiga Prefecture. A city that maintains much of its old traditional charm, sitting high in the mountains near the border of Nara and Mie. The climate makes for rich soil and clay that lends to its well-known and unique style of pottery, *shigarakiyaki*. (2) Not only the minerals and flora but also the fauna is in plethora, including the famous tanuki that became an inspiration for the pottery motif.



The current amalgamation of the tanuki statue is a recent development in history and its popularity started with the Showa Emperor, Hirohito. On his visit to Shigaraki in 1951, he was greeted by many Japanese flags and tanuki statues. Taken by the spectacular sight, he created a poem which he used as a greeting that day and thus the tanuki was solidified as a popular pottery product. (2)

Though still ever-popular, and despite my having studied abroad in Shiga for one year, I never visited the homeland of the coveted tanuki statues. I was only ever disturbed by the overspill that had spread to the area around my campus, sometimes even startling me with their looming and indulgent figures. The tanuki statues were everywhere. I couldn't escape. It wasn't until my second stay in Japan that I made the trek to the famous location to satisfy my perturbed curiosity and potentially quell my ever-growing disgust with the exhibitionist form.



But is that all there was to it? I wondered. Despite the tanuki's allure for reasons cute, strange, or fad, they are equivalent to the kitschy painted coconuts, Route 66 giant dinosaurs, or the American rest stop boobie mug—tourist trap products used to pull in the crowds. All this to say, if you strip away Shigaraki's tanuki façade, what's left for shigarakiyaki?

Surprisingly a whole lot more.

It was a bleak and gray-cast day. Not quite downpour but enough rain to keep you indoors. My friends and I had agreed to meet up and drive to Shigaraki to get a first-hand experience with making shigarakiyaki.

We arrived to be welcomed similarly to Emperor Hirohito; the tanuki figures crept out from every corner in greeting. But the goal for the day was not to pay them any mind. We were there to learn how to make pottery.

We were taken into the back portion of a studio and put on pottery wheels. Though I love pottery and had taken multiple classes, I had never used a pottery wheel before so suffice to say I was excited to try. However, more traditional methods of making Japanese pottery used a coil method so I was at first confused. Nevertheless, I tried my hand at some simple objects; a bowl, a mug,

a plate. But it didn't scream shigarakiyaki. We were then told to pick a glaze color and go on our merry way. It was fun but was it authentic? How naïve I was! To think we would actually make real shigarakiyaki in an hour.

To my chagrin, we only experienced making pottery in Shigaraki, not making shigarakiyaki. For unskilled hands, it must be quite hard to copy. So then, what makes shigarakiyaki, shigarakiyaki?



Shigarakiyaki is one of the many famous types of pottery in Japan. If ever on a trip to any prefecture, chances are there will be a pottery style associated with the area displayed in many gift shops. However, the characteristics of each pottery style are specific to its geography. This is based on a variety of factors, one being the type of clay that is taken from the land. Each location has a different balance of minerals and chemical components that affect the end product. The type of glaze, the motifs used, the colors introduced, all differentiate the famous potteries of Japan.



Take, for example, shigarakiyaki. It is more rustic and gritty compared to the polished, refined, and intricate kyoyaki (Kyoto pottery). It holds a certain rough imperfect charm often known as wabi-sabi. Roughly, the idea that imperfection in itself is perfection. (1)

The glaze (uwagusuri, 釉薬) of shigarakiyaki is all-natural (shizenyuu, 自然釉). Rather, there is no glaze applied to the pottery at all. While firing in the kiln, the clay comes into contact with the ashes from the kindling which then turns into a natural glass. In the kiln, many products are fired side-by-side which also allows for any loose bits of clay to transfer and adhere to other pieces (hittsuki or ひっつき lit. stuck). (1)



The clay itself in Shigaraki is special too. Located just an hour away from the majestic Lake Biwa, there are bountiful amounts of clay in the region. As seen on the finished pottery, the natural dusty red and orange colors come from the copious amounts of iron in the region's clay. (2)

I couldn't make shigarakiyaki, but I knew I wanted to return. I was thoroughly charmed by the rugged appearance of the pottery. The second time I visited, the weather was much of the same. Gloomy and yet through the chilled mist it seemed perfectly fitting, a natural constant. Due to the typhoon that had recently passed, the Shigaraki Pottery Festival was cancelled. We didn't let it dampen our spirits as we took the opportunity to visit the kilns used for firing the pottery.

The traditional method of firing pottery in Shigaraki is called an ascending kiln (noborikama, 登り窯). As the name implies, the kiln is built on a slope or more naturally built alongside a hill or mountainside. (1) The fire is made at the base and as the heat rises, it fires the pottery in each tier sequentially. Each chamber is shaped like an oval and they all stand in a stair-like formation. Now, it is more convenient to use electric kilns though some artists still prefer the traditional method of firing pottery.



Despite the modernization of the art form, pottery in Japan is closely linked to the core of Japanese culture. The vessels are used in tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and general cookery. Shigarakiyaki is also used in these traditional practices. However, much like one would have a favorite coffee mug or flower vase, the use of any kind of pottery is up to the user's taste.

In tea ceremonies, shigarakiyaki is often coveted for its natural appearance. Depending on the mood the coordinator of the event is trying to achieve, shigarakiyaki might be used in a very calm and informal setting, or where the theme is centered on nature.

However intimidating, shigarakiyaki can be used for daily dining plates as well as informal bouquet vases. It also isn't just tanuki statues littered along the street. But for much of my displeasure of the famed tanuki statue, it is also the reason why I got to know of the greater shigarakiyaki tradition. So in a way, thanks to the tanuki's god-given gifts, a greater appreciation of a Japanese art-form was achieved.

Photos: Victoria Eichbauer and Tayler Skultety

Sources:

- (1) Kawano Emiko 河野恵美子, *From Zero to Understanding! An Introduction to Pottery*, 2017
- (2) <https://bit.ly/35oluw3>
- (3) <https://bit.ly/2MWxHBQ>

Victoria Eichbauer is a third-year ALT from Detroit, Michigan. She now resides in Nara Prefecture. In her free time, she enjoys tea ceremony and flower arrangement.





Working for the K

David Caprara (Nara)

JETs living in Japan in the Reiwa era are there during a period of extreme downsizing that is reshaping the face of the country and its foothold in the world. Many of you reading this live in small towns and villages with faded signs and long-ago-shuttered businesses that give a hint of a time decades ago when these areas were thriving and economically viable. A few decades from now, many villages that JETs call their Japanese hometown will be abandoned and cease to exist.

From 2012 to 2014, I was a JET in the rural village of Kawakami-mura in the hilly Yoshino region of Nara Prefecture. Kawakami is a village with unbelievably clean water, access to great hikes, and a rich history, but it is as deep in the sticks as one can be in Japan. The village is comprised of a string of hamlets peppered within a river valley connected by a single road. There are no trains or convenience stores.

On the first day that I arrived in Nara, the JTE who picked me up from the prefectural

capital to drive me to Kawakami found his own description of where I'd be living to be hilarious. "Where you live," he said laughing with a huge grin on his face, "No people! Only animals!" I remember vividly that he spent an awkwardly-long portion of our one-and-a-half-hour car ride to Kawakami making animal gestures and growls, imitating the range of creatures that I'd be living amongst in my village.

My JTE wasn't completely wrong. However, the people that I did form bonds with throughout the two years I lived in Kawakami ended up becoming more or less family. This was particularly true with my taiko team members and another group of bikers that I rode motorcycles with.

After my time with JET, I pursued a career as a journalist and spent years chasing writing assignments and producing documentaries for various international media outlets around the world. I climbed into the Nepali Himalayas to create a documentary for VICE on hallucinogenic honey hunters, who ascended



Ryūryūtai

A JET Alumn's Unexpected Return to Village Life

steep cliffs on hand-made bamboo ladders. I spent weeks camping out in a tent along the razor-wired Greece-Macedonia border reporting on the situation when nearly 10,000 refugees were unable to pass beyond Greece and were bottlenecked in a tent village that devolved into a humanitarian disaster area. I traveled widely and eventually found full-time reporting jobs in New York, first with The Tokyo Shimbun and later with Japan's public broadcaster, NHK.

In the years after I left JET, I was building my career and having meaningful experiences, but I frequently thought about my friends in and around Kawakami and dreamed about the idea of returning one day. This desire was augmented by the experience of feeling ground down by life in the city. As my brain fried on my daily standing commutes on New York's decaying subway system, I wondered if my career really necessitated living in the city. In this global age of remote work where you can access the world anywhere you have an internet connection, I wondered if it would be

possible to continue my career in a place like Kawakami for a while.

I left my job in New York and bought a one-way ticket to Japan with the goal of starting a new chapter of my career back in the Land of the Rising Sun. Shortly after making that decision, I was reading through my news feed and found a report that hit me like a punch in the gut. According to a recent study by the government of Japan, of all of Japan's thousands of municipalities, Kawakami had been projected to be the [#1 village](#) for the highest rate of downsizing between 2019 and 2045. It wasn't a shock to me that the village was projected to decline, but something about its becoming #1 on the list felt surreal and particularly crushing—like learning that a loved one had been diagnosed with a terminal disease. I grew a sense of determination to select Kawakami as the next place I would call home. I believed that I could make it anywhere, and I felt that if this was so, why not work in a place that could use my help. I wanted to show by example



of the program is that people from cities are hired to move to the countryside and engage in some sort of activity that will contribute to the life of rural villages. In the case of Kawakami, where I was hired and able to return to through this program, participants have a four-day workweek and are essentially given carte blanche to engage in whatever kind of work they feel will benefit the area. One guy here is raising fish, another woman is in the process of setting up her own café. A Kyoryokutai friend in the neighboring town of Yoshino renovated a 100-year-old abandoned pharmacy and turned it into a restaurant. My work activities are centered around documentary journalism and, in the future, I would like to also expand into renovating abandoned houses. (There are between 8.5 and 10 million of them in Japan—more than in any other country in the world).

Participants are encouraged to create their own businesses and it is hoped that the businesses and fruits of the efforts of the Kyoryokutai members will outlast the one to three years that they are expected to be with the program. In villages where the conditions of the Kyoryokutai program are interpreted loosely, the program feels like something of a cross between a relocation initiative, an incubator program, and a rural Japanese experimentation program with universal basic income.

Most of the Kyoryokutai members are in their 20s and 30s. A good friend and mentor in Japan described life in the inaka for city-folk quite well: “When it’s just one or two of you in the countryside, life is miserable, but when there are 20 of you, it’s a party.”

Participation in the Kyoryokutai is almost entirely Japanese and there is no information provided on the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications website in English (all of my research and application for the job was done in Japanese), however, this program is available to foreign nationals and there is a written desire on this website (in Japanese) to increase this participation. As of 2019, JET alumni have been specifically mentioned as candidates for this program on the [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Website](#). It appears there is a desire to create a stronger JET-to-Kyoryokutai pathway, though how this is so is as of yet not entirely clear.

Given the wide diversity of experiences and backgrounds of JET Programme participants, I see great potential for more and more JETs using the Kyoryokutai as a channel through which, after their completion of JET, they can maintain a connection with the villages where they are placed and to expand their work into areas beyond English teaching. The program is not available in every

that we don’t always have to chase opportunities, but that we can create them even in places where people say none can exist.

Despite its rapidly declining population, Japan still maintains a high wall with regard to letting immigrants into the country. Obtaining a visa stood as a major obstacle to my resettling in Japan. Eventually, I secured a visa and the financial base for my reporting that I was seeking through a unique rural revitalization program funded by the Japanese government: the 地域おこし協力隊 (Chiiki Okoshi Kyoryokutai).

The Kyoryokutai program was in its first years back when I was a JET and, though I had a vague idea of what it was, I hadn’t really probed it deeply enough to consider it as an option. There is no official name for the program in English but it translates to something like the “Rural Revitalization Cooperation Corps” and the requirements of the program are about as vague and open to interpretation as the program’s name.

As with JET, the conditions of Kyoryokutai members and their job conditions are completely dependent on where they are placed, but a general synopsis

municipality in Japan but, as of 2018, there are 5,530 participants in 1,050 municipalities across 11 of Japan's 47 prefectures. The national government has expressed a desire to see these numbers increase.

Through the expansion of the Kyoryokutai program as well as through the efforts of unaffiliated innovative thinkers who have unplugged from city life to live in Japan's countryside, little pockets of creativity are popping up all around Japan. Their numbers will never be enough to fully replace the numbers lost through Japan's aging population, rural flight, and declining birth rate, but these communities do offer new ways of living that might be a hint of how rural villages with a depopulation death sentence might actually be able to defy the odds and continue into the future.

Life and work for me back in Kawakami has been fulfilling. I'm back to playing with my taiko team and hanging out with my biker friends. I spend most of my working hours on the journalism work that I had hoped I'd be able to engage in when I left New York. I'm not sure if I will physically remain in Kawakami forever or beyond my time in the Kyoryokutai program, but I do know that because of the ties that were created during my time with the JET Programme, I will always have a connection to this place and to this beautiful country. I'm excited to see how the current generation of JETs and those who will come after them will continue to foster ties with their communities and apply their unique skills to benefit the country.

To learn more about the 地域おこし協力隊 program, research in Japanese on the [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Website](#), or the national [地域おこし協力隊 website](#). Recruitment is handled through local municipalities and you can find out more through researching online or contacting the kencho of your prefecture to find out if the program is available where you are living.

David Caprara is a journalist living in the hills of Kawakami Village in Nara Prefecture. He is a member of Japan's Chiiki Okoshi Kyoryokutai program (Japan's Rural Revitalization Corps) and was a JET based in Kawakami from 2012 to 2014. You can learn more about him and the work that he's done on his website, www.davidcaprara.com or by following him on Twitter [@CapraraD](#).

Yoshino Ringyo is a documentary that David is directing from Kawakami on the culture of lumberjacks in Japan and the struggle to continue centuries-old traditions of forestry.



A SHORT DOCUMENTARY FILM BY DAVID CAPRARA

YOSHINO RINGYO

吉野林業

吉野林業と川上村、不屈の精神
国際的ドキュメンタリー映画

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY DAVID CAPRARA

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL CROMMETT EDITED BY KIRA DANE

SPONSORED BY CHIUKI OKOSHI KYOROKUTAI PROJECT FILMED ON LOCATION IN KAWAKAMI VILLAGE, YOSHINO JAPAN

The Japanese House Explained

A NEWCOMERS GUIDE TO SOME OF THE CULTURAL
ORIGINS OF THE JAPANESE HOME





Curtain House Designed by Shigeru Ban,
by 準建築人手札網站 Forgemind ArchiMedia



「縁側」 "Engawa" by Ocdp CC

Benjamin Everitt (Tokyo)

Adjusting to a Japanese home may be daunting for many residents new to Japan. Whether it is a small 1DK apartment within a dense metropolis, or a standalone house within the rural backcountry, newcomers face the challenge of adjusting their social habits and lifestyles to fit the small confines of the Japanese home. The definition of 'small' in this context is not limited to the floor area, but also relates to a home's permeability and fragility. Paper thin, un-insulated walls are battered with constant natural disasters and the close proximity to neighbours may lead to spaces within feeling more vulnerable and smaller than they actually are. Despite these initial differences, it is possible to find comfort within your new Japanese home by exploring the cultural background of spaces that are commonly found within almost every Japanese dwelling.

Many aspects of the modern Japanese home are adapted from the vernacular housing made for the common folk known as the *minka* (民家・みんか). As Japan is a volcanic island with frequent natural disasters, *minka* housing is structured with timber

posts and beams in which the flexibility of the material allows for the house to shake independently from the ground or gusts of wind. Although *minka* are generally utilitarian, variations of materials and finishes are applied depending on the geography of the local region (*fudo*・不動・ふどう)[1]. For example, an urban house with a shop front known as a *machiya* (町家・まちや) as you might find in Kyoto, may be clad with clay roof tiles (瓦屋根・かわらやね) to prevent the outbreak of fire, or a rural village would have thatched hipped roofs made of straw to accommodate the harsher climate, a style known as *gasshozukuri* (合掌造り・がっしょうづくり) and made famous by the UNESCO world heritage site of Shirakawago in Gifu prefecture.

Building upon these practical adaptations, the spaces beneath these heavy roofs are configured to cater towards the unique domestic lifestyle that encompasses Japanese culture. As the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma describes his design process: "I first design the roof of the building which provides shade. I consider shade to be the most important

part of the building. As the roof casts a shadow within the building, it creates a dialogue with the plants.” (Kuma, Goethe Institute) What Kuma refers to in this instance is how the shadow cast from the roof and eaves (noki・軒・のき) creates a very dark interior, which draws the inhabitants’ attention outward towards the bright view of the garden, the street life, or the surrounding landscape. As the timber posts and beams hold up the majority of the load, this allows the walls to be designated as any material, such as opaque wooden or paper screen doors (fusuma・襖・ふすま) acting as a partition that separates spaces temporarily, or the iconic plant fibre paper screen doors (shoji・障子・しょうじ) that acted in lieu of glass windows to diffuse light into the building.

Life within the home is embodied by how the need for privacy and comfort is controlled by the seasonal arrangements of the sliding paper partitions. During the hot summer months, the entire house may be exposed, the sliding doors opened fully, with families enjoying watermelon along the veranda (engawa・縁側・えんがわ) as the fresh air passes through; during the winter seasons the entire house is enclosed with the sliding doors boarded shut, to create individual pockets of heat for people to gather in.

It is both peculiar and saddening how these whimsical images of the traditional Japanese home are becoming fleeting. The rustic beauty and warm textures of natural materials have been substituted with artificial synthetics; the obsessive use of concrete and steel has reduced the importance of timber to Japanese society. However, within contemporary homes, the traditional and the modern have been combined to preserve the most significant cultural aspects, in adaptation to the demands of the present day.

Bespoke homes such as the Curtain House by Shigeru Ban, located in the Itabashi neighborhood of Tokyo, reinterpret the engawa veranda into a protruding open deck. Although the house is completely exposed to the environment, the main living space is elevated on the second floor to prevent

onlookers at street level from gazing into the entire home. Paper screens are exchanged for a western curtain, a single thin cloth providing privacy, while still diffusing light into the building.

Another home, the Sumiyoshi Row House by Tadao Ando found in the Sumiyoshi area of Osaka, is a reinterpretation of the machiya style, minka dwelling. Borrowing from the way a machiya house has the street-facing side of the building closed off to preserve the privacy of its customers, this home follows the same principle using a thick concrete facade with a penetrated hole that implies the door to the home.

Although the above works are the exception and not the standard, they are helpful examples towards understanding how many traditional elements of Japanese architecture are reinterpreted in the contemporary environment. As we spend a very large portion of our stay in Japan within our residences, the process of learning to love our Japanese homes can be an invaluable cultural experience.

Footnotes:

[1] ‘fudo’[不動・ふどう] meaning ‘milieu’ is a philosophy that outlines certain characteristics in geography, climate and culture that defines a local sense of place. From a western perspective, the Romans had a similar philosophy of the ‘genius loci’(Spirit of the place). The same kanji is used to describe a real estate agent, (fudo-san・不動産・ふどうさん) who generally lacks any sense of spirit or culture within their line of work.

References:

Goethe-Institut. (2015, Jun 23). Kengo Kuma - Nezu Museum Tokyo English [Video]. YouTube.

Ben is a Graduate of Victoria University of Wellington, Te Whare Wananga o te upoko o te ika a Maui, and currently working at an architectural practice in Tokyo, Japan. He enjoys photographing and drawing Japanese temples when he is not overworked at his Japanese company. He would like to explore how timber can be used abundantly in contemporary architecture in the near future.





Sumiyoshi Row House Designed by Tadao Ando, by Het Gallery



"A machiya style house near Nijojo" By Japanexperterna



THE EARTH IS A POLKA DOT

Cynthia Gomez (Gunma)

Art has a beautiful way of granting creators the opportunity to share their deepest emotions. It allows the artist to express themselves in a way which words won't (**suffice**). The artist is someone who simply wishes to be understood.

Nonagenarian Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama is a classic exemplar of this notion. You may know her as the old Japanese woman who wears red bob wigs and polka dot dresses or—you might more easily recognize her work. Surely you're familiar with those spotted pumpkins? Or those selfies of people in the "infinity rooms" all over Instagram?

This November I had the privilege and pleasure of visiting the Yayoi Kusama museum in Tokyo. Being a fervent admirer of her previous works, nothing less than a phenomenal experience was expected.

The thin, white, five-story building stands tall in the western suburbs of Shinjuku and is a work of art in itself. Upon entering the polka dot-strewn lobby, the viewer

is invited into the mind of the artist by visually experiencing the same spotted hallucinations that frequented her life.

Photography within the museum is forbidden with the exception of the fourth and fifth floor exhibitions, much to the dismay of avid social media enthusiasts like myself. However, I believe this implementation warrants the art to be properly viewed and appreciated in the moment.

As Kusama is known for dabbling in a plethora of mediums, the museum is abounding with variety. Her various sculptures, paintings, and textile work grace each floor with their presence. The exhibition on display at the time was titled *Spirits of Aggregation*. This show, like many of Kusama's works, delves into themes of multiples, patterns, obsessive compulsiveness, anxieties, immersion, and infinity.

The first (but unofficial) installation is located in an unexpected but pleasantly surprising place—the elevator! The three walls and doorway are mirrors spangled in

Though you might have experienced one or many of Kusama's infinity mirror rooms, this may be the only one with the ability to physically ascend. Quite possibly the best part of having a museum dedicated exclusively to an artist is the disposition to make the architecture an equally immersive experience as well.

Beginning from the second floor, *Accumulation of Letters* (1961), a framed collage of text from one of her 1961 exhibitions was on display that day. In this work, her name—Yayoi Kusama Yayoi Kusama Yayoi Kusama—is echoed repeatedly, and almost compulsively until it becomes another of her renowned visual patterns. As mentioned earlier, the artist has reportedly hallucinated patterns since childhood. It is through her art that she bestows these visions upon the viewer, so that they may partake in her experience.

Present also are a few pieces from the artist's infamous phallus series. In this series, Kusama appeases her sexual anxiety and fear of male genitalia by covering ordinary items such as chairs, frying pans, boats and even entire rooms of floors in sculpted or plush phalli. What better way to confront your fears than to surround yourself in them completely?



This body of work, though rather outlandish, aims for the viewer to share firsthand in a phobia which consumes the artist in the same way that the phalli consumes the artworks.

The astonishment escalates as does the viewer into the higher reaches of the vicinity. The third floor of the museum displays an abundance of gigantic square-shaped paintings that wrap around the vast white walls. Kusama's choice to use large canvases that tower over the viewer plays on her perpetual desire to make her art an immersive experience. In these works, the artist uses primary colors to portray organic shapes, lines, and you guessed it—polka dots! The free forms and swayed brush strokes are an expulsion of emotion and the polka dots reflect her compulsive behavior and inclination for repetition. Essentially, the paintings are an embodiment of the artist's anxiety, in which she renders herself vulnerable to the audience and bares her deepest feelings.

Kusama has said that she uses art as her own form of therapy. The reason such an immense body of these colorful, nonfigurative paintings exists is because the artist has an uncontrollable desire to create consistently, to the point where she has been hospitalized or overworked herself. However, she has said that if she stops making art, she may slip back into a depressed stupor. It is in creation that

Kusama finds refuge from the mental maladies that have plagued her since her childhood.

The next floor was without question my favorite. The fourth floor is dedicated exclusively to Kusama's infinity ladder installation. The room is almost pitch black except for a glowing neon ladder covered in dots in the center of the room. There are two round mirrors on the top and bottom of the ladder, which makes it appear as if it were protruding from a portal in the ground and continuing into another in the ceiling. A closer look into the mirrors allows the viewers a glimpse into infinity.

Quote thy artist, "I think I will be able to, in the end, rise above the clouds and climb the stairs to heaven, and I will look down at my beautiful life."

The fifth and final floor is the rooftop patio of the building where a large spotted sculpture of a pumpkin sits—the pumpkin being another of Kusama's recurring icons. The rooftop is partially open so that the Tokyo sky shines upon the massive chrome vegetable like an oculus, giving it the glorification the artist believes it deserves.

And thus the patron's venture into Yayoi Kusama's realm of color and illusion comes to an end. It's true, the museum is kind of small! Some dismayed reviewers on TripAdvisor even believe the museum leaves much to be desired and I agree. . . but in the sense that Kusama's work always

leaves me profoundly inspired and eager for more.

What I love about Yayoi Kusama's art—more than the fact that it is aesthetically pleasing, more than how much it makes a lovely addition to anyone's feed—is the profound sentiment that it represents. She has taken all of her disquietude, all of her infatuations, all of her traumas and embodied them into monuments for the world to see, enjoy and hopefully understand. Art is empathy. The museum collection contains over 600 of Kusama's works, which will be showcased in biannual exhibitions. So no matter when you decide to take a visit, there will always be something new and beautiful for you to see.

Cynthia is a first-year ALT in Kiryu, Gunma originally from Southern California, USA. She has a double Bachelors of Fine Art and oil painting is her calling. Some of her favorites include dogs, long drives, altruism, and self care.







Bloom: Nurturing Art in Tokyo

Gwendolyn Meshberg (Tokyo)



I came to Japan in August 2015 as a Tokyo JET. I was somewhat familiar with Tokyo, having studied abroad in Setagaya, Tokyo for a summer program at Showa Women's University when I was in college. However, coming from New England and having only lived in small towns and cities, I was not entirely prepared for life on my own in a big city like Tokyo. I had taken Japanese classes at a neighboring college for four years while majoring in Illustration at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, but these classes only scratched the surface of the Japanese language, and I had so much more to learn.

When I first came to Japan, I took a break from illustration as I battled learning more Japanese and getting used to the city. Although I drew in my sketchbook, part of me was hesitant to pick up a paint brush again after the great stress,

countless all-nighters, rigorous critiques, and other hardships I had endured as an art student in college, and the now additional stress of not being able to adequately communicate with those around me here in Tokyo.

But eventually I found a group of supportive Tokyo JET artists and the desire to draw, paint, and create reawakened. We would often get together to drink and draw and have friends model for us. We supported and uplifted one another, and eventually I gathered the courage to study for and take the JLPT and paint more consistently.

The inspiration for my pieces is derived from nature and human interaction. Through watercolor illustration I depict life as a whimsical storybook, creating an intimate world for the viewer to escape to.

*This beautiful variety
of nature constantly
serves as inspiration for
my artwork.*

I am surrounded by inspiration in Tokyo. Living a 15-minute walk from Ueno Park, I can easily go and see a beautiful range of seasonal floral and fauna—from cherry blossoms in spring to hydrangea in June. Fields of sunflowers, rose gardens, parks full of purple wisteria, and temple grounds adorned with paths of azaleas are all within reach by train. This beautiful variety of nature constantly serves as inspiration for my artwork.

Living in Japan as a foreign artist has not been without its challenges. However, after studying more Japanese and thanks to the combined support of the JET community and artist friends, I have been able to organize and participate in various events, exhibitions, and art markets here in Tokyo.

Some exhibitions that I've participated in and organized include "ARTNIGHT: Spring Edition: InBloom", "Christmas Art Market" at Design Festa in Harajuku, "Transitions" at ICA SPACE, the 世界のKAWAII展 at Picaresque Gallery, and the "We are the Christmas" group Christmas Exhibit at Boji Hair+Gallery in Shibuya.

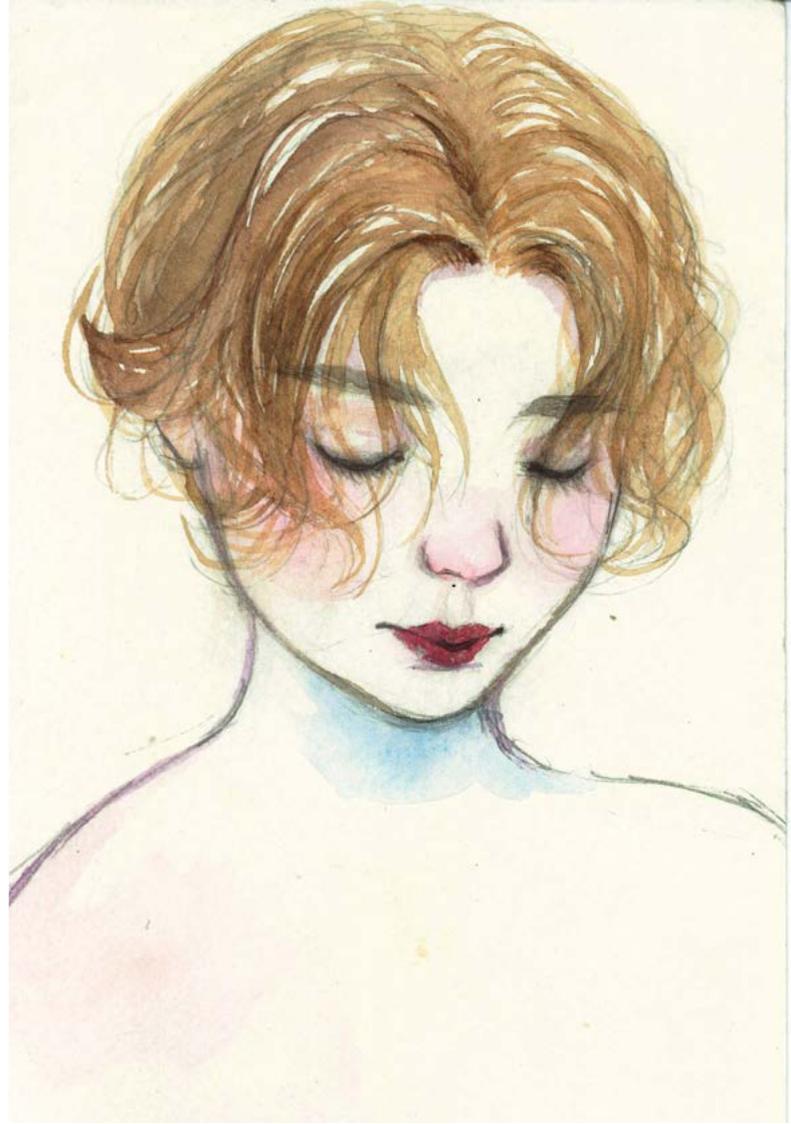
With the contract for my final year on JET ending this August, I'm currently faced with deciding where I want to work next, but no matter what I choose to do, I will continue to create, to share those creations with the world, and to organize events and support other artists within Tokyo.

To connect with other artists in Tokyo and for more information on artist events such as Drink and Draws, please check out the TJET Artists group on [Facebook](#).

For more of my work, including sketches and Inktober pieces, and for news of future exhibitions, please connect with me on Instagram [@goondepompadour](#) or through my website [www.gwendolynmeshberg.com](#)

Gwendolyn Meshberg is a fifth-year JET from the US. She is currently teaching high school in Tokyo.









NAMIDA



涙

Namida:Tears

Emily Ridgway (JET alumna)

As ALTs, we all know those constant waxing and waning feelings of excitement, frustration, and homesickness. Sometimes you just feel like you're blocked up, unable to process. This zine is about one such time for me. Written during what felt like the never-ending winter of February 2019, this zine was a therapeutic outlet for what felt like overwhelming emotion, yet also dullness at the same time.

It takes you through my frustration at my own condition, just wanting that outlet of a physical manifestation of my emotion in the form of warm, wet tears. The feeling of trapping myself by building walls to cope with the confusing combination of emotions moving to a different country brings, but also feeling like I was unable to have that space in Japan. I did manage to find such a space for these flurry of emotions, relating back to my roots in New Zealand; through a strange combination of Instagram crushes and airline safety videos. But this zine is a snapshot, a capture of my emotions at one point during my time in Japan, through the juxtaposition of art and text.

Emily Ridgway was a one-and-done ALT based in Maibara, Shiga Prefecture teaching JHS for 2018-19. She is now back home in New Zealand. Having always had a penchant for drawing and writing, the medium of the zine drew her in as a quick and dirty way of expression using both of these interests in her own way. Having plenty of down-time (and available stationery) during the holidays at school in Japan, she used this time wisely to delve deeper into her zine passion. She has submitted zines at zine-fests in her hometown of Auckland and continues to be an active member of the zine community in her new home of Wellington. She is also now an expert in making herself cry; she recommends watching the Air New Zealand safety video ['Summer of Safety'](#) or another such strange yet nostalgic video to let those tears flow. You can find her longer-form Japanese/emotional musings [here](#).

2
I haven't
cried
for more
than
4 months
now...

3
I can't
remember

the last time
my eyes were
so dry.



I am very aware of the
emotional wall I have built
myself here keeping the tears
at bay

6 But I just want



to cry.

I
DON'T
WANT
TO
DEAL
WITH
THE
SHIT
IN
MY
HEAD

I DON'T CARE

ABOUT WHAT

OR WHO.

OR WHEN.

I JUST WANT TO

HAVE A GOOD OLD

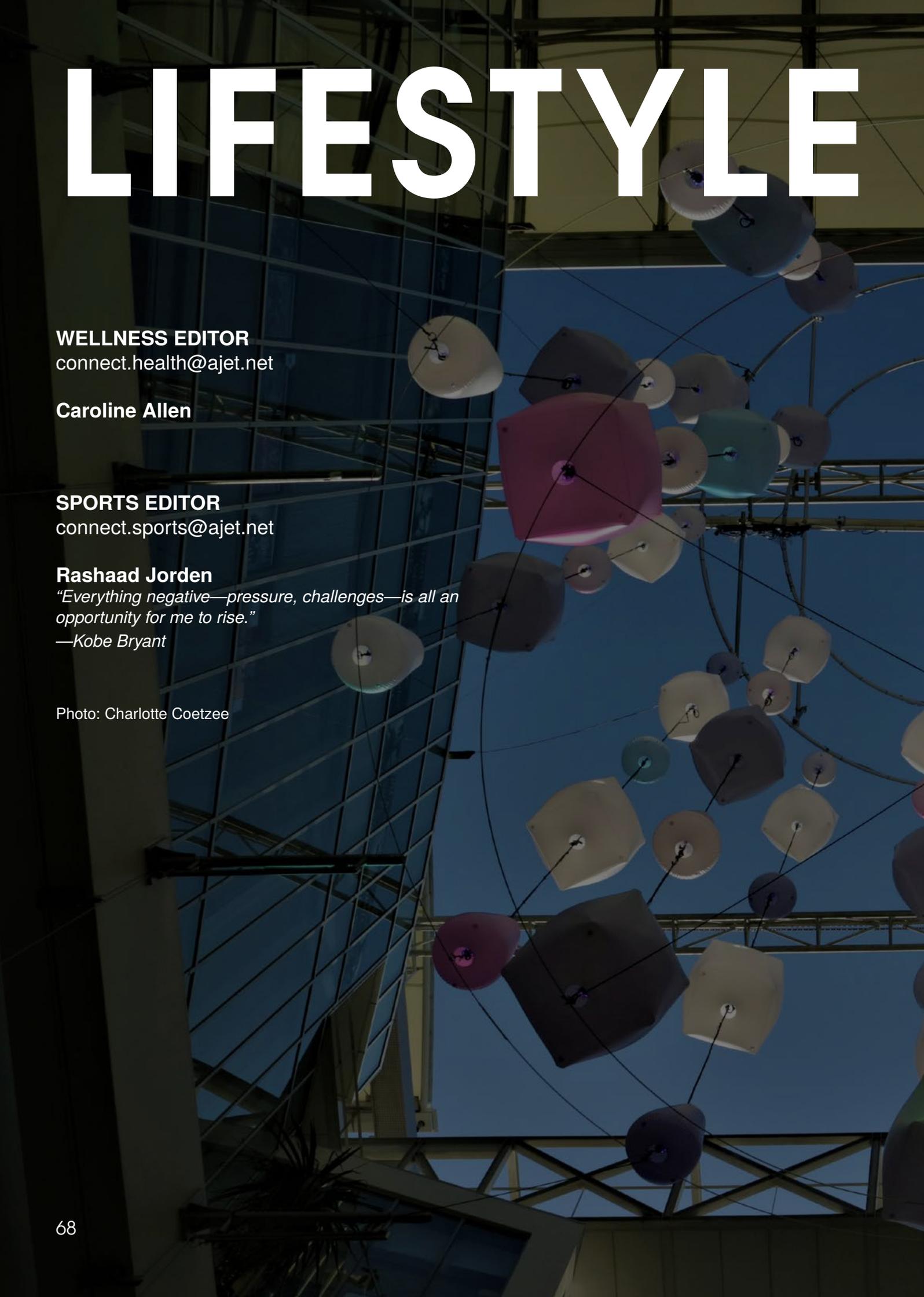
CRY.

I'M SICK OF USING WORDS TO
EXPRESS MYSELF. I WANT TO
USE REAL, RAW, WET TEARS.

I'll deal with why when
I get back to NZ. 🍷

泣く。

LIFESTYLE



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Rashaad Jordan

“Everything negative—pressure, challenges—is all an opportunity for me to rise.”

—Kobe Bryant

Photo: Charlotte Coetzee



WHAT'S THE
POINT OF MAKING
NEW YEAR'S
RESOLUTIONS?

Brett Borthwick (Tottori)

It's almost become a trend to say that you don't believe in making New Year's Resolutions. There's something so earnest and passé about telling people you have goals you intend to stick to, things about yourself that you'd like to change. It's easier just to tell people that you don't believe in all that stuff. Yet, people continue to set these resolutions—maybe even some of you reading this article—leading to this time-honored tradition. So, when it comes to making promises to yourself, what's the point? Does it do anything for our sense of wellbeing? Here, I take a deep dive into the world of the New Year's resolution.

HISTORY OF NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

Where exactly does the tradition of making New Year's resolutions come from? According to some sources, the ancient Babylonians were among the first to set resolutions at the start of the New Year. In those days, they celebrated the beginning of the year in March, not January, in a twelve-day festival known as Akitu. During this festival, they reaffirmed their loyalty to the king.

The tradition of holding the New Year's celebrations in March continued throughout the rise of the Roman Empire. In this military society, it was decided that the date of the New Year should be brought forward in order to have generals in place for spring battles. It was Julius Caesar who set the beginning of the

year on January 1st, the idea being that Janus, the two-faced god who lurked in arches and doorways, would look backwards into the past year and ahead into the future.

Unsurprisingly, this custom was adapted by Christians, who saw it as an opportunity to set intentions. The tradition of celebrating the New Year on January 1st fell out of practice within Medieval Europe but the custom of making and upholding promises continued. Knights would place their hand on a peacock and vow to uphold the values of knighthood. Over time, this trickled down to ordinary people and spread around the world, as people began to make secular vows to themselves rather than a god or king.



KEEPING OR BREAKING

With all of this background knowledge in mind, just how easy is it to stick to a New Year's resolution? Making a resolution for the upcoming year is pretty common. Studies have shown that around 40% of Americans set a resolution for themselves each year. However, the same studies also show that only around 8% of those who set a resolution see it through. Yikes. And that's only one culture.

While the most popular resolutions involve self-improvement, they can vary a lot depending on where you're from, according to a Google Maps survey. For example, Americans usually make health related resolutions, while Japanese people often resolve to find love.

What causes us to fail? One reason, experts believe, is that the goals we choose are too vague and unrealistic, influenced by what others expect of us, rather than our own values. It's easy to tell ourselves to "lose weight" without addressing the underlying causes of why we have such poor body image.

WHY we fail to KEEP NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS:



WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT SETTING A NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION?

Sometimes, it can feel really empowering to dedicate a specific time to addressing our goals and bettering ourselves. Facing the year with a sense of hope and determination can go some way to battling the winter blues many of us feel and give us a sense of purpose. On her site, Comfort Zone Shake Up, author Federica Cascia lists four main reasons why making a resolution for the year ahead can be helpful;

- Motivation
- Taking Control
- Sense of Achievement
- Self-Esteem

And this makes sense. If we see ourselves as autonomous and capable of taking charge of our futures, we will usually begin to feel better about ourselves and our actions, leading to a sense of well being and increased self-esteem.

ARE WE JUST SETTING OURSELVES UP TO FAIL?

We're in the midst of a long-overdue conversation about mental health, and part of that conversation has to include the expectations we place on ourselves. So, is making resolutions actually good for us? Or is it just another tool we can use to needlessly self-flagellate? Many believe that a tradition that emphasizes the "New Year, New Me" mentality can be damaging for our self-image.

It's hard to live up to the images of perfection that are presented to us on Instagram and this is even more apparent in January, a grim month for many of us, even without the pressure of reinventing ourselves in our new, upgraded selves.

Personally, I believe the trick lies in harnessing the power of habit, while maintaining self-acceptance. Maybe you can't resolve to change your entire life overnight, but with some dedication you can make small steps towards living the life you want.



Originally from England, Brett Borthwick is a second-year ALT living in Tottori Prefecture. When he's not working, Brett enjoys sampling Japan's finest liquors (read: Strong Zero) and discovering new prefectures that he's never explored before. He can often be spotted on a Peach Airways flight whenever there's a three-day weekend. A true Renaissance man, Brett is also interested in Spanish language and culture.

Sources:

- <http://bit.ly/36F7Llf>
- <http://bit.ly/2RJ71Yg>
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- <http://bit.ly/2UbbXqh>
- <http://bit.ly/2GBiW3Z>

Another year, another vow to get fit. Across the world, people are looking for ways to be healthier in 2020, with exercise being at the top of our lists. While going to the gym and hitting the treadmill may get the job done, many are wondering if there's a better, more exciting way to get fit. From at-home workouts to fitness apps, here's the lowdown on this year's fitness trends.

APPS

Yes, there's (more than one) app for that.

Sometimes there's nothing better than setting yourself a goal, and one of the easiest, is the couch-to-5-km run. With the app C25K, even beginners to running can build up the strength and endurance over an eight week period to run 5 km. With 30-40 minute workouts, three times a week, this free app is a great way to build up motivation. Plus, it's available for both Android and iOS.

Don't worry if running isn't your thing. There are other options such as Sworkit, an app that gives its users customizable and personalized workouts, ranging from cardio to building endurance. You can choose what you'd like to focus on—for example, losing weight—and how long you'd like to work out for, and the app makes a workout that's perfect for you.

VIDEOS

Fitness can come in many different forms.

For some people, that involves working up a sweat, for others, building flexibility. For those looking for a way to unwind, Yoga with Adriene, provides viewers with great yoga routines for every occasion. On her informative (and frankly kind of inspirational) [website](#), she offers monthly guided journeys through yoga. Examples of her monthly yoga guides include: "Reset" "Care" "Open" and "Embrace." The website is also a great place to get more information and outlines her philosophy.

POPSUGAR Fitness is for those who like something a little bit more up-tempo. With a star-studded cast of celebrity fitness trainers, the workouts on [POPSUGAR's channel](#) range from high-intensity interval training (HIIT) to slow-dance cooldowns. They also have a website with a range of advice and articles, which is perfect both for those who are workout gurus and those who are complete newbies. If you're interested in finding out more, there list of core exercises for those who are new to fitness available [here](#).



FITNESS YOU NEED MAS FOR 2

Caroline Allen

HACKS NEED TO START 2020

n (Tottori)

Caroline is a second-year ALT from Ireland living in Tottori prefecture. She keeps busy by volunteering, organizing events for her local international plaza, listening to audiobooks in the bath and watching K-dramas on Netflix.

Sources:

- (1) <http://bit.ly/37BclCh>
- (2) <http://bit.ly/3aUyRli>
- (3) <https://amzn.to/2uMww1x>
- (4) <https://amzn.to/2GBJSQQ>

GEAR

You know you want it. With the turn of the New Year comes the opportunity to buy new fitness gear to convince ourselves that this will be the year it gets put to good use, and this will be the magic yoga mat, dumbbell or hula hoop to get us back in shape and turn us into our happier, healthier selves. Hell, this might be the year it actually gets used.

When it's still dark (and potentially pretty miserable) outside, chances are you don't want to leave the house. Thing is, for a good workout, you don't need to. It's easy to exercise at home, with the convenience of online shopping to sweeten the pill further. [The Prorion Resistance Band Set](#) is a cheap and versatile way to exercise at home, and, at prices ranging from 980 to 2080 yen for different weights, it won't break the bank either. Another way to exercise at home (while bringing up a lot of playground memories) is with a jump rope. For only 899 yen, this [Benran Speed Skipping Rope](#) is cheap and definitely more fun than a rowing machine.

ADVENTURES

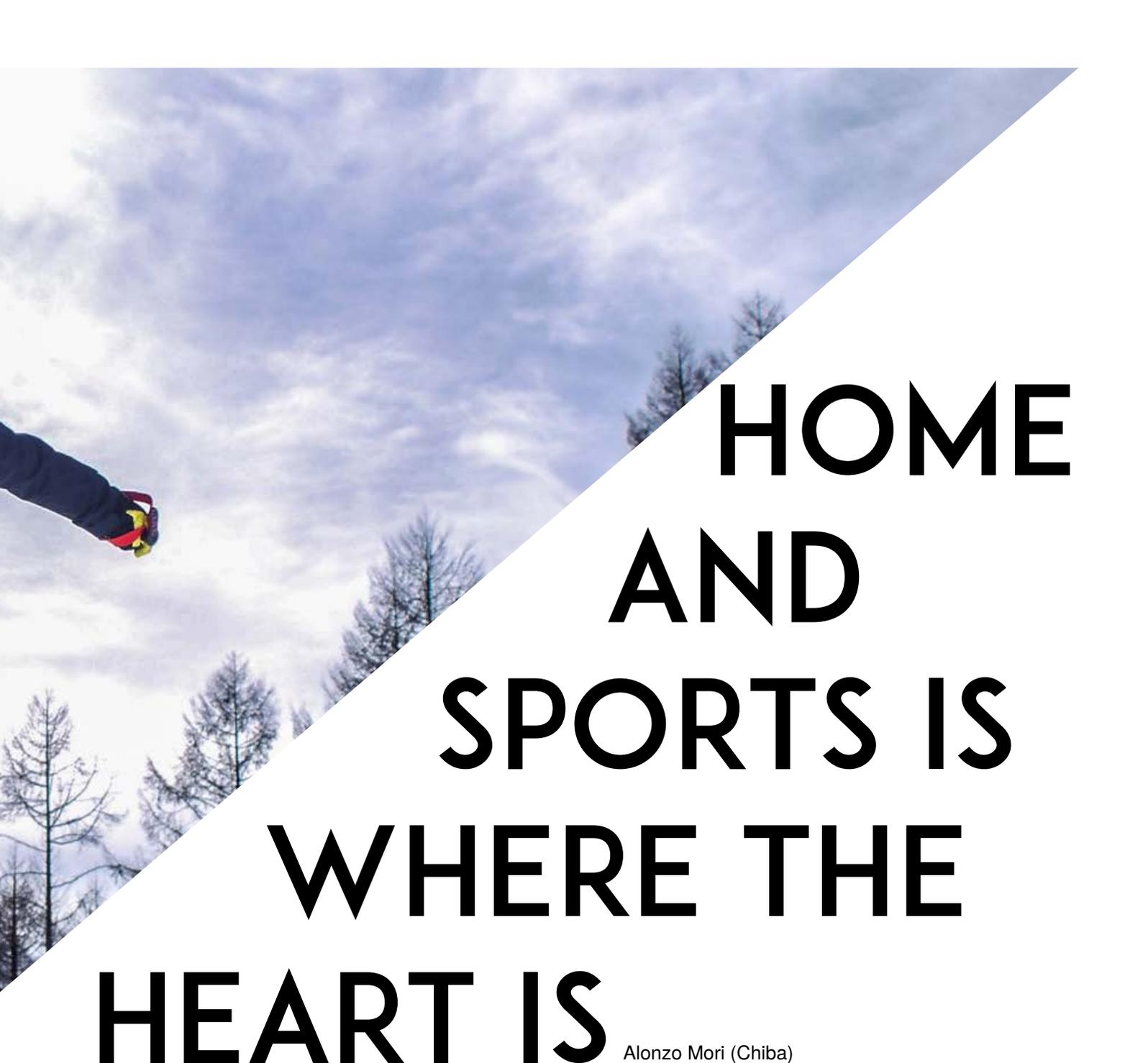
There are plenty of adventures to be had for fitness fanatics in Japan. For those who like hiking, there is Yukushima, Japan's southernmost island, where the longest trek takes 10-13 hours. There are also plenty of meet-ups happening around the country. If, for some reason, you don't feel like trekking for days on end on a remote island, look for chances to exercise closer to home. Is there a cool mountain, some sand dunes, a lake that's perfect for kayaking? In Japan, you never have to look far for the opportunity to get fit and have an adventure at the same time.

LET'S GET FIT IN 2020!

I hope I've given you some ideas and inspiration. I know that for many of us, fitness is a lifelong journey and, as our routines change, many of us fall out of the habit of exercising while in Japan. Hopefully, 2020 will be the year to change all that. I wish you the best of luck on your journey to happier and healthier selves!



Tokyo is a large city and is bustling around the clock with people moving non-stop. At times it seems like people are simply too busy to acknowledge each other. On the morning train you'll find many people glued to their phones, tending to their own worlds. On the streets, you'll note that people like to keep to themselves and not even glance towards your direction (even if you are a foreigner). Perhaps these are mere tendencies of Japanese society. However, there are many groups and small communities



HOME AND SPORTS IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Alonzo Mori (Chiba)

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in this city that have formed in order to assist those dealing with the challenges Japanese society has brought upon them. Luckily for me, I was able to find my home in one of these groups.

But before I get into that, let me tell you about my experience living in Japan before I found this group. It's hard to believe that I came to Japan a little over four years ago. I remember when I first got off the plane at Narita Airport, I was greeted by my friend who

was living in Tokyo at the time. We exchanged pleasantries and caught up with each other naturally as we've known each other since high school. When I initially came to Japan, I was living in a city called Ichihara in Chiba Prefecture. When I settled into my new home, I was excited to start my new life in Japan as an English teacher at a local junior high school. Although it was a challenge for me to teach English in a classroom setting, it was rewarding being able to help students learn English. During my

first couple of months of teaching, I was having an amazing time. And outside of work, I would go to my local gym to exercise with some of the locals and eventually befriend several of them.

Even though I enjoyed going to the gym on a regular basis, I yearned to find a place to play basketball in Ichihara. Although there were many basketball courts in town, I wanted to find a place where I could play basketball indoors. Unfortunately, I had a difficult

time finding an indoor basketball facility where I could play on a weekly basis. I remember feeling bummed out at the time and wondering if I would ever be able to find a place.

But feeling determined one day, I went on my laptop during my break and googled “indoor basketball in Tokyo.” The very first website that popped up on the search engine was “Tokyo Gaijins Basketball Club.” When I clicked on the link and read more about the club, I realized that I had found the perfect place. There was one problem, however: the facility was located in Tokyo, which was about an hour train ride from my place in Chiba. Although it was a long commute, I decided to go to every single session because I simply loved the game of basketball that much.

At these basketball sessions, I befriended many people from all around the world. The people I met were very welcoming and open, which was also a plus.

At one of the very first basketball sessions that I attended, I managed to meet one of my closest friends in Japan. I don't quite remember the exact moment as to when we met. But I remember that we took a liking to each other since we shared similar interests in sports such as basketball and soccer. We became such close friends that in fact, we went on a vacation together to Hawaii. Although we do not see each other often as much as we used to since both of us are so busy, we still stay in touch via LINE.

One day, one of the organizers at the basketball session asked me if I would be interested in organizing basketball sessions in the future for the [Tokyo Gaijins](#). Without hesitation, I was more than happy to accept the offer. Little did I know, the Tokyo Gaijins also organized volleyball sessions as well as many other outdoor activities such as hiking, kayaking, rafting, snowboarding/ski trips, etc. During my first year in Japan, I joined many of these trips and went on so many awesome adventures with some great company.

I consider myself to be quite fortunate to have been able to find Tokyo Gaijins and, in a sense, my home away from home in Japan. Before I found this group, I would sometimes go through phases of homesickness and loneliness.

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like me. All in all, I feel like
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on.

since joining the group, I have been
to meet so many different people from
round the world and be a part of many
orable experiences. The friendships and
onds that I've been able to make in this
o are some of the things that I will always
with me and hold onto for the rest of my life
am truly grateful that I am able to be part of it.
you want to make friends, meet new people, and
y the outdoors; come join us whenever you get the
ce! Hope to see you around!



Alonzo Mori is a freelancer who has worked as an English teacher and Event Organizer in Japan for the last four years. During his free time, he performs hip hop music in various bars and clubs in the Tokyo area. He also has a [YouTube channel](#).





**RIDING THE
JIU-JITSU
WAVE**

David Atti (Chiba)

The sun had already set on the rustic beaches of Kamogawa in Chiba Prefecture as I drove to my first *jiu-jitsu* practice. I thought back to my first visit to Japan over seven years ago when I met my friend Hide-san at a tattoo parlor specializing in *tebori* (traditional hand-poke tattooing).

We hit it off and have kept in close contact ever since. I affectionately call Hide, *Ani* (“older brother” in Japanese). A self-described “eccentric artist” and “Japanese patriot,” Hide-san is widely known throughout the area as a brilliant painter and entrepreneur. He is the czar of his own mural painting company, [G”ART](#) (which is located in neighboring Kimitsu City).



As fate would have it, my JET placement ended up being just a 45-minute drive south of Hide’s G”ART studio. Having an “older brother” so close to my placement made my transition smooth and meant I would never feel lonesome. We had our long overdue reunion soon after my arrival and ever since Hide-san has always invited me to hang out with him and his friends. At our reunion, I expressed an interest in practicing martial arts during my time here. In America, I was an amateur boxer on and off for ten years and it had always been a dream of mine to study martial arts in Japan. Hide quickly arranged for me to try Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu with a friend he’d known since junior high school, Hiroki Owa

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is a martial art of Japanese origin that emphasizes ground-fighting and submissions such as joint locks and chokes. Jiu-Jitsu (柔術, the “gentle art”) can be traced back to the samurai of feudal Japan before it spread to Brazil in the early 20th century, where the legendary Gracie family evolved the art into its modern form made popular in the UFC.



INITIATION

I was feeling calm and in a pensive mood settling into life in Kamogawa but my serenity came to an abrupt halt when out driving—something or someone was blocking my path in the distance. The headlights of my old Daihatsu beamed on a clearly disoriented older woman in shabby clothing, talking to herself in the middle of the train tracks. She shook her cane belligerently at me after I pleaded with her to move. Soon there were several cars waiting behind me. The driver in the next car calmly approached the scene to investigate the delay. I'd only recently moved to Japan so I was shocked when the man peered in my window and called me by name, “Oh! Deibu!” I recognized him from Instagram as Owa-sensei, the instructor and founder of [Ocean Jiu-Jitsu](#). Hide-san had put us in contact and we had made plans to meet that day. We were both surprised to meet under such bizarre circumstances. I explained the situation in poor

Japanese. Owa-sensei nodded and eventually persuaded the *obaa-chan* to move off the tracks to safety before alerting the authorities.

We arrived at the *dojo* located on the campus of Kameda University. It was spacious with judo mats sprawling out across the floor. The faint smell of sweat and cleaning products entered my nostrils. I could hear college girls whisper and giggle together as they strolled by. I set down my green army duffle bag before getting changed. I met the gaze of Kimura-san, an impressive physical specimen, who decided to exhaust his English vocabulary before formally introducing himself in Japanese. Pointing to my army bag, the first three words Kimura-san ever uttered to me were, “Rambo. First Blood.” I immediately started cracking up before he followed up with, “My bike is very, very cool!” He seemed thrilled to use the

grammar he had studied in high school over a decade ago.

Owa-sensei gave me my uniform. It's similar to a judo *dogi*, except mine was black with thinner material. After tying my belt, it was time for my initiation, where I was thrown around, twisted, and choked in the unforgiving August heat by Owa-sensei and company. I was pushed to the point of sheer exhaustion and loved every minute of it. Men from all walks of life beat me up. Kase-san, the proprietor of a nearby upscale soba shop, arm-barred me from every possible angle and position 'til I tapped. I dubbed my *senpai* Kimura-san and Chiba-san "men of steel," due to the fact they work long hours through insufferable heat at the local Nippon Steel factory.

Moreover, I met two MMA fighters who trained in the dojo. Yoshida-sensei, who had studied abroad at Oxford University, greeted me in the Queen's English. He works as a law professor on a tenure track at a local university and moonlights as a cage fighter. Then there was Rin-chan, who holds a black belt in Judo and competed in her first MMA fight before graduating from high school. Despite her small stature, she throws grown men down with ease. Rin-chan introduced me to my first student, her younger sister, who would be in one of my junior high English classes come September. Rin-chan's sister was shy even by Japanese standards but very kind. So the first student I ever met was on the mat, not the classroom.

We were both students in our first lesson together, studying how to break arms instead of mastering English grammar points. When the school year started, she gradually warmed up to me as the new ALT. Together we all wore the same uniform or *dogi*. After the pre-roll ritual of slapping hands and bumping fists, we were all just part of Team Ocean Jiu-Jitsu.

After practice, Kimura-san once more attempted to converse with me in my native tongue. "Do you know Gari Gari-kun?" he asked. I thought he was talking about another member of the dojo and shook my head. Kimura-san quickly smiled and said, "I'll show you. Come with me." I climbed in Kimura-san's car with no idea where we were going or who

exactly this mysterious "Gari Gari-kun" was but I have to admit, I was intrigued. We arrived at a 7-11 where Kimura-san treated me to the iconic Japanese popsicle known as "Gari Gari-kun." Gari Gari-kun was depicted as a loveable oaf with a bad haircut and a large gaping mouth but I think the logo closer resembles a gorilla than a boy. After getting beat up by everyone in the dojo, the soda-flavored refreshment brought me back to life. The next practice, Kase-san inquired if I had met "Mr. Gari Gari." Kimura-san violently shook his head and protested, "No! Not Mr. Gari Gari! It's Gari Gari BOY!" Owa-sensei chuckled in amusement with Kimura-san's newfound passion for English.





MY FIRST COMPETITION

The day came when Owa-sensei decided I was finally ready for competition and signed me up for my first tournament at the Taito Riverside Sports Center in Tokyo. I had spent the better part of a year learning submissions completely in Japanese, grappling with training partners, and conditioning my body. I had made the middleweight limit of 80 kg and was eagerly awaiting my first match. My name was called and I stepped on to the mat. I bowed to my opponent, a game-looking, wiry Japanese guy in his twenties, and the referee signaled for the match to begin.

As soon as the match started, everything I learned in the dojo for the last year immediately went out the window. I found myself on top of my opponent, who was flashing a mouth full of clenched teeth while

strangling me from the bottom position. Several thoughts rushed through my head as my opponent was cutting off the blood flow to my brain. I remember thinking, "I came all the way from Kamogawa to get choked out in the first minute." Then I thought, "I went on a diet, paid money to enter this tournament and I'm about to tap in the very first match." I could hear the encouragement from my team and decided I'd better get moving if I wanted to avoid taking a nap. Just then, I noticed something that gave me a sudden burst of energy. My opponent's breathing became labored, a sure sign of his fatigue. He had been choking me with all of his strength and it had taken its toll on his endurance. I was able to break his crossed-arms grip, escaping the submission at the last minute before taking an advantageous position known as "mount" for the first time in the match.

The whole Ocean Jiu-Jitsu team erupted and was telling me what to do in rapid Japanese. I can remember during my boxing days in America, having trouble

following one coach's instructions in plain English during a match. So how could I understand five different people shouting at me in Japanese all at once? The "men of steel" quickly picked up on this and started telling me what to do in heavy katakana English. "Push chest!" Kimura-san said. Chiba-san quickly barked, "Knee on belly!" Even the laconic Owa-sensei was now unabashedly yelling in English, "Deibu! *FAITO!* COME ON! DON'T STOP! LET'S GO!"

The fact that my whole team was cheering me on in English at the top of their lungs was an overwhelming feeling of support. In this moment, I felt a profound

feeling of acceptance as a member of team Ocean Jiu-Jitsu. I dominated the rest of the match and won on points following that initial scare. The referee raised my hand in victory. On my way back to my team, a skinny white guy around my age with blond hair stopped me. He was an American airman stationed here in Japan. We chatted for a bit and then he patted me on the shoulder before giving me a backhanded compliment, "You really made a big mistake out there early. I didn't think you knew what the hell you were doing." We laughed together before he gave me props "You didn't give up and you got the win though! Congrats man!" I think he took me for another serviceman

at first. He looked absolutely incredulous after learning that I was an English teacher.

After shaking off the nerves of the first match, I settled down and remembered my game plan. Owa-sensei reminded me, "Stick to the fundamentals and relax." I went on to compete three more times, advancing to the middleweight final. Unfortunately, I ended up losing the last match by decision but I made my dojo proud by taking the silver medal back to Kamogawa.



CALL ME "DEIBU"



Owa-sensei and Hide-san decided I was worthy of a *nom de guerre* in kanji. As mentioned earlier, Hide-san is a “Japanese patriot” and the name the two men gave me clearly reflected this. Written by itself, the character 帝 is pronounced “*tei*.” It means “emperor” and can be found in words such as 帝国 (*teikoku* meaning “empire” or “imperial”). Hide-san—with a little poetic justice—added a *ten-ten* mark so the kanji could be read “*dei*.” It’s not proper Japanese but I thought the artistic liberty was genius. Surely, no one else had this unique character in their name. The second character given in my new moniker was 武 or *bu*. This character means “war” or “martial” and can be found in words like 武士道 (*bushido*), 武道 (martial arts), and 武士 (warrior). Together these two characters spelled out 帝武 or “Deibu.”

Now that I had my Japanese *nom de guerre*, I trained even harder and

continued to enter competitions. It helped that Ocean Jiu-Jitsu looked after its members like family (Hide-san and Owa-Sensei often referred to me as their “little brother”). When Typhoon Hagibis hit Chiba Prefecture last fall, Owa-sensei drove an hour from his house on perilous roads to check on his favorite *gaikokujin*. The dojo in Kamogawa had sustained serious damage from the typhoon. Ocean Jiu-Jitsu eventually opened up a new branch in a spare room of Hide-san’s G²ART studio that became the dojo’s new main location. Many of the members had pitched in and built the new dojo themselves. Hide-san and Owa-sensei even built me a bunk bed if I wanted to crash at the dojo after training.

Hide-san and Owa-sensei have been instrumental in helping me chase my dream of studying martial arts in Japan. There are truly no words for the gratitude I have for both men. As I continue my Jiu-Jitsu training, I will do my best to make Ocean Jiu-Jitsu and my two Japanese brothers proud.

David Atti is currently a second year JET in Kamogawa City, Chiba Prefecture. When not on the mats, he enjoys travelling and reading about the Sengoku Jidai. David graduated from SUNY Geneseo with a degree in American Studies before coming to Japan.

Source:

(1) <https://bit.ly/2QOWPvx>

COMMUNITY



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Clare Braganza

"You've no right to walk into people's castles and take their guitars."—Diana Wynne Jones, 'Howl's Moving Castle'

TRAVEL EDITOR

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Hoong Shao Ting

"A walk in nature walks the soul back home"—Mary Davis

Photo: Charlotte Coetzee



今西康宏

八鳥良輔

前川妙子

田中由美子

坂本広央美

前田龍子

敬請



BA
DOING

D GUYS G GOOD

Mark Christensen (Fukuoka)

The beautiful princess protests at the menacing black figure, “I don’t know what you are talking about. I’m a member of the Imperial Senate on a diplomatic mission to Alderaan.” The Dark Lord scoffs. “You are part of the Rebel Alliance, and a traitor . . .” He motions to his ghoulish, white-armored troopers. “Take her *away!*”

The class laughs as we recite the famous lines from the opening scene of Star Wars Episode IV, *A New Hope*. My JTE is a major fan of Hollywood movies, and the students enjoyed the day’s Star Wars theme.

However, as the class winds down, I reach into the old black backpack next to me and pull out something none of my shocked students expect: the skull-like helmet of an Imperial Stormtrooper.

That’s right. Their ALT-sensei is secretly a Stormtrooper in the Galactic Empire’s 501st Legion. Pathfinder TB-21427 of Garrison Titan, to be exact.

So, why am I a Stormtrooper? What is the 501st legion and how does it connect with Japan? The 501st Legion is a voluntary service organization created about twenty years ago. After obtaining and replicating some of the original Star Wars movie armor, a few fans gathered together around the revolutionary idea of using cosplay of the iconic villains for volunteering and charity.

The idea was a massive success. The project initially bloomed in the US and quickly spread around the globe. What once was a small core group rapidly expanded to an international charity with over 13,000 members, 28,000 costumes, and official groups in over 60 countries, including Japan. The organization has continued to evolve, and developed official standards of professionalism, regional units, and international organization across language and cultural barriers.

I’ve always loved cosplay, and while I’ve built or arranged for the construction of a number of costumes, I found the joy of the hobby disappearing. Lately, the cosplay scene has become increasingly competitive and dominated by beauty models, celebrities, and professional prop makers. For those of us who aren’t Hollywood models or artisans, it could be discouraging. For me, the 501st Legion provided a unique opportunity to not only rethink and revitalize my understanding of cosplay, but to use it in a way that directly helps the community. It is no easy process; even with the help of my father and some friends it took me over a year to assemble my armor . . . and longer still to have it approved to specific standards.

For those of us with armor, it can be difficult; overheating and dehydration are common risks, and some armor types have extremely poor mobility and visibility. It is difficult to obtain parts as some need to be homemade or obtained through limited channels. Even with all of this, though, it’s definitely worth it.

In the 501st, my tasks have been quite varied, and it’s created a fun new twist on volunteering. By wearing the masks and armor, we lose our individual identities and become the characters, bringing smiles to the faces of children and adults alike. It doesn’t matter who we are; we come from all sorts of backgrounds. Our activities can be as varied as talking with children, acting, fundraising for charity causes, or in one hilarious incident, being target practice for kids armed with deadly nerf blasters. Other activities can include visits to museums, comic cons, pride marches, movie premiers, and much more!

For all the fun it can be, it can also be a sobering experience. The very first troop that I participated in was a birthday party visit, which is common enough . . . but the child had just lost his father.

It was a humbling experience to bring a bit of happiness to someone enduring one of the worst kinds of loss.

The Garrison has also visited places like the Seattle Children's hospital, where we have done our best to be a positive moment in the life of children suffering and sometimes dying from serious medical conditions. It's a unique experience bringing laughter and smiles to children with little hope. But just as importantly, our garrison has also tapped into the goodwill of scifi and fantasy conventions such as Emerald City Comic Con and used the goodwill of con-goers to arrange for tens of thousands of dollars in donations to go to local children's hospitals or funds. Likewise, the other garrisons around the world have also been committed to their communities.

In Japan, I've found a number of opportunities to carry on the spirit of our work outside of the armor. Recently in my area, a number of JETs organized and held a party for students who had little experience with Western-style Christmas events. We played games, sang songs, and even used a Santa cosplay to share holiday cheer and teach them about a number of Western Christmas traditions. While not a Star Wars themed event, it demonstrated how props and costumes can be valuable teaching tools to engage the minds and imaginations of students. A number of the students proved this further with their enthusiastic reception of the Santa cosplayer and Christmas hats.

I have also helped out at a small Japanese church for a Halloween festival. There, I engaged in much of the same type of work that I do in the 501st legion, such as community games and general helping. I was surprised to discover that some of the volunteers themselves cosplayed for the event, and it was very funny to see a Mario cosplayer running a number of games and activities with children. Costumes can be a great tool, and it is nice to see people using similar ideas to the 501st.

As I passed my helmet out to my classes to examine and even try on, it was great to see the boys and girls laughing and smiling as they tried on the gear. It was even more surprising when a number of quiet and normally silent students began to engage. I truly believe that the use of pop culture is an excellent way to bridge cultural gaps and language barriers. After showing the



armor, a number of students now actively talk to me outside of class and others jokingly hum the Star Wars theme. I've even learned that several of my students are, themselves, cosplayers.

In 2020, I will continue working with the 501st Legion. If possible, I'll try to coordinate with the local Japanese Garrison. By engaging with Japanese 501st, I'll not only be able to connect with the Japanese community, but also act as a cultural relay between garrisons. And, even if that doesn't work, there are still plenty of opportunities to reach out to the local community. Ultimately, I believe that nothing is stopping us from using our own hobbies to reach out to our students and community.

Japan has provided many unique challenges for volunteering and cosplay, but one thing is for certain. Whether or not I'm in armor, I will continue to be 'a bad guy doing good.'

Mark is a first-year high school ALT in Fukuoka hailing from Snohomish, Washington. Outside of teaching and the adventure of being an ALT, he enjoys cosplay, alpine mountaineering, and nature photography.



Sources:
<http://bit.ly/costumeresources>
<http://bit.ly/501stlegioninfo>
<http://bit.ly/garrisonsitan>

Embarrassing Adventure in Tokyo

As I walked through Kichijoji's streets,
I was handed a flyer for a kawaii cat café.
I had to go in, the cats were calling,
My feet lead me there without delay.

I rolled up my sleeves,
A cool cat was eyeing me up as I walked over.
He sat on his shelf with a denim jacket on,
My hand went for his head, he gave me the cold shoulder.

Suddenly, in one quick swoop, his paw flew towards me,
I drew away from him, his face full of glee.
My face full of shock, his stature was proud,
He fixed his denim jacket while watching me flee.

I escaped towards a box seat on the ground,
I thought I'll sit here and wait for a cat who is sound.
Without knowing it, the box was hollow,
My arse went through it like there was no tomorrow.

A member of staff looked completely shocked,
While all the furry felines pointed and mocked.
Jesus, I thought, get me out of here fast,
Before I sit on a cat with my big fat ass.

I ran for the door with my embarrassed face,
Leaving the cat café, I had now defaced.

It was definitely time to relax at the beach.
So I went on my way, I hopped on the train to Enoshima Bay.
The aquarium was my first destination,
I goggled at the giant jellyfish, and crusty crustaceans.

I was in the mood for an ice-cream,
So I walked onto the promenade with the sea on my left,
I was two licks in when I witnessed daylight theft!

Large shadows appeared on the pavement below,
A creepy claw scraped my hand with one sharp blow.

Onto the rocks, the ice-cream splattered,
Holding only the cone, I ran for cover,
Embarrassed and battered.

Carol Kavan



Adventures of an Expatriate in Tokyo

Carol (Tokyo)



I threw what was left into a shrub,
It was highly likely they'd come back for more.
What kind of birds even eat ice-cream anyway!?
What kind of birds could be so hardcore?

Hawks! Hawks! And a shitload too!
They patrolled the sky,
Doing Satan's work as they flew.

I needed a drink or two after that ordeal,
Friends advised that clubbing would be ideal.

Drinks were had and dancing was done,
It all only stopped with the rising of the sun.
So I hopped on the first train in the morning,
My eyes suddenly drifted without warning.

I woke to find I was in the inaka,
Any further and I would have ended up in Osaka.
The mountains were high, the afternoon sun ablaze,
I bought my ticket back home in a sweaty, drunken haze.

The embarrassment wasn't over yet,
As soon as I got to my station, I broke out in a cold sweat.
My stomach was turning, my legs heavy as bricks,
I made a dash off the train and spurted projectile sick.

Luckily I had made it to the toilet on time,
Any later and the commuters would be slipping in slime.

I was never so glad to see my bed,
But it would only be a few hours until,
The nightmarish hangover, full of fear and dread.

So there you have it, my truly embarrassing adventures in Tokyo.
These mistakes are made by me, so you don't have to.
I hope I've managed to entertain with my pitfalls and woes.
Feel free to read this during your JET life's highs and lows.

The End.

Carol is a second-year JET teacher living in the west of Tokyo. She comes from Ireland and has been writing since she was a young child. Her first poem was published when she was thirteen years old and writing has remained one of her favorite hobbies since then, along with art and photography.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Kevin Feeley (Gunma)

What is it about a place that makes us feel at home? I've been wrestling with this question ever since I moved away from mine. I relocated to the village of Kuni in the town of Nakanojo about five months ago at the beginning of August when the summer heat was just starting to head out. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I'd never experienced living in a village where the only store closed at six o'clock and the native language of the locals was Japanese, devoid of all "yous guys" and "widdouts." Suffice to say, I was a bit removed from my home. Even going to college in the Berkshire Mountains of Western Massachusetts hadn't really prepared me for my life here, because even the coldest Amherst mornings aren't terrible if you have centralized heating.

But the spatial adjustment hasn't taken the toll I expected it to, and even though it hasn't been a terribly long time I feel at home in this place—in this village—something

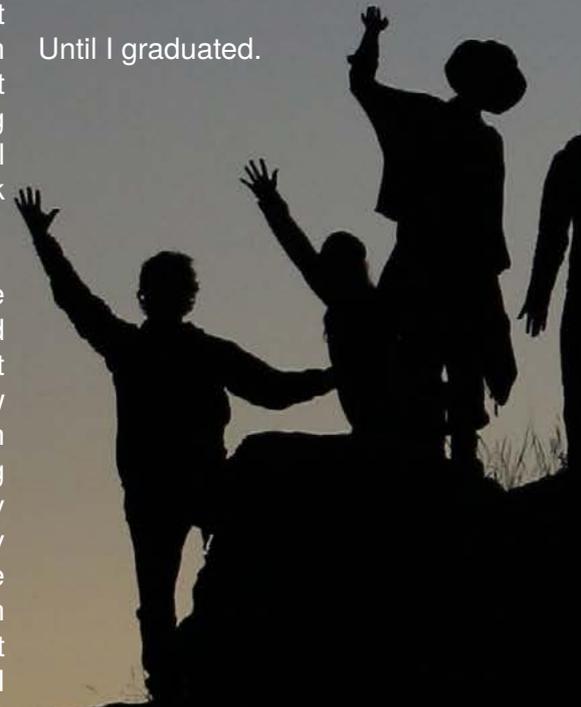
I've had to reconcile with my intense feelings of homesickness.

One of the hardest things about living in Japan has been the number of times I have had to say goodbye to the people I care about. The friends who came to celebrate my birthday two days before departure, my parents at the gate, a buddy visiting from Thailand, and, perhaps most poignantly, my girlfriend coming for New Years. These were all moments that made me take stock of what it means to be home.

It was the last one that really made me understand. I've been on and off playing with the idea of what a home really is for the past few years, from high school graduation through college, always attempting to make a different space my 'new home.' But it wasn't until my parents sold my childhood home that I really started to wonder on it. It should have been a significant moment—moving from the place I came of age to a mid-renovation

condo—but it ended up being little more than an inconvenient day in my summer. For a while I wondered why the move had meant so little to me—as someone who hates change—before I was reabsorbed into academia and friends and unhealthy amounts of alcohol and pizza.

Until I graduated.



I'd known it was coming but it still managed to sneak up on me and in the span of a few hours, I went from living door to door with friends and a twenty-minute drive from my girlfriend to being in another part of the country—and eventually, the world too. I packed up my room, said goodbye to my friends and girlfriend, and left the place I had called home for four years.

Two months later I boarded a plane to Japan and said goodbye to my family and the city I'd called home my entire life.

And a few days after arrival I said goodbye to all the people I'd met at the several orientations, some of whom I knew I'd probably never see again, and relocated the few belongings I'd chosen to be most important to my new home in Kuni.

I haven't missed my hometown, I haven't missed my college or the house I grew up in, nor the many other places in the world I've rested my head.

I only miss the people.

I know it seems obvious, that it's really the people that make a home, but call me a slow learner: as a child I cried when we got a new car because I didn't want to lose our old van. I don't like change, and places hold a special spot in my heart, as the home for the various memories that occurred there. I'd catch myself while out on walks around town stopping at the house of a friend that moved away, or my old train station, or a driveway I used to walk by on my way home, just remembering the moments associated with them. But I guess, finally, after twenty-three years I've figured out that it's not the location, it's the people that really make the memories last. It's the friend that moved away, my dad waiting at the station with me, the people I'd spoken to on my walk home who I really remember. It's the people that make a home, well, home, and it took all these goodbyes for me to put that together.

As I mentioned, most poignantly, it was hugging my girlfriend after being apart for nearly six months, and, despite being in Narita International Terminal 1, feeling at home in that space. We called her parents to tell them she arrived safely, got water from a vending machine, and got on a bus to Shinjuku, the entire time feeling exactly as we had when driving to Mt. Holyoke or Amherst just a few months prior. It was checking into our hotel and feeling like we were swiping into our dorms. It was getting ham and cheese croissants at Shinjuku Station and believing we were ordering the same from the old Black Sheep Bakery in Amherst. We were on the other side of the world—far away from everything we had called home for years—and felt the need to remind ourselves that, yes, we were in Kusatsu, we were in Karuizawa, we were in Tokyo and

Yokohama. Yes, we were in Kuni Village. Yes, we were in Japan, and not the Pioneer Valley. Yes, we were home.

All this is to say that I've come to realize that no matter what changes await me in the coming years, I'm going to remember my time here as home, not because of the apartment or the schools, but because of the people. I'll remember the little ones only pretending to cover their eyes while playing Missing Card Game; I'll remember the nomikais with my teachers as we talk about our upbringings and foods and drinks we enjoy; I'll remember the smiles from the Michi no Eki (roadside rest area) workers I'd greet every Sunday when I grab my weekly groceries; I'll remember the members of my taiko group as they laugh and beat the drums and speak way too quickly and casually for me to fully understand always; I'll remember the restaurant chefs and owners who would somehow manage to make me feel special while also feeling like a regular as they chat me up about my hometown and daily life; I'll remember the nights spent with other ALTs watching movies and exchanging tips on how to keep warm; I'll remember the nods and waves and smiles of passing strangers; I'll remember my predecessor telling me how lucky I was to receive this placement and being totally right about it. I feel at home in Kuni, not because of the beautiful mountain range I can see from my apartment every morning, but because of the faces that greet me after I've left it, and their thoughtful words pushing me forward along the way.

Kevin Feeley was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the United States, and graduated from Amherst College with an English degree in 2019 before joining the JET Program. He wants to go to law school to do public defense work for people who cannot afford an attorney.

North Japan's Premiere Land for Spiritual The Dewa Sanzan

Tim Bunting (Yamagata)

Mt. Yudono shrine gate

Location Rebirth

Take a step through the Zuishinmon gates and into the cedar forests of Mt. Haguro, and you will instantly be whisked into another world—the world of the Dewa Sanzan. Located in the middle of Yamagata Prefecture, the Dewa Sanzan is the collective name for the three sacred mountains of the former Dewa

Province: Mt. Haguro, Mt. Gassan, and Mt. Yudono. These three peaks have been used for over a millennium as training ground for Haguro Shugendo monks, more commonly known as Yamabushi, on their pilgrimage of rebirth.

In the ancient belief of Shugendo, in which elements of Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism, and native animism

are combined, mountains are believed to be the abode of the *Kami* (gods) and Buddha. According to Shugendo, by training in the mountains, we are able to attract the spirits of the Kami and Buddha into our souls before emerging reborn. Even today, along with Mt. Koya in Wakayama Prefecture and Mt. Hiko in Fukuoka, the Dewa Sanzan are amongst the most famous training grounds for Yamabushi in Japan, and are where you too can be reborn.

Mt. Haguro

The Dewa Sanzan pilgrimage of rebirth traditionally begins on the lowest peak, Mt. Haguro. Of the three peaks, only Mt. Haguro is low enough to not be covered in metres of snow in the colder months, making it accessible year-round. Known to represent the world of the present where we overcome our worldly desires, Mt. Haguro is home to the Shukubo, pilgrim lodges where for more than 300 years travelers have stayed and prepared for their pilgrimage of rebirth. Any pilgrimage begins with a stay in the Shukubo that are still run as they were in the olden days, such as the grand Daishinbo run by Master Hayasaka, or Daishobo run by the famous Master Hoshino. The Shukubo will provide you with *shojin ryori* (ascetic cuisine), a Hakui white jacket or Shiroshozoku white garments, a Shime necklace, and blessings at their altar to send you off on your voyage into the mountains.

From the Shukubo village, head through the Zuishinmon gates and



Mt. Haguro's Dewa Sanzan Shrine with the thickest thatch roof in Japan



Mt. Haguro's Five Story Pagoda

down Mt. Haguro's famous stone stairway amongst the towering cedars. Follow the winding path and you will cross the Haraigawa River that Yamabushi traditionally use for purification rituals, Jijisugi, the grandpa cedar, and the Japan Heritage Five Story Pagoda. In *yuki guni*, a.k.a. snow country, Mt. Haguro's Five Story Pagoda is the only pagoda in the forest which doesn't use any paint or varnish, allowing it to assimilate into the foliage. From there, the ascent to the top begins, where you will find Sanjingsaiden, the building with the thickest thatch roof in Japan and home to Dewa Sanzan Shrine, the collective shrine of the three gods of the Dewa Sanzan. Saikan is another popular lodging, where *shojin ryori* lunch is available even for those not staying.

Mt. Gassan



Tim meditating on Mt. Gassan



The 8th station of Mt. Gassan

In Haguro Shugendo, there is a philosophy called Kan'nabi Shinko, which is essentially the training our souls go through when we pass away. Beginning in the lower mountains, our souls complete tasks under the guidance of 13 Buddha as they eventually make their way up to the tallest mountains, in this case, Mt. Gassan. After 33 years, our souls reach the top and turn into gods who look over all the souls far below. As such, Mt. Gassan came to represent the world of the past and the land of the afterlife where we encounter our long-lost ancestors.

The 1984-metre Mt. Gassan boasts the most snowfall of any

mountain, and the latest ski season in Japan, which begins in April. If you're looking to climb the Dewa Sanzan's tallest peak, you're going to have to wait until July, otherwise there's just too much snow to combat. The most popular route is to catch a bus to the 8th Station on Mt. Gassan, climb to the top, then hike back to the bus. This path takes you through the Midagahara Marshlands, past the Busshoike Lake, and boasts great views overlooking inland Yamagata to the east, Mt. Chokai to the north, and the Sea of Japan to the west. Other people choose to climb from the Mt. Gassan Ski Lift to Shizu Onsen, or even from Mt. Yudono, but these routes are better for experienced hikers.

Mt. Yudono

Katarunakare, Kikunakare! Don't talk, don't ask! Mt. Yudono's motto makes it pretty hard to explain things in detail, and the monks of old knew fully well that this only adds to the mysteriousness. Mt. Yudono is known as Oku no in, the Shrine in the Depths, and is home to a sacred object of worship that represents the world of the future on the Dewa Sanzan pilgrimage of rebirth, the exact location where we are reborn. Unfortunately, it is forbidden to speak of this object in detail, so you are going to have to check it out for yourself to see what the fuss is about.

There is a bus that goes to Mt. Yudono from central Tsuruoka, but by far the easiest way to get there is by private car. Mt. Yudono is not a mountain that you climb per se, but is located at one of the entrances that leads up Mt. Gassan. Once you pay your respects at Mt. Yudono Shrine, take the path leading into the mountains to get to the top of Mt. Gassan. Naturally, the reverse is also possible.

Mt. Yudono was traditionally the final mountain on the Dewa Sanzan pilgrimage of rebirth, and is famous for Sen'ninzawa (roughly translated to The Swamp of the Immortals), a training ground to the self-mummified monks known as *Sokushinbutsu*.

Sokushinbutsu are known in English as Living Buddha or Buddha Mummies, and came about through the belief in Shingon Buddhism that reaching Buddhahood in this life was possible. Would-be Sokushinbutsu went through

extended periods of harsh ascetic training in the mountains, buried themselves alive in custom-made tombs, then chanted sutras until they turned into a Buddha. By becoming Sokushinbutsu, the monks believed they could provide salvation to the people by proving that Buddhahood was attainable in the current world. Churenji and Dainichibo Temples on Mt. Yudono are home to some Sokushinbutsu, and there are a few others housed in temples scattered throughout Yamagata and the surrounding prefectures.



Mt. Yudano shrine gate



Mt. Yudano shrine gate

Yamabushi
training on the
stone stairway
amongst the
cedar forests of
Mt. Haguro



Your Dewa Sanzan Pilgrimage of Rebirth

As the training ground for centuries of Haguro Yamabushi, the Dewa Sanzan have developed a truly mystical atmosphere leading it to become north Japan's premiere location for spiritual rebirth. Make the pilgrimage to the Shukubo and Five Story Pagoda of Mt. Haguro, top the towering peaks of Mt. Gassan, and explore the mysteries of Mt. Yudono and you too will feel reborn.

Tim Bunting (@kiwiyamabushi) is a former ALT and current Yamabushi from New Zealand, who is helping the Dewa Sanzan develop into a global retreat centre. Check out yamabushido.jp or dewasanzan.com for more on this wonderful area of Japan.

All Photos: Tim Bunting

Yamabushi
during Takigyo
waterfall
meditation





Meditation at Eiheiji

Carol Kavanagh (Tokyo)



As an English language teacher in Tokyo, I try to travel as much as I can during the school holidays. This winter break was no different. I wanted to experience something to help me escape from the intense city life that Tokyo throws at you. Deciding a temple stay in Fukui would be the perfect way to spend my Christmas, I booked an overnight temple stay at [Eiheiji](#) for Christmas night. This Buddhist temple dates back to 1244 and is a glorious hidden gem, high in the misty mountains.



It was the afternoon when I arrived on Christmas day and a pleasant, English-speaking monk greeted me. He demonstrated how I should act and meditate and how, if I looked like I was failing at this



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and lacked concentration, another monk would hit me with a long stick on my shoulder. This was not for discipline but simply to encourage me to try harder. After two back-to-back *zazen* (lit. seated meditation) sessions, my legs were numb and my mind panicked with the realization of what it must be like to be paralyzed from the knees down. I managed to escape a stick to the shoulder, which was not the case for a poor fellow tourist—I jumped when I heard the sharp, brisk stick behind me. I sat up straighter, and put on a determined facial expression with lips pursed and eyebrows slightly furrowed, all while pretending to be fascinated by a marking on the wall in line with my eyes.

After the meditation, I received a delicious vegetarian dinner prepared by some of the one hundred and fifty practicing monks. I ate alone and said a prayer of thanks before and after my meal. In the evening, it was time for more *zazen* and at this stage, my legs were starting to shiver from the thoughts of being crossed for another forty minutes. I managed to struggle through the last meditation of the day and rewarded myself with a soak in the private bath. Afterwards, I was exhausted and fell into a deep sleep.

I woke up to the sound of the morning bell at 4:20 A.M. and quickly made myself look relatively decent for the meditation and morning mass. I chanted with the large gathering of monks as



best I could, failing to pronounce words properly but my enthusiasm surely making up for it.

Afterwards, I was given a tour of the temple and then directed back to my room for breakfast. Tiredness hit me like a brick and I managed to take a peaceful nap before checking out at nine. I thanked the lovely monk who made my stay so welcoming, who in turn gifted me with a book on *zazen* as well as a small notepad. The rain was falling quietly as I walked past the 500-year-old cedar trees and down the narrow street toward my bus stop with a sense of gratitude and satisfaction.



Carol is a second-year JET teacher living in the picturesque, west side of Tokyo. She has been writing since her childhood and also spends her free time creating art and travelling around Japan during the school holidays. Her writing creations include: children's rhyming stories, poetry, short stories and travel articles. You can check out her photography and art [@carolcksensei](#). She is currently working on her website which will showcase her writing, art and photography, which she hopes you can check out someday.

All Photos: Carol Kavanagh



Journey Through Magic

Lillian Seiler (Hyogo)



Lillian Seiler (Hyogo)

Exploring the forest that inspired Ghibli's Princess Mononoke

"You should go to Yakushima," a friend messaged me back in April. At the time, I had no idea why or what they were talking about. But then they said, "If you like the Mononoke atmosphere and unique nature environments, you should totally go."

As soon as I heard the word "Mononoke," it was over for me. One brisk Google search afterwards confirmed that the nature in Yakushima was responsible for the artistic nature style in Ghibli's Princess Mononoke. When I read this, there was no excuse not to travel there and see it first-hand. So, I did what any Ghibli enthusiast would do and hastily began planning for the adventure to this mysterious island. Here's a mini-game: try to find all the hidden Ghibli movie titles sprinkled throughout this article!



Mission Start!

After banding together five spirited explorers, we prepared to fly away to Kagoshima Prefecture. It was decided that going in October would ensure pleasant weather because we weren't about to hike during Japan's soggy summer or weary winter. We chose to take a high-speed ferry from Kagoshima to Yakushima, which cost us more than I'm willing to admit here. There was a slight mix-up about which port we needed to go to, however, and we ended up having to do what I like to call, "Indiana Jones" our way over to the right port at the last second. Everything turned out okay and we made it just in time, despite a couple of hairs of mine greying from the stress.

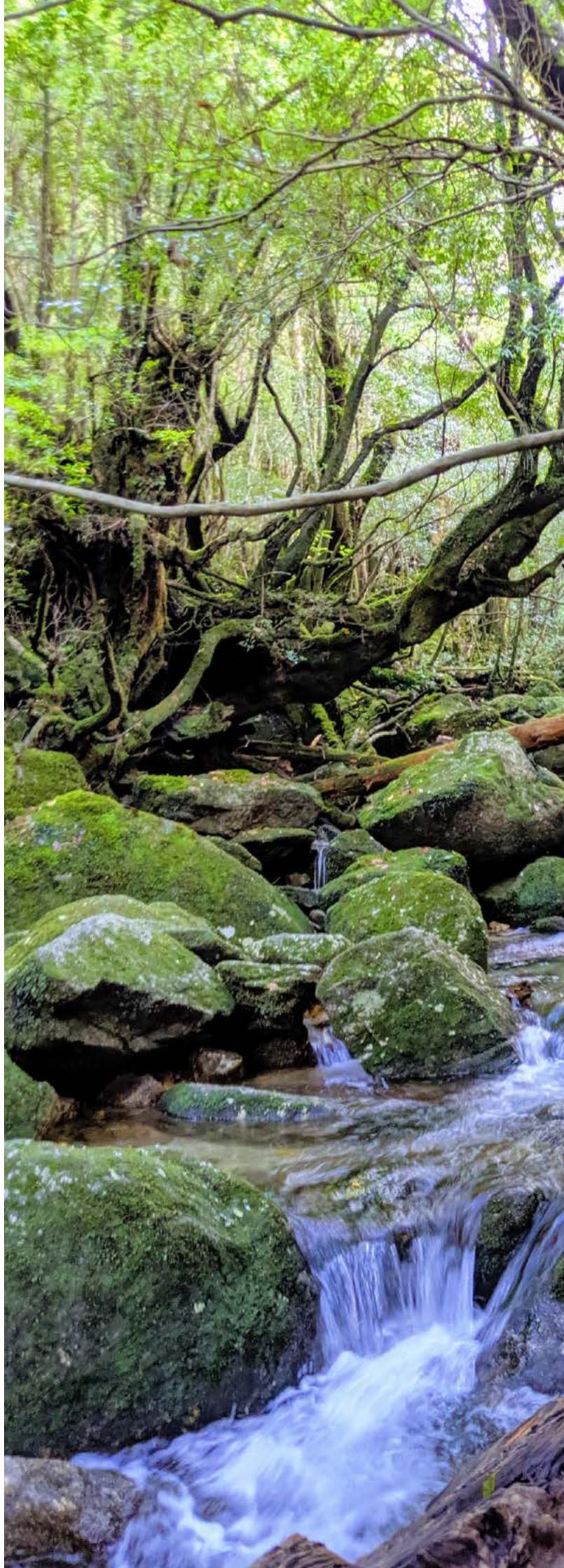
I will say one thing: getting a car rental in Yakushima was crucial for a smooth trip. Public transport on the island is neither frequent nor convenient, so having our own moving castle of transportation came in handy. We learned that Yakushima has a rather unpredictable climate as well, so the weather was much hotter than expected, complete with fragmented bouts of rain throughout the day. Even so, the atmosphere of the island was uniquely captivating. After arriving, I was quickly enraptured by the beauty that Yakushima had to offer.

Shiratani Unsuikyo: the moss-covered forest

Our first objective was to personally experience the otherworldly moss-covered forest that was featured in Hayao Miyazaki's "Princess Mononoke." A nearby information center told us that the moss-covered forest was a five-minute walk from the parking lot at the start of the Shiratani Unsuikyo trail. Due to this, we decided to promptly drive up the mountain in our regular clothes, and set foot into the evergreen forest.

The contrast in the atmosphere at the entrance of the forest was overwhelming. I went from being miffed at the blazing sun at the base of the mountain, to feeling at peace in the crisp, invigorating air of the forest. However, there was definitely a miscommunication, because we ventured into what was labeled an "extremely hard trail," completely unprepared in our casual attire. One of our members looked down at her shoes (which happened to be a pair of flats), and looked back up towards the trail with the look of "Well. I guess this is my life now," seeing as there was no turning back at that point.

In order to get to the moss-covered part of the forest, we had to ascend uneven stone steps lined with unruly tree roots, clamber over a cluster of giant boulders, and daintily hurdle ourselves across rivers. While every step was a challenge, every glimpse of the forest was fabulously picturesque. All I could muster was a "wow" every time we arrived at a new section of the forest, as each view sparkled with viridescent brilliance.





Is that a soot sprite?

In the middle of the hike, I saw quite the peculiar little creature scurrying by my feet. It was a black spider with a round, fuzzy body, and legs that were so thin they were barely visible. “A soot sprite, it’s a soot sprite!!” I blurted towards the others. The perfectly circular spider looked as if it was floating across the rocks due to its virtually invisible legs, which made it look exactly like a soot sprite. I’m not sure if that’s at all related to the soot sprite creatures in Hayao Miyazaki’s films, but it sure did add a bit of Ghibli magic to our travel. It disappeared just as quickly as it appeared, so, unfortunately, I couldn’t snap a picture in time. If you ever travel to Yakushima, keep an eye around your feet and maybe you’ll spot the “soot sprite!”

Mossy Elegance

After making it more than halfway, the trail became too dangerous for our members who weren’t wearing the proper gear. Nonetheless, we were still lucky enough to see a good portion of the moss-covered forest before heading back. Blankets of emerald green moss enveloped the landscape, while crystal clear water delicately rippled around silvery stones illuminated by the azure light of the sky. The only sound you could hear was the steady pace of the river. Well, the “wows” that were uttered from my dweeb self were pretty audible too. I was awestruck; it genuinely felt as if I stepped straight into a Ghibli film.



10-hour trail, start!

The real challenge starts here. The next day, we dragged ourselves out of bed at 4:00 a.m. to prepare for a ten-hour hike. The forests of Yakushima are strictly protected, so cars aren't allowed to go near the trailhead. Instead, there's a bus you must take, packed tightly with other eager hikers that will lead you to the starting line.

The start of the trail is misleadingly easy since it's on a nicely paved wooden track with no inclines or climbing involved. One of us mentioned how the area looked like the prelude to a Disney ride because the scenery was rapidly changing and becoming more dynamic with each step at the beginning. For most of the track, tall trees densely lined the sides which made it feel as if we were going through a portal to a different dimension. The woods would temporarily open up and reveal valleys of the wind, with water and broad stones beneath us as we crossed over bridges. Most of the bridges were way too narrow with gaps too large to be considered a sane method of navigation, but we managed. Those parts really looked like something you'd see in movies, during an action scene of some sort.

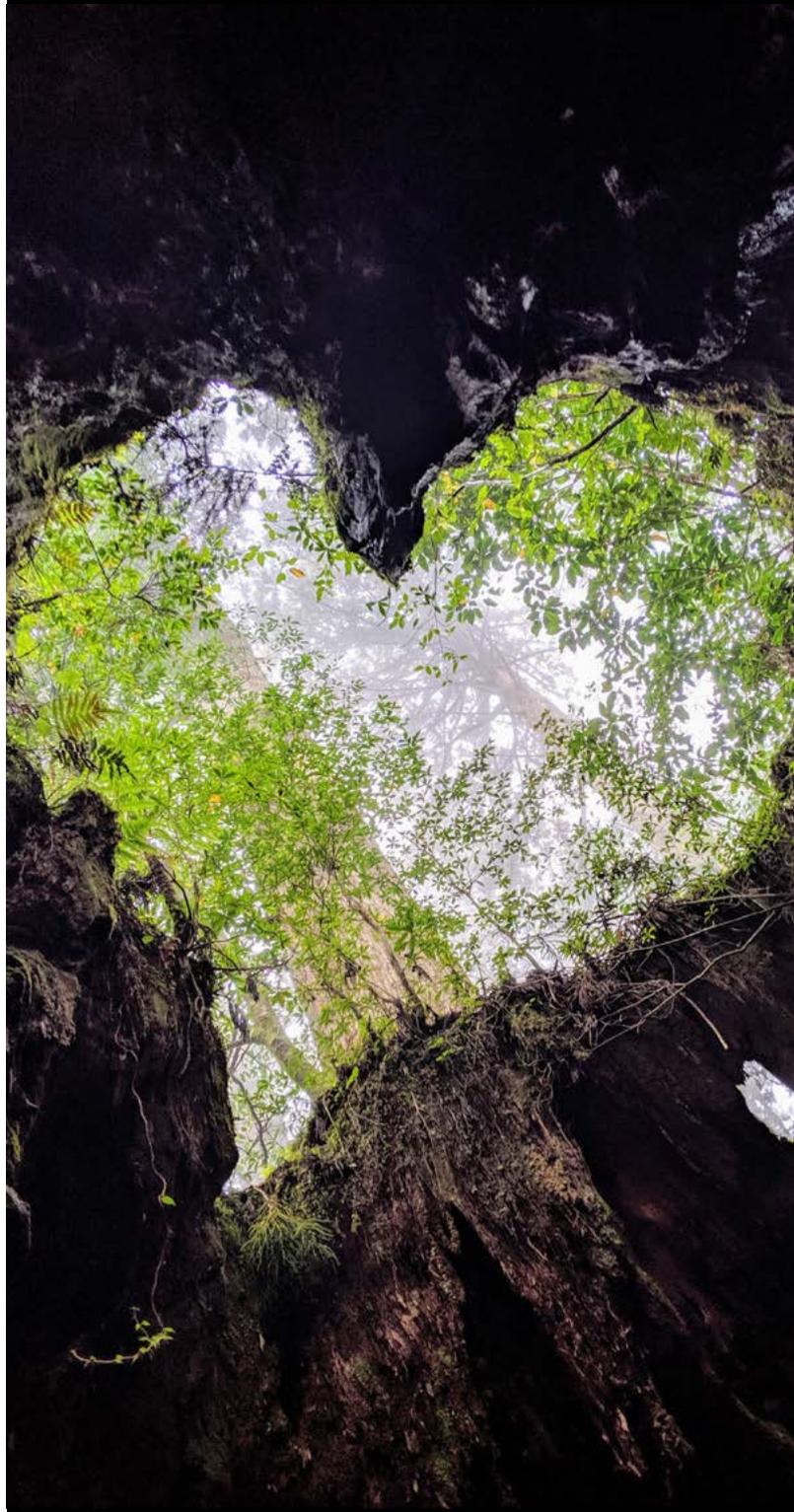
Now, usually, I'd premise this with an "unfortunately," but in this case, I wasn't too bothered that the weather was rainy. The misty weather added a nice touch to the atmosphere, as the sheer fog gently cloaked the nature around us. This added extra magic and mystery to our surroundings. The dewy leaves giving a serene glow to the forest was perfect for the full Ghibli immersion experience. Even though it was a ten-hour, slightly damp hike, the liveliness and beauty of my surroundings gave me continuous energy throughout our journey.

The Heart-Shaped Stump

On the way to the goal, there was a famous landmark called “Wilson’s stump.” While it was a considerably large tree stump, it didn’t look like such a big deal from the outside. It was hard to understand why so many people were lining up to go inside. However, the inside was a completely different story. If you stand at a certain spot and look from that angle inside the stump, the opening at the top appears to be heart-shaped. Sharing that moment of realization with my friends was a wholesome moment that I’ll always remember. Typically I shy away from large crowds, but the detour to see this was worth it for the view.

Witnessing the *Jomon Sugi*

Finally, after five hours of trekking, we made it to the goal point to see the famous *Jomon Sugi*: the oldest cedar tree in Japan. This tree is estimated to be around 3000 to 7000 years old. Now, this was the only part where the misty weather proved to be a bit of a nuisance. Travelers weren’t allowed near the tree, but instead were able to view it from a vantage point. As you can probably guess, the fog wasn’t doing us any favors for a nice view. Although it was tough to see through the fog, the tree had quite an illustrious presence. The *Jomon Sugi* didn’t look too distinct from the other *Yaku Sugi* (Japanese cedar trees more than 1000 years old), but it had a compelling aura that I admired. I mean, imagine standing in front of a living entity that’s been around for thousands of years!



Jomon Sugi after-thoughts

To be straightforward and honest, the end of the trail didn't fully live up to my expectations. Not because of the weather, but because I envisioned being able to get close enough to the Jomon Sugi to touch it. One of my favorite parts about being near ancient trees is the opportunity to press my palms against the trunk and feel the antiquated energy emanating from it. This is something that hikers often do when they come across impressive, age-old trees. Connecting with nature this way is a healing experience for me. It was a little disappointing, but I think the Jomon Sugi might have been vandalized before, and that's why people are no longer allowed near it. On the bright side, I was able to get close and touch some Yaku Sugi on the trail route, so I was able to connect with the spirit of the forest a little. Still, I left wondering, what would have felt like if I was able to connect and hear the whisper of the Jomon Sugi heart?

After a relaxing picnic in nature, we power-housed five hours back to the start before sun-down. Everyone left with a great sense of accomplishment, triumph, and exceedingly stinky socks. Despite how taxing the hike was, we didn't leave with any injuries. However, my neighbor thought it'd be fun to sprint down the slippery wooden track at 100 miles per hour on the way back. I have never seen a wipeout so admirable before. The most impressive part was that they walked away unhurt. I almost joined them since they challenged me to a race, but I backed out because my danger sense was tingling. I most likely would not have survived that fall as skillfully as they did.

From exploring the mystifying forest, eating the local delicacy of flying fish, relaxing in refreshing onsen, and returning to a surprise delivery service of *mukade* (aka centipedes) in our hostel beds, I wouldn't trade this adventure for anything. To all Ghibli fans, or nature fans in general, Yakushima is a must for a one of a kind, enriching travel experience.



Were you able to find all the Ghibli titles?

Answer key: Spirited Away, [Howl's] Moving Castle, [Nausicaa] Valley of the Wind, Whisper of the Heart, My Neighbor [Totoro], [Kiki's] Delivery Service, and of course, Princess Mononoke.

Lillian is a third-year ALT who dances more than she walks. She spends her free time watching funny penguin videos, and also enjoys taking aesthetic pictures of everything and everyone.

All Photos: Lillian Seiler





Photo: Charlotte Coetzee

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