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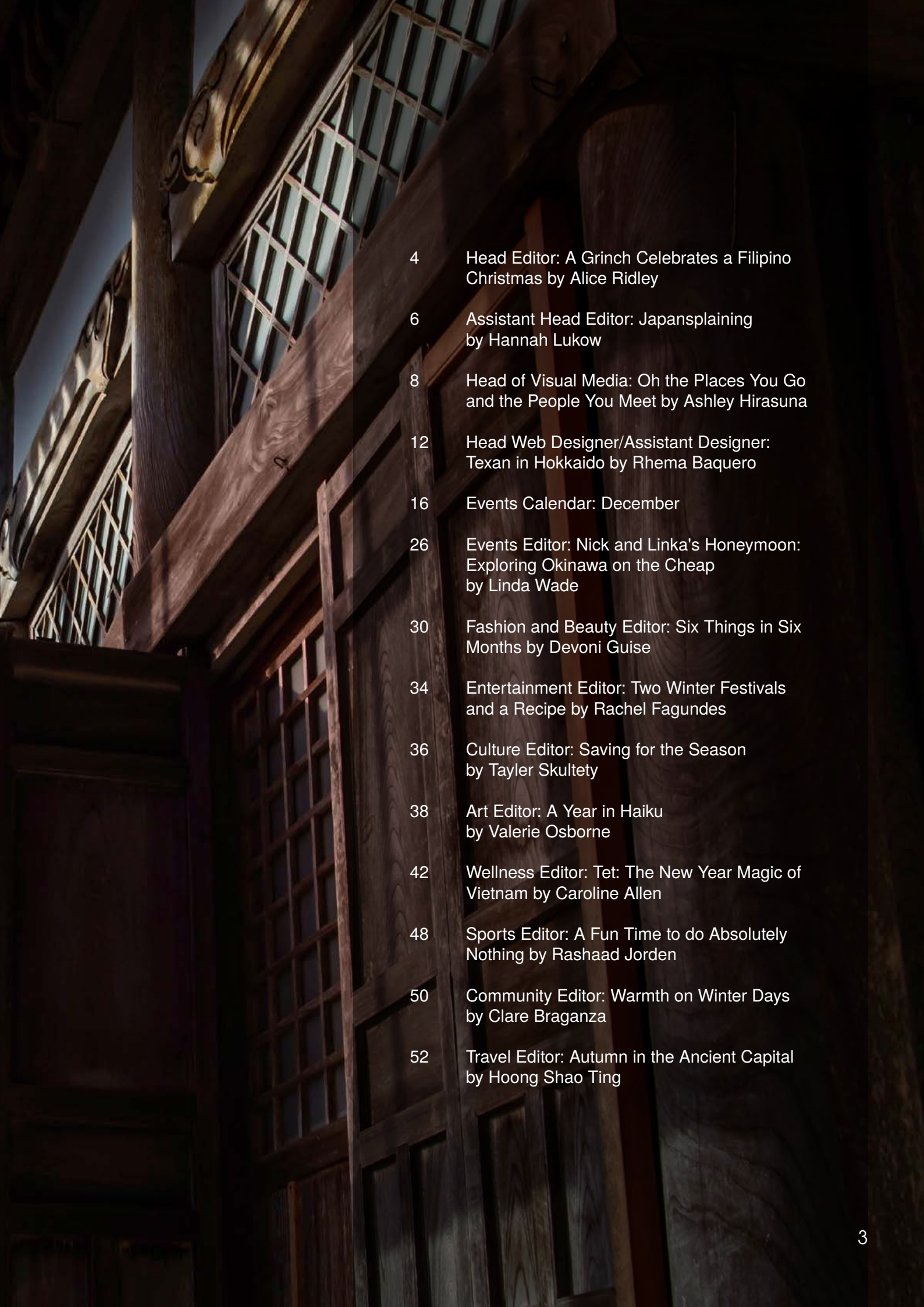
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HEAD EDITOR

A Grinch celebrates a Filipino Christmas

Alice Ridley (Gunma)



When my Filipino friend asked me if I wanted to join her family in Manila for a large and chaotic Christmas celebration . . . I couldn't say no to that now could I? But what I *haven't* actually mentioned to her is that I'm not the biggest Christmas fanatic. For me, living in Japan where there's only a sprinkling of the Christmas spirit is a breath of fresh air.. The Philippines, however, is known for its extravagant Christmas celebrations that begin as early as September. These early celebrations kick-off at the beginning of the "ber" months. Being a country where 86(1) percent of the population is Roman Catholic, this is easily the *biggest* holiday of the year. To put it simply, the Philippines is a country that is extremely devoted to their traditions and I will be thrown directly into this. I am excited but a little nervous about what the day may bring me.

A Christmas decoration that will likely be a common sight is the *paról*. A *paról* is a star-shaped lantern

that is based on the story of the three wise men. These lanterns represent the triumph of light over darkness(2) and high spirits of the Filipino people during this season. *Paróls* are traditionally made with bamboo, Japanese paper and lit up with a candle. There is even a Filipino version of "Secret Santa" called *Monito Monita*. It's very similar to the version that we all know and love but takes things up a level with gift exchanges happening weeks before Christmas Day—sometimes as early as Dec. 1(5), with each week being given a certain theme. Some example themes being: something sweet, something soft, something that grows(3) and so on. On Christmas Day everyone reveals themselves and says "Merry Christmas, my Monita!"(4). Christmas Eve is traditionally spent with family and a midnight feast called *Noche Buena* is held. This is a lavish spread of food after midnight mass. Emphasis on the *lavish*. During this event is when family members open presents from one another.



Plans after Christmas

After spending two days in the capital city, Manila, I'll be flying out to the southern island of Cebu. There I will be spending six days exploring the surrounding areas. The Philippines is made up of 7,641 islands. Unfortunately, I only will be seeing a couple out of the thousands. Some places in the area that I'd like to visit are Bohol, an island famous for rounded "chocolate hills", Moalboal, for its serene white beaches, and it wouldn't be a trip to Cebu without visiting the Kawasan Falls.

I plan to make the most out of these days. My biggest tip for travel, especially solo travel, is to *never* sleep in. You should also try to keep to your regular schedule so your body doesn't feel out of whack. If you want to get the most out of your trips, then there is no time for any sleep-ins. Maybe I'm a bit too hardcore with my schedule, but you will never regret an early rise!

Images provided by my friend Louis Go.

- (1) <https://bit.ly/2sfv1HS>
- (2) <https://bit.ly/2LLDDNy>
- (3) <https://bit.ly/35krF5q>
- (4) <https://bit.ly/35krF5q>
- (5) <https://bit.ly/36IVPFg>

*Alice is in her second year as an JHS & ES ALT in Gunma. Originally hailing from New Zealand, she finds a piece of home when staring off into the Gunma mountains. When not wearing the hat of Head Editor of **CONNECT** she enjoys trying to see as much Japan as possible, searching for plant-based eateries and working on other various volunteer roles as an international resident of Japan*

Japanexplaining

Hannah Lukow (Gunma)

In just a few weeks from the time I'm writing this, my family will leave their home in upstate New York, drive to JFK Airport in New York City, sit in a flying metal tube for twelve hours, and somehow end up in Tokyo, Japan.

I have lived in Japan since June 2018, but this will be my family's first time in Japan. Of course, I am thrilled to have them here, especially because it's been nearly a year since I last went home to the States. But another, smaller part of me feels preemptively embarrassed. There's something nauseating about watching foreign tourists in Japan freely do things I have disciplined myself not to do: having loud conversations on the train, assuming that everyone speaks enough English to understand your fast-paced regional accent, or unabashedly jaywalking.

A few months ago, Netflix released the latest iteration of the hit American TV show *Queer Eye*: "Queer Eye Japan." For those unfamiliar with the show, a team of four gay men and one non-binary person travel around to give their subjects "more than a makeover" via a trademark blend of consumerism and self-help logic. This time, we follow the Fab

Five around Tokyo as they make over four Japanese subjects. Of course, the Fab Five is accompanied by gorgeous (and to my knowledge, disappointingly straight) model Kiku Mizuhara, who is tasked with explaining Japanese customs to the team. Five minutes into the first episode, I had to look away. They're hugging the subjects! Karamo is driving the scooter on the wrong side of the road! Did you hear the way Bobby said *arigatou*? And they're just *so loud*.

Of course, any sense of superiority I might have over the Fab Five or other foreign tourists is surely an illusion designed to protect my own sense of belonging. It's uncomfortable to watch foreign tourists make "mistakes" in Japan because it's like looking into a mirror, forcing you to relive that vulnerable time when you were new here and had no clue what was going on.

Luckily for most of us, we now have a bit more of a clue about what's going on, and we're eager to share the details of our lives with the people we love back home. Sometimes, though, it seems like there's just too much to explain—to



Sharing Your Experiences Without Losing Your Mind

Japansplain, if you will. In conversations with friends and family, I find myself descending into multiple tangents just trying to explain some banal aspect of my everyday life.

How can we deal with the gap of knowledge and experience that exists between us and the folks back home? Many international residents *already* face a huge gap of knowledge and experience that often separates us from native residents of Japan—whether it's language, culture, or etiquette. How can we be the explainers when we constantly need explaining?

The answer I have come to at the moment is to stop explaining and start sharing. When you finally get around to calling that friend from college who earnestly asks, “So what’s Japan like?”, it can be tempting to make blanket statements about the people or places you’ve encountered. It can be tempting to position yourself as an absolute authority. It is more difficult, but perhaps ultimately more

truthful, to speak about your own experiences as just that—your own experiences. Instead of saying, “In Japan, people don’t eat on the train,” you might say something like, “So far I haven’t noticed many people eating on the train in my city.”

It’s such a minor shift in language that I know I will be accused of being the political correctness police (fire away!), but I think it’s a shift that lets you off the hook from being a “Japan expert,” and allows you to be just another person learning about a place and its culture.

Whether you are heading home for the holidays, hosting family here in Japan, or just anticipating a nice FaceTime call, may your Japansplaining be cathartic and your cultural learning be plentiful!

*Hannah Lukow is a second-year resident of Japan, first-year ALT in Gunma Prefecture and the Assistant Head Editor of **CONNECT**. Originally from central New York, Hannah has spent time living in North Carolina and France. Her hobbies include meditating, bothering elected officials, and sharing wholesome memes.*





HEAD OF DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Oh the Places You Go and the People You Meet

Ashley Hirasuna (Ishikawa)

A Winter Vacation in Europe

What are some impressions people have of the JET Programme when they hear about it? Perhaps they think of it as a chance to gain valuable teaching experience in a culture that is completely different from their own. Maybe they think of it as a chance to learn a new language and make friends in Asia. People can even think of the JET Programme as a way to travel to parts of Japan and Asia they didn't have ready

access to before. These were all thoughts that I had when I first applied for the program some . . . years ago. As one year in Japan became two and then three, I realized there was another benefit to belonging to the community of international residents in Japan—the people you meet and the friends you make from other English speaking countries. It's these experiences with folks that

I've met in this community that inspired my winter vacation plans.

Now I know it sounds insane to go from cold and freezing Japan to even colder, if not the same level of cold, Europe, but remember that one key factor that Japanese buildings lack . . . INSULATION. I've also come to realize that, since I have decided that this is my last year in Japan



and on the JET Programme, I probably won't have as much vacation time in any future job. If I'm going to go to Europe to visit my friends there, then it might as well be now.

My first, and by far the longest, flight will be from Kansai International Airport to France. Not because I wanted to go to France but because it was cheaper to fly there than straight

to Spain, which is where I want to celebrate Christmas. The first person on my list to visit now, after completing her tenure on JET, now teaches English in Spain. Second, I plan on flying to Edinburgh, Scotland, where I will meet up with a current Scottish JET who happens to be visiting home. Then, utilizing my British Rail Pass, I plan on taking trains down to York (where I will meet another

friend), Sheffield (where I will meet up with two friends), Oxford (taking a break from people), culminating in celebrating the New Year in London (where I will meet up with more people). After the New Year I plan on flying back to France (and will probably meet up with yet another friend who I found out moved to France recently) and then making the trek back to Kansai.



Things to consider and that I have prepared for my Europe trip:

- ★ flights around Europe and between European countries are relatively cheap if you use discount websites like [ryanair.com](https://www.ryanair.com)
- ★ there's [Pocket WiFi](#) that works in many European countries, so I don't need to reserve several different Pocket WiFi's when I travel between countries. Best of all, it can be picked up in the airport I'm arriving at in France and dropped off the same (with a small fee).
- ★ in order to make the most of my journey, I reserved a consecutive day [British Rail Pass](#) that I can take from Scotland all the way down to London, England.
- ★ I also reserved all of the places I'm staying using a combination of begging my friends, [Airbnb](#) and [booking.com](https://www.booking.com).

I'm both excited and terrified about how everything is going to play out, especially as this is going to be the first time I'm going to be traveling completely on my own.

Wish me luck!



*Ashley is a fifth-year ALT who spends her days, when she's not chasing small children around a classroom trying to get them to speak in English, socializing, designing for **CONNECT**, and performing vague attempts at exercising.*





HEAD WEB DESIGNER /ASSISTANT DESIGNER

Texan in Hokkaido

Rhema Baquero (Kobe)

I do not like being cold. I really despise feeling cold inside of my own home. Give me shorts and tank top weather. Give me the warmth of the summer sun on my melanated skin. I will bare unbreathable humidity. I will tolerate the sweating. The hottest months are when I am at my happiest. As a Texan, I am accustomed to winters that rarely dip below 32°F (0°C) and summers with averages of 90°F or more (32°C). But last year, I learned that Japanese winters in Kansai, while not the toughest in Japan, are not a joke. As I write this, I am swaddled in layers of clothing, sitting beside a cranked up space heater while under my beloved 炬燵 (kotatsu). With the sun setting as early as 5 p.m., I know that the winter is not my element.

But, for New Years, my husband and I were invited by a friend to spend the holidays with him and his family in Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido. Hokkaido is famous for its winters, and this destination has been on my travel list for some time. Though the temperatures can drop to lows of 24.8°F (-4°C) in December, from the pictures, the stretches of fluffy white snow look enticing and simply beautiful. We are elated to be invited, so I am going to grab my thickest coat, load up on hot packs and explore a part of Japan very different than my homes here, and in America.

With so much to look forward to, I can definitely brave the severe chilly weather for a week. Our itinerary is flexible, but there are a few things we hope to do while there:

Photo: commons.wikimedia.org



All about the Seafood

Whenever we go out with the friend we are staying with, he raves about Hokkaido's sushi superiority to all other sushi in Japan. We want to put his claims to the test. For fairness, we are going to binge on Kansai sushi just before leaving to have the freshest taste to compare to. A large portion of crabs in Japan are landed in Hokkaido, so I must chow down on snow crab and if I can, try the Hanasaki crab.

Ramen, お願いします!

Many parts of Japan are known for their take on ramen, but Sapporo ramen is iconic for its rich, salty miso base with a knob of butter, corn and seasonal seafood. They also have a hearty way of making my go-to favorite style, tonkatsu ramen. When I am at my coldest, I will

have to warm my hands on a rich, steaming bowl. If we have a chance, we will also try the unique soup curry which, as the name suggests, is a curry you can drink.

かんぱい! Beer Museum & Garden

You can pick up a can or bottle of Sapporo at any コンビニ (convenience store) or grocery store, but it would be interesting to learn about the history of the process at the [Sapporo Beer Museum](#), Japan's only museum of beer. The Beer Garden on the property will provide a chance to sample new flavors.

Shredding Snow

As a former skater, I have always wanted to try the transition from cement to snow. What better place to try it for the first time than a winter sports mecca? Snow



tubing and sledding are options we would also love to experience. Plus, racing down a white-capped mountain will give us a chance to really take in the natural beauty of this part of the country.

Hello Hatsumode

Last year, we went on our 初詣 (first shrine visit) at a small local shrine after seeing the massive lines at Minatogawa Shrine and Ikuta Shrine. We turned up at the right time and were able to witness a ceremony in progress. This year, we will wake up early to brave the New Year crowds at Hokkaido-jingu Shrine, a shrine with mystic grounds surrounded by forest and nature. I appreciate shrines for their historical nature over spiritual, but I look forward to witnessing the tradition from the perspective of our Japanese friends.

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

Photo: commons.wikimedia.org

Events Calendar:

January 2019

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

Block 1

Hokkaido
Aomori
Iwate
Akita

Block 2

Miyagi
Yamagata
Fukushima
Niigata

Block 3

Ibaraki
Tochigi
Gunma
Saitama
Nagano

Block 4

Chiba
Tokyo
Kanagawa
Yamanashi
Shizuoka

Block 5

Toyama
Ishikawa
Fukui
Gifu
Aichi

Block 6

Shiga
Kyoto
Hyogo

Block 7

Mie
Osaka
Nara
Wakayama

Block 8

Tokushima
Kagawa
Ehime
Kochi

Block 9

Tottori
Shimane
Okayama
Hiroshima
Yamaguchi

Block 10

Fukuoka
Saga
Nagasaki
Oita

Block 11

Kumamoto
Miyazaki
Kagoshima
Okinawa





Block 1



Block 2

Souunkyo Onsen Icefall Festival

January 23 - March 15

Kamikawa, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shikaribetsu Kotan Festival

January 25 - March 22

Shikaoi Town, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Lake Shikotsu Ice Festival

January 24 - February 16

Chitose City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hirakasa Hadaka Mairi

January 8

Hachimantai City, Iwate Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hanamaki Hoshi Meguri Night

January 26, February 2, 11, 16, 24

Hanamaki City, Iwate Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Miyoshi Bonten Festival

January 17

Akita City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

3rd Hasshoku Ramen Festival

January 11 - January 13

Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Dontosai Matsuri

January 14

Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sendai Hatsu-uri

January 2

Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

35th Niigata Jazz Street

January 18

Niigata City, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Dynamite Carnival in Suginosawa

January 18

Myoko City, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Muikamachi Onsen Kamakura Matsuri

January 24 - February 23

Muika Town, Niigata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yamagata City Hatsuichi

January 10

Yamagata City, Yamagata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sakata Sea of Japan Cod Festival

January 25 - January 26

Sakata City, Yamagata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yaya Matsuri

January 15

Shonai Town, Yamagata Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sai no Kami

January 14

Aizuwakamatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture

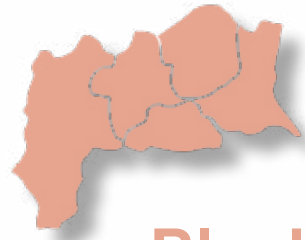
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Takada Big Tug-of-War Festival

January 11

Aizumisato Town, Fukushima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 3

Toride Takoage Taikai and Dondo Matsuri

January 11
Toride City, Ibaraki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shorinzan Nanakusa Taisai Daruma Ichi

January 6 - January 7
Takasaki City, Gunma Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Torioi Matsuri

January 14
Nakanoyo, Gunma Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kawarayu Onsen Yukake Festival

January 20
Naganohara Town, Gunma Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kisoji Ice and Snow Festival

January 25
Okuwa Village, Nagano Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Togakushi Dondo Matsuri

January 18
Nagano City, Nagano Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

22nd Kakeyu Onsen Ice Lantern Festival

December 26 - January 31
Ueda City, Nagano Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Mushasai Festival

January 4
Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Utsunomiya Dezomeshiki

January 5
Utsunomiya City, Tochigi Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Icicles at Ashigakubo

January 5 - February 24
Yokoze Town, Saitama Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Kawagoe Kita-in Daruma Hatsuichi

January 3
Kawagoe City, Saitama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Dezomeshiki

January 6
Kumagaya City, Saitama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 4

Furusato Matsuri Tokyo

January 10 - January 19
Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Earth Garden Winter Festival

January 18 - January 19
Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Japan Brewers Cup 2020

January 24 - January 26
Tokyo, Tokyo Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Hiregasaki Obisha Ritual

January 20
Nagareyama City, Chiba Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Chakkirako Festival

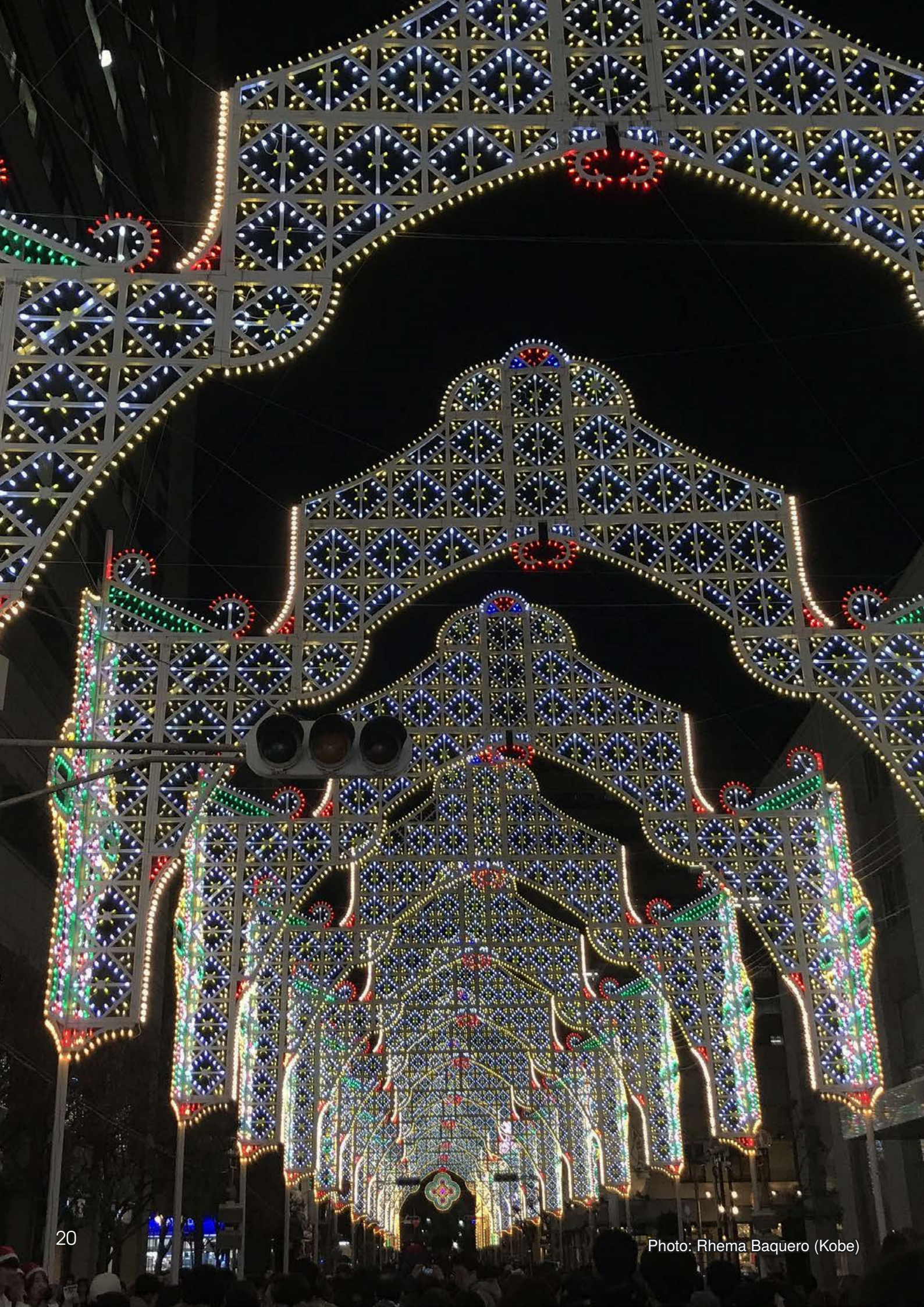
January 15
Miura City, Kanagawa Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

2020 Chinese New Year

January 25 - February 8
Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Japan Brewers Cup 2020

January 24 - January 26
Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)





Block 4



Block 5

Atami Plum Garden Festival

January 11 - March 8
Atami City, Shizuoka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Bishamon Tendai Festival

January 31 - February 2
Fuji City, Shizuoka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Omatsuhiki Festival

January 7
Tabayama Village, Yamanashi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kawaguchiko Winter Fireworks

January 18 - February 23
(Saturdays and Sundays)
Fujikawaguchiko Town, Yamanashi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

34th Sea of Japan Nabe Festival

January 11 - January 12
Takaoka City, Toyama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kota Takoage Matsuri

January 12
Kota Town, Aichi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Morozaki Sagicho Matsuri

January 26
Minamichita Town, Aichi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Whisky Lovers Nagoya 2020

January 19
Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Aichi Pop Culture Festival 2020

January 12
Nagakute City, Aichi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Akigami Onsen Subzero Forest

January 1 - March 31
Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Koinobori Kanzarashi

January 20 and February 2
Gujo City, Gifu Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shirakawago Light Up

January 13, 19, 26
February 2, 9, 16
Shirakawa Village, Gifu Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Underwater Tug of War

January 19
Mihama Town, Fukui Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Star Festival

January 15
Kaga City, Ishikawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kanazawa City Dezomeshiki

January 5
Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 6

Kobe City Dezomeshiki

January 5

Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nankinmichi Chinese New Year Festival

January 24

Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tokoji Temple Ta-asobi/Oni Festival

January 8

Kasai City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Toka Ebisu

January 8 - January 12

Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yutate Kagura

January 20

Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Omato Archery Competition

January 12

Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hokoku Shrine Toka Ebisu

January 9 - January 11

Nagahama City, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Katsube and Sumiyoshi Fire Festival

January 11

Moriyama City, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 7

Doya Doya

January 14

Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tsunahiki Shinji

January 19

Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Imamiya Ebisu Toka Ebisu

January 9 - January 11

Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Haraso Matsuri

January 13

Owase City, Mie Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Yumitori

January 18

Toba City, Mie Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Wakako Matsuri

January 9

Nabari City, Mie Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Otateyama Matsuri

January 25 - January 26

Nara, Nara Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Onihashiri

January 14

Gojo City, Nara Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Mt. Wakakusa Yamayaki

January 25

Nara, Nara Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Kishu Snow Play

January 25

Tanabe City, Wakayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 8

Toka Ebisu

January 9 - January 11
Ozu City, Ehime Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tsubaki Matsuri

January 31 - February 2
Matsuyama City, Ehime Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Todo Okuri

January 13
Niihama City, Ehime Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Otsuki Coral Illuminations

December 1 - January 18
Otsuki Town, Kochi Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

23rd Kokubunji Winter Festival

January 19
Takamatsu City, Kagawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Taisanji Chikara Mochi

January 19
Kamiita Town, Tokushima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

New Year's Special Awa Performance

January 2 - January 3
Tokushima City, Tokushima
Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 9

New Year's Grand Ushitsuki

January 12
Okinoshima Town, Shimane
Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Katae Sumitsuke Festival

January 12
Mihonoseki Town, Shimane
Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Daikokuichi

January 7
Kudamatsu City, Yamaguchi
Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kaminoseki Shinmei Festival

January 26
Kamizeki Town, Yamaguchi
Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Okayama Korakuen Shoshun Matsuri

January 1 - January 3
Okayama City, Okayama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Momotesai

January 20
Hatsukaichi City, Hiroshima
Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

26th Yoshiwa Daitondo Matsuri

January 11
Hatsukaichi City, Hiroshima
Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

3rd Kagura Co-Performance Show

January 19
Miyoshi City, Hiroshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Otake Oyster Festival

January 26
Otake City, Hiroshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 10

Tamaseseri

January 3
Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Daizenji Tamataregu Oniyo Festival

January 7
Kurume City, Fukuoka Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Kasuga Mukoshi

January 12
Kasuga City, Fukuoka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Crucian Carp First Market

January 19
Kashima City, Saga Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Toka Ebisu Matsuri

January 10
Sasebo City, Nagasaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Taihou Tug of War

January 11
Goto City, Nagasaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nagasaki Lantern Festival

January 24 - February 9
Nagasaki City, Nagasaki Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Horan Enya

January 12
Bungotakada City, Oita Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 11

21st Lake Midorikawa Dondo Matsuri

January 12
Misato Town, Kumamoto Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Uezu Fukae Yasaka Shrine Naked Festival

January 20
Shohoku Town, Kumamoto Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Light-weight Bullfighting Competition

January 1 - January 3
Tokunoshima, Kagoshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Sankome

January 7
Ibusuki City, Kagoshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

28th Ibusuki Nanohana March

January 25 - January 26
Ibusuki City, Kagoshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

41st Motobu Yaedake Sakura Festival

January 18 - February 2
Motobu Town, Okinawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nago Sakura Festival

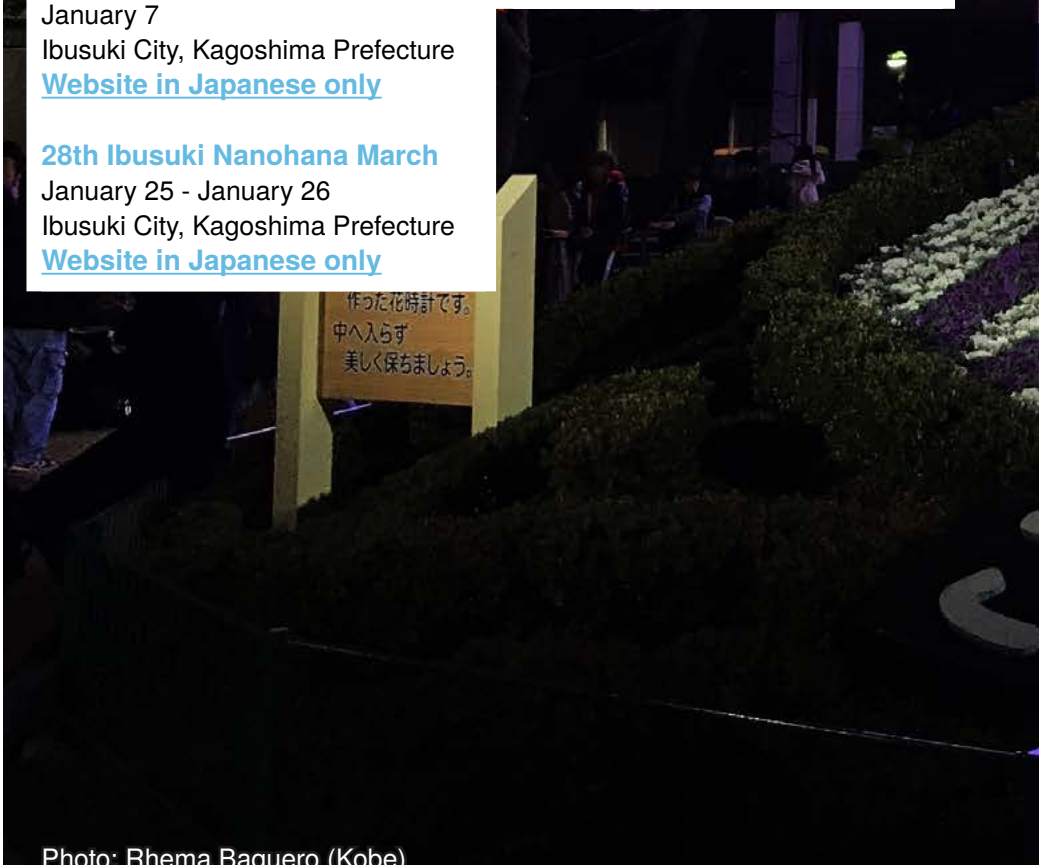
January 25 - January 26
Nago City, Okinawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

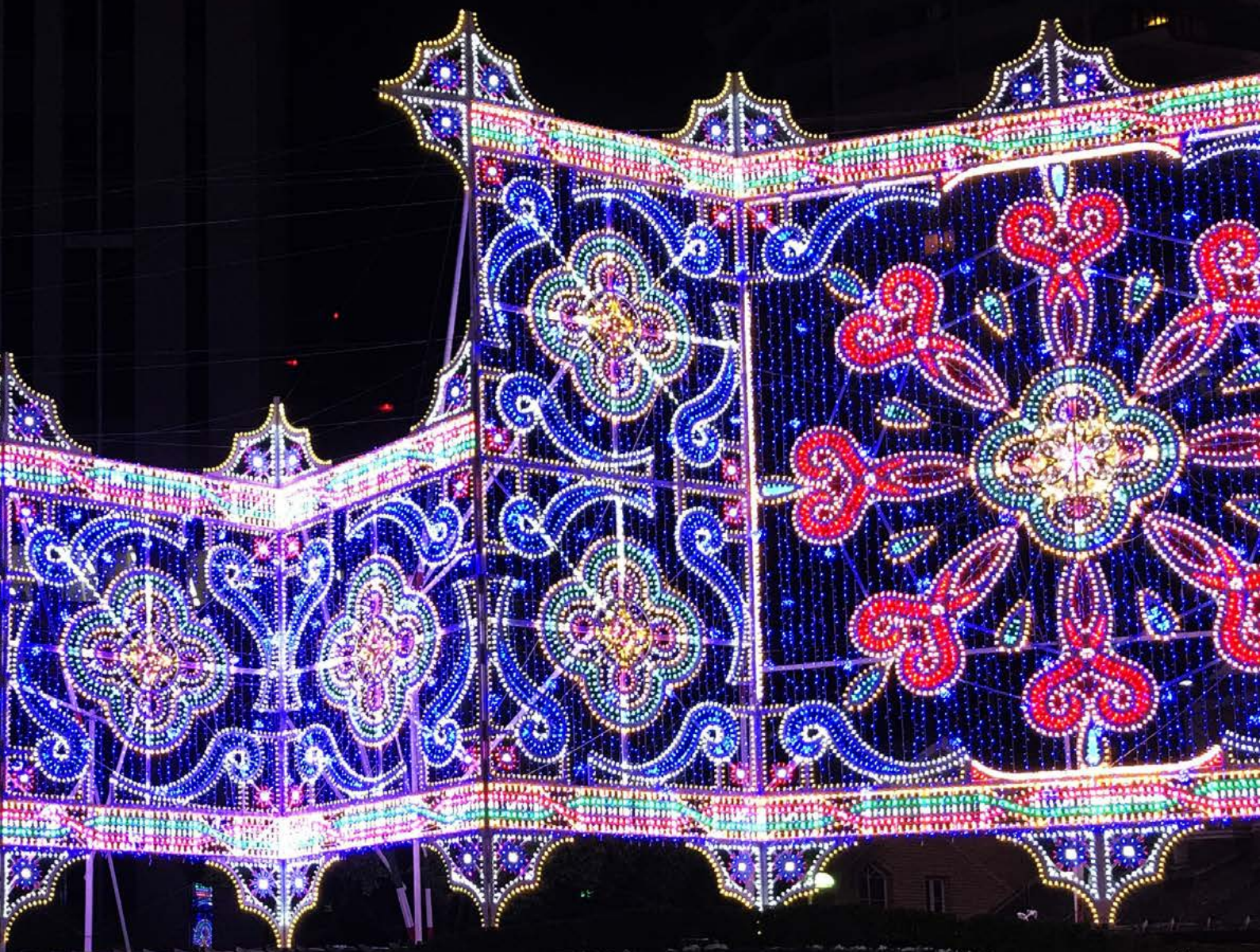
Shiwasu Matsuri

January 17 - January 19
Misato Town, Miyazaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Aojima Shrine Hadaka Mairi

January 13
Miyazaki City, Miyazaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)





うべ花時計

EVENTS EDITOR

Nick and Linka's Honeymoon: *Exploring Okinawa on the Cheap!*



Linka Wade (Gunma)

Once upon a time, a young couple fell in love in college, and then moved to Japan together. After a year, they went back to the USA and got married. Afterwards, they were whisked away on a lovely honeymoon, and then went back to happily living together in the *inaka*. This article is not about them. Instead, this is about a couple who fell in love, moved to Japan, went to the USA to get married, and then . . . the wife went back to work while the husband sat stateside, twiddling his thumbs as they waited for his new visa to clear. All the while, they both vociferously cursed bureaucracy.

As you may expect, I'm a bit bitter about being separated from my husband and not having a honeymoon after several months of being married. However, this will all kind of work out in the end. Gunma winters are long and cold, and winters in Okinawa are not. So, we decided that we would reunite at my parents' house for Christmas, and then escape the cold to Okinawa for the long-awaited honeymoon. We knew we didn't want to do anything fancy, but rather just enjoy each other's company and spend time in a new place. Also, we're both cheapskates. We'll rent a car and drive all around the island, exploring along the way. Here's the master plan of Nick and Linka's Honeymoon: Exploring Okinawa on the Cheap!

December 31

Leave my parents' house with as many Christmas baked goodies as we can. Fly out on an insanely early flight because apparently my husband (who booked the tickets) wants me to suffer. Arrive in Okinawa, get to our hotel,



Heart Rock
<http://bit.ly/2rRjHxp>



Naminoue Shrine <http://bit.ly/38XEdit>

January 6

Go for a stroll underground at Gyokusendo Cave. Be very sad that we can't see Shurijo (a UNESCO World Heritage site castle that tragically burned to the ground in October). Try our hand at making some glass at the Ryukyu Glass Village.

Fun Fact: The 2019 fire was the fifth time that Shurijo has been destroyed. Plans are being made to rebuild again.

January 7

Another day of mystery. Having entire plans figured out is overrated anyway.

Fun Fact: Having plans figured out is not overrated.

then pass out. Celebrate New Year's at Naminoue Shrine.

Fun Fact: Naminoue Shrine is the *Okinawa Sochinju*, or "the protector of Okinawa."

January 1

Tour Chuko Awamori Distillery (it's free!) and possibly enjoy some tasty samples. Head up to Murasaki Mura to see the Ryukyu Lantern Festival.

Fun Fact: *Awamori* is the name for Okinawa's style of sake.

January 2

Go to the Katsuren Castle ruins. Stare dramatically out to the ocean from the ruins. Ignore husband mocking me for my dramatic staring. Go see what's going on at the American Village. Laugh at the American stereotypes.

Fun Fact: In 2016, Roman coins were found in the Katsuren Castle ruins.

January 3

I'll be perfectly honest, we haven't figured out what we're going to do yet. So the current plan is to just wing it.

Fun Fact: We shouldn't have procrastinated as much in planning.

January 4

Go to the Kouri Ocean Tower. Force husband to take cute and romantic pictures with me on the Love Island. Go see the Heart Rock. Continue to torture husband with picture-taking. Continue the theme of exploring castle ruins and go to Nakijin Castle ruins. Love a good castle ruin.

Fun Fact: The Kouri Ocean Tower is 82 meters tall and can be reached via golf cart.

January 5

Ocean Expo Park! I'm so excited for this. Aquariums are my jam, and the Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium is the second biggest in the world. There's also a museum and planetarium, if I manage to drag myself away from all my fishy friends. We'll also stop by the gorgeous Emerald Beach.

Fun Fact: The aquarium is famous for its whale shark, who has been at the aquarium for 24 years.

January 8

Fill our suitcases with *chinsuko* to replace the Christmas snacks that will undoubtedly have already been devoured. Fly back to Tokyo, and then begin our long journey back up into the mountains of Gunma.

Fun Fact: Chinsuko are a traditional snack from the days of the Ryukyu Kingdom.

So there you have it, the master plan for running around Okinawa. It's not your typical honeymoon, and it's a bit scattered around, but that's very us. In the meantime, I'm very much looking forward to spending Christmas at my parents' home for the first time in several years. Not to mention; I have a husband to reunite with! I've been promised that my mom is saving all the baking for the season until I get there, so I know that as soon as I walk through the door, I'll be handed an apron and told to get busy.

This won't be published until after the holidays are over, but I hope you (had) a very Merry Christmas, and I wish you all the best in the new year. My personal new year's resolution is both to be kinder to myself, and to push myself more. Here's to embracing where you've been, and celebrating where you're going. 明けましておめでとう!

*Linka Wade is a second-year ALT in Gunma Prefecture. She is from Monterey, California, and a staunch supporter of NorCal in the NorCal vs. SoCal debate. She is also the Events Section Editor of **CONNECT**. She lives with her husband and two guinea pigs deep in the inaka. In her free time, she loves traveling, exploring onsen, and not having to plan her wedding anymore. As the weather gets colder, her plans are to evolve into her true form as a kotatsu mushi. You can find her on Instagram as @linkaslens, and on her blog, [Linka Learns Things](#).*





Ryukyu Lantern Festival



Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium



FASHION AND BEAUTY EDITOR

SIX THINGS IN SIX MONTHS

Devoni Guise (Saitama)

It is shaping up to be my last year in Japan. As I reminisce about my time in Japan, I can't help but to look forward and start planning, in no specific order, for the last few items on my list of things I want to do before I leave.

A solo trip to Hiroshima

I've done trips to different parts of Japan, but usually as a part of a group. I want to experience traveling alone, only me and my thoughts to keep me company. I also want to stay somewhere *nice*. I'm tired of hostels: bunk beds, shared toilets, and small lockers for my big luggage—I want more. I'm going to stay at a fabulous *ryokan* with a spectacular *onsen*, and enjoy a delicious *kaiseki* (Japanese dinner) meal while I'm at it.



Photo: fezbot2000 (Unsplash.com)

Perfect my own version of a traditional Japanese dish + miso soup

Like many ALTs, I eat school lunch every workday. Personally, I really enjoy the food. I aspire to one day be competent enough in the kitchen to recreate some of the meals I have eaten. So far, I can fry up *sanma* and make the sauce almost identical to my school lunch's, but I still have a long way to go to master the petite gratin so commonly found on the menu in Japanese schools. This goal is testing my mettle, because I truly hate cooking, but the thought of being able to recreate some of the dishes I had in Japan back home in the States keeps me going.

My first time experiencing miso soup, I didn't like it at all. It flowed over my tongue in a way I would imagine old dishwasher would have. Over time, repeatedly forcing myself to gulp it down in hopes of being a good role model by showing students to eat all of their food, I started to acquire a taste for miso. I realised that *mami* isn't just a euphemism for bland, but an actual taste as real as sweet, sour, salty, etc. Now, on my second year, after mastering enjoying miso soup, I hope to be able to recreate my own. I have a very active account on [Cookpad](#) and am constantly stalking my city's school lunch account in hopes of them one day releasing the full recipe for their sweet potatoes miso soup—my favorite!

Visit every major art museum in Tokyo

(including Studio Ghibli)

I've been light on my museum visits. Every time I travel, I make it a point of visiting a few museums. But oddly enough, I haven't ventured out to one during my time in Japan. Before I make my leave, I have to visit some—actually, I have to outdo myself and visit every major one in Tokyo. And yes, I'm including Studio Ghibli in my 'art museum' list.



Photo: Devoni Guise





Photo: Yifeng Lu (Unsplash.com)

Pass the JLPT N3

I studied Japanese in high school for 4 years, and picked it back up after being accepted as an ALT. During my time in Japan, this is my best chance to immerse myself in the language and make real progress. Back home, I fear that because Japanese has no career relevance for me (there's only a small Japanese community), and the intricacies of life just pulling me away, if I don't buckle down and study now, I may never improve my Japanese. With a newfound level in Japanese, I really hope to one day be able to watch and understand all the interesting Japanese shows that Netflix decides not to sub.

Get even more involved with my students

I must admit I'm lucky. When I first found out I was going to be an elementary school teacher, I was confused. Why would I be working with elementary school students when I said I had experience with high schoolers and college students? How did they figure out my placement? While I really like kids in general, nowhere on my application did I say that . . . but anyhow, I truly lucked out with my students and placement. I enjoy my students, even the ones with a bratty streak; they try in class, are respectful, and we have a good time together, even with my limited Japanese. They try to talk to me, and I try to piece together an answer in Japanese. I really appreciate the effort we mutually put forth to better communicate.

During my first year teaching, it was hard to really settle down and just enjoy being a teacher in Japan. It was hard for the second half of 2019 too. Now, heading into 2020 and being a second-year ALT, I feel more at peace, and stable enough to take that breather and create more out-there activities for my students. For instance, I have made it a point to do more culture days in class. So, for American holidays, I prepare a special lesson and media to present to the class. Just recently in December, we celebrated my birthday with a Christmas-themed party. We learned some relevant vocabulary, played some common games, and broke a pinata I made. It was a great time. For my last year in Japan, I hope to do more with my students outside of the regular.



Photo: Jacob Plumb (Unsplash.com)

Visit at least two place off the beaten path in Japan

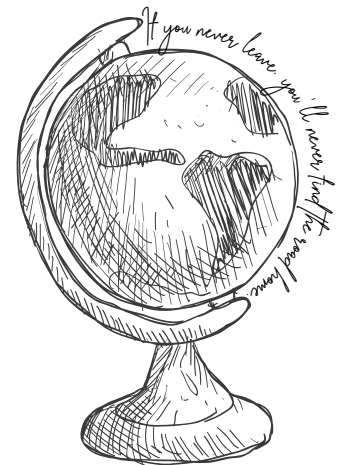
Japan is a small, but big country. Small, because the landmass is small. But big, because there is so much to see but can feel very daunting to get to. I don't have nor want a car in Japan, so this goal is my 'reach' goal. But I would love to go to locations in Japan that isn't featured that often in tourist books. Sometimes, being the frugal person I am, I find this a little daunting. For instance, I planned a trip to Tokamachi to see the art installations there from their triennial art festival. But, it was too expensive for a weekend trip! For two days it was going to be around 70000 yen. And the main culprit for this exorbitant price was transportation.

This is a common problem for places off the beaten path in Japan. It's pricey to get to these places that overnight buses won't take you to, shinkansen tickets are prohibitively high, and car rentals moreso. When planning day trips, you really must plan it by how easy they are to get to from your location, but that makes it hard for those in the countryside. But I won't give up on seeing something uniquely Japan. To make this trip possible I have started saving, looking at Japan-specific sites for inspiration, and stalking Japanese travel deal sites, like [Rakuten](#) or [JTB](#) for deals on train tickets or accommodations. Hopefully I can find something that won't break the bank.

I have a bit on my plate that I plan to do, and while I may not be able to cover it all, I am hoping to try my best and at least leave knowing that I did all that I can to have made my stay in Japan wonderful.



Photo: Wolfgang Rottmann (Unsplash.com)



Devoni Guise is a second-year ALT living in Saitama-ken. For her first year and six months living in Japan she spent her time daydreaming, reading, and studying Japanese. She now finds herself drifting into deep meditations on her life and what is next upon her return to the US. She still finds time to study Japanese when she can break free from the anxiety.

ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

TWO WINTER

FESTIVALS

AND A RECIPE

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

While my main goals this winter break are to relax, plan for the future, and use the school ovens to make the holiday cookies I so desperately crave, there are also two winter festivals I've been particularly looking forward to attending.

First, the beautiful town of Takachiho in Kyushu hosts an all-night sacred *kagura* performances I've been looking forward to for months now.

I previously visited Takachiho (also known for spectacular natural gorges) during Golden Week last year, and was very taken in by its natural beauty, fascinating folklore, and incredible *kagura* dances. One of the most famous stories in Japanese mythology tells how the Sun goddess Amaterasu hid in a cave, plunging the world into darkness. The other gods, after repeatedly failing to convince her to come out, threw a raucous dance party which aroused her curiosity enough to lure her from her cave and bring light back into the world. That very cave is apparently in Takachiho, and the residents of this town don incredible masks and perform *kagura* dances telling this story and others from Japanese mythology during the winter months.

I was able to see a brief sampling of four of the dances on my visit last spring (they hold nightly hour-long performances for tourists year round) and found it completely thrilling. However, from November to

February, performances of these sacred dances last through the night. It'll be well worth a trip down to Kyushu to see it for myself, and I'm looking forward to doing some *onsen*-hopping along the way.

The second festival will occur a little after my winter break ends, but sounds easily worth taking the time off for. At the notorious Dosojin Fire Festival, 42-year-old men are going to climb a tower shrine made from rice stalks and the wood of sacred trees, 25-year-old men will guard the tower's base (because 42 and 25 are unlucky numbers) and the rest of the village men will spend the rest of the night trying to *burn it the fuck down* with flaming torches and projectals. While the older men are still *on* it, taunting their attackers below. You know, to banish evil spirits. What could possibly go wrong? I have no idea—but I am *very* excited to find out.

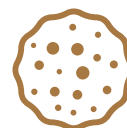
So safe travels this winter you guys! Have a happy new year! And if any of you have access to the blessed ovens of your school's home economics rooms, I've included my favorite cookie recipe below, to keep you warm instead of desk-warming this winter. Or you could just, you know, set a tower full of middle aged men on fire. That seems fine.

Rachel Fagundes is a 3rd year ALT in Okayama Prefecture. She likes cats, naps, cat naps, Japanese festivals, and good books.



Chocolate Orange Walnut Cookies

- ◇ 2 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- ◇ 1 teaspoon baking soda
- ◇ 1 teaspoon salt
- ◇ cinnamon
- ◇ chinese five spice
- ◇ additional spices to taste
- ◇ 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened
- ◇ 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- ◇ 1 cup packed brown sugar
- ◇ molasses (optional)
- ◇ 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ◇ 2 eggs
- ◇ 3 oranges, zested
- ◇ 1 1/2 cups dark or bittersweet chocolate chips (or chopped up dark chocolate)
- ◇ 2 cups walnuts or more



Preheat oven to 375°F/190°C

Combine flour, baking soda, salt, and spices in a small bowl. I usually eyeball the spices rather than measure exactly, but I use a lot of cinnamon and/or Chinese five-spice (which has more cinnamon in it), and sometimes an additional sprinkling or cloves, anis, or ginger, etc, since I like a dark, gingerbreadly flavor. Note: I suspect this is not a popular flavor combo with my Japanese coworkers, so if you are making cookies to share with the office, maybe ease up on the spice.

Beat butter, granulated sugar, brown sugar, and vanilla extract in large mixer bowl until creamy. I often replace a spoonful or two of the brown sugar with molasses, again for a darker and richer flavor, but if you can't get a hold of molasses in Japan don't worry about it. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Zest two or three oranges and add zest into the wet batter.

Gradually beat in flour mixture. Stir in chocolate chips and nuts. I add about as many nuts as can be reasonably held together by the batter; makes for very hardy cookies.

Spoon desired cookie-sized dalops onto a greased baking sheet or non-stick pan.

Bake for 9 to 11 minutes or until golden brown.



CULTURE EDITOR

Saving for the Season



Learning to Slow Down and Embrace a Frugal Holiday

Taylor Skultety (Nara)

Traveling used to be the most important thing to me during my time in Japan. I spent my winter vacations seeing the illuminations of Osaka, snorkeling with sea turtles in Okinawa, and most recently, *onsen* hunting in Nagano. This year, though, I haven't found the motivation to book a single flight or hotel room. Lately traveling had lost a bit of its meaning, feeling more like another task to complete rather than a vacation. It took a while, but I have become more comfortable with the urge to stay put—inviting it in and having a good talk with it.

I needed a change of pace. I decided that I would take this year to downsize my lifestyle and figure out which practices and habits I wanted to keep, boosting my savings along the way. But a saving-oriented lifestyle is difficult to pursue. Travel has become more accessible than ever and why

do I feel I must buy the latest flavor of Strong Zero even though I already know they all taste bad? Consuming less can really force you to make the tough decisions.

Some may already have encountered the *takeibo*, a Japanese personal finance journal that was invented by the first female Japanese journalist, Hani Matoko, in the early 20th century. The first English version of which was recently published by writer Fumiko Chiba. Perhaps riding on the coat-tails of the Marie Kondo craze, Chiba discusses how the *takeibo* is meant to be a tool for the user to think more deeply about spending in a [recent article](#) in Refinery 29. The *takeibo* should reveal what clutter can be eliminated from daily life in order to save up for something meaningful in the future. While I am not about to run out and buy a *takeibo* (1200 yen? *puh-lease*), I have adopted

the basic financial management routine of logging all of my purchases into spreadsheets. Seeing my purchases on 'paper' has helped me gain perspective on where my money is actually going.

With travel gone, food became my biggest area where I could increase my daily micro-savings. The chore of inputting all my purchases immediately caused me to spend less and more economically. Not surprising, I was prompted to mostly eschew eating at restaurants and consuming alcohol. I realized, due to lifestyle inflation, even eating at home needed some tweaking. Do I really need the 400 yen almond milk? No, the 200 yen soy milk is probably fine. Cooking has always been a hobby of mine. Eating simpler meals and repeating meals throughout the week took some relearning. Another triumph; I have found what might be the cheapest produce vendor in my town. A cooperative of local farmers selling produce out of a corrugated iron warehouse for 100 yen or less. Good-bye Aeon. Small changes have really started to add up.

As December rolls around and I still have nothing on my calendar for winter break, I can feel the FOMO creeping in. At this point, there are definitely no affordable hotel rooms left in Sapporo or Kinosaki. Is this a mistake? Am I squandering my youth? The other day while folding exam papers with my supervisor, I floated my imaginary plans for a trip to Kinosaki past him. "Japanese people don't like Kinosaki, too many tourists, I suggest you go somewhere else" was the response I got. A reminder of why I needed a break in the first place.

This is less of a resolution and more of an experiment to provide clarity regarding my evolving goals and values. So far, it's been the refresher I needed. Eating out feels like a treat again and a day-trip to Osaka produces excitement. After my experiment is done, I wonder what fantastic things will be deemed worthy of my hard-earned savings? So, this year rather than traveling during winter vacation, I will be at home enjoying the more modest Christmas tradition of watching "Nailed it! Holiday!" on my mother's Netflix account FOMO free!

Originally from Victoria, B.C., Canada, Tayler has been living in Japan for three years. She is looking forward to finding new and creative ways to prepare New Year's mochi.



ART EDITOR

A year in Haiku

Valerie Osborne (Fukuoka)

Since coming to Japan, I've often found it hard to find inspiration for my writing. I used to write poetry like diary entries, recording my thoughts and feelings. Yet, despite being in Japan for over a year now, I've barely written anything about my time here. You would think that living in such a beautiful country, within a new and interesting culture, there would be no lack of new ideas for a writer. Yet still, I find myself drawing a blank. It doesn't help that when I get home from school, the only motivation I have is the motivation to watch Netflix until it's time for bed. I just don't have the energy to write and edit the long-winded, free verse poems that detailed my college life. However, I don't want to quit writing altogether, so I've tried to make it a goal to write just a little bit, even if it's only occasionally. The Japanese poetry form haiku is perfect for this goal.

“

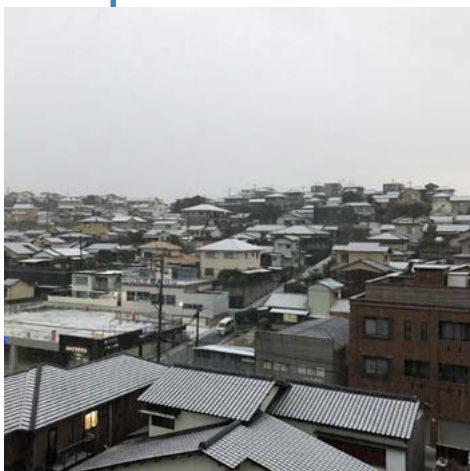
A haiku is a short form poem that consists of three lines, the first and last lines contain five syllables, while the middle line allows seven syllables.

”

I've found that the strict structure of the haiku gives me a more concentrated focus on my writing, while the short length allows me to write quickly without losing motivation. Haiku can also act as a scrapbook of sorts, letting me write quick snapshots of things I've seen and experienced in Japan. The following haiku detail some moments from the past year . . . my first full year in Japan.

*Valerie Osborne is the **CONNECT** Art Section editor and a 2nd year JET from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, USA. She currently works as an ALT at two high schools in Fukuoka Prefecture.*

Photos: Valerie Osborne



January

First (and only snow)
in Fukuoka

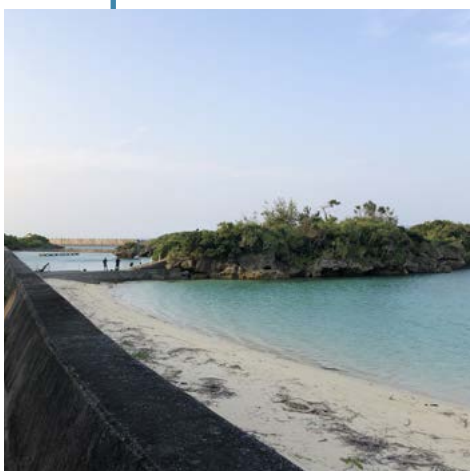
Tepid breath tattoos
the frozen window. Loose snow
crowns a hill of roofs.



February

Concert in Osaka

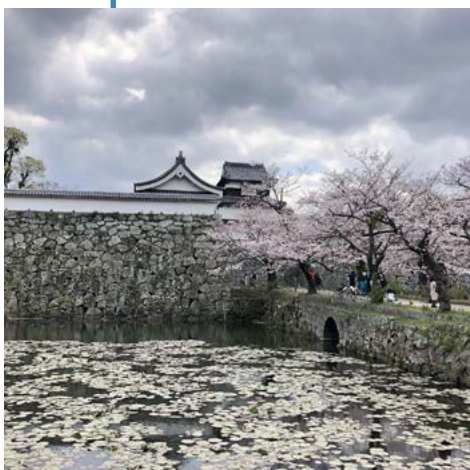
A lone singer sweats
Under the hot furor of
Stage lights. The crowd hums.



March

Trip to Okinawa

Salted air fills my
lungs with gulps of life. A sea
bluer than the sky.



April

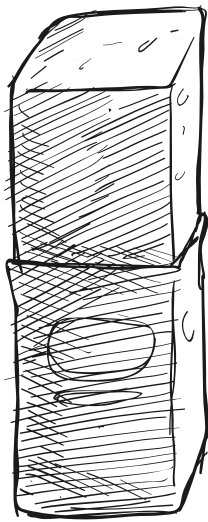
Hanami

Lilly pads drifting
ships, catch *sakura*: nomads
shaken from the trees.

May

Lotus Lantern
Festival in Busan

Roses glow under
the gentle flush of lanterns.
Birthday for a god.



June

Takotoyama Park

Ajisai, blooming
violet, a bruised and fitful
love paints the petals.



July

Train ride across Hokkaido

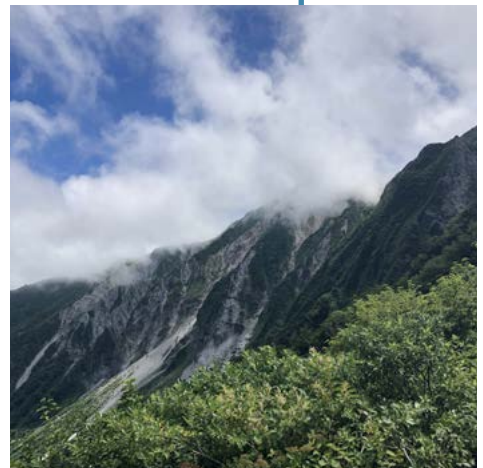
From the train window,
Farmhouses break the fold of
waves. *Midori* sea.



August

Climbing Mt. Daisen

Clouds weaving a mask,
veil the mountain's shy face. We
ascend for a peak.





September

Visiting Itoshima

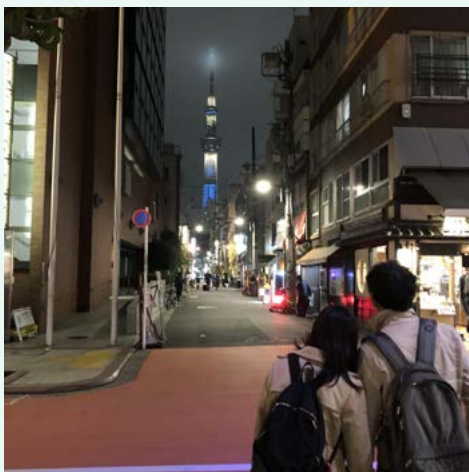
Itoshima weds
the sea, kissing the feet of
Heaven's gate, chaste white.



October

Trip to Yanagawa

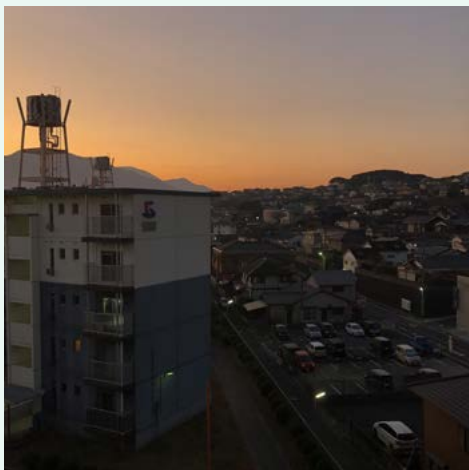
Heads brushed by weeping
willows, an old man sings. The
river guides us home.



November

Tokyo

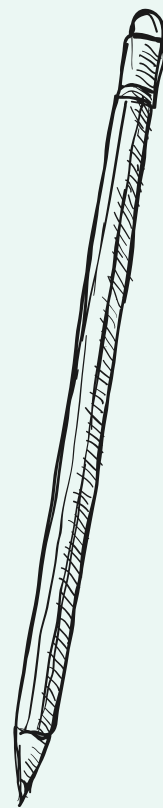
Above neon lights,
A starless sky watches the
city reach for her.



December

Early morning before work

Rising slowly, the
sun blushes, waking up to
the face of the hills.



WELLNESS EDITOR



Tet:
The New Year
Magic of
Vietnam

Caroline Allen (Tottori)

By the time you read this piece, I won't be in rural Japan, mourning the absence of central heating. Rather, I'll be staring down a sunset in Vietnam with a cocktail in my hand. This winter vacation, I'm headed to Ho Chi Minh city, where my family are flying over to meet me. Together, we will celebrate the new year in the sunshine. We spent last Christmas together in Kyoto and, quite honestly, at this stage I think my family are just glad to have an opportunity to travel east.

It's a different kind of celebration from the New Years I've spent in Ireland. For one thing, we're technically celebrating the Gregorian (Western) New Year, rather than the Lunar New Year, which is the most important celebration in much of East Asia. Japan is actually unusual for following the Western style of celebrating the New Year at the beginning of the Gregorian calendar.



Collecting and Adapting Cultures

One of my favourite parts of living in Japan is discovering new aspects of Japanese culture (and getting to reflect on Irish culture, in a way I had never thought of before). The seasonal customs of a country can tell us so much about their culture and history, from food to festivals. Another aspect of life here that I really enjoy, is the chance to incorporate aspects of this new culture to my own life.

I generally throw myself into the celebration of *oshogatsu*, buying myself an elaborate *kumade* to bring good luck and decorating my front door with a *shimekazari*. And yet I won't celebrate the New Year in Japan, so I've started researching a whole new set of traditions. The Lunar New Year is celebrated throughout East Asia. It was traditionally celebrated in Japan until the Meiji era.

Now, it persists in small pockets of the country with large Chinese populations, such as Kobe and Yokohama. However, in many other countries, from Korea to Thailand, it's a big deal; think Christmas and Halloween and Easter all rolled into one.

As I've grown to love *oshogatsu* traditions, I've started to think more about the Lunar New Year as it is celebrated in Vietnam. The Western New Year is celebrated in Vietnam, as it is throughout Asia, with fireworks and countdowns and champagne, but it's really the celebration of Tet that is the most cherished time. The festival itself is called Tet and it is also considered the beginning of spring. (The Chinese word for the holiday is literally the "Spring Festival").

The Joy of Family: The Promise of a New Year

Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, is a time to spend with family. I haven't seen my parents since May and as we'll spend our first Christmas apart this year, I'm looking forward to seeing them. In many European countries, including Ireland, it's generally considered a bit uncool to ring in the New Year with your family. We generally consider it to be a night of revelry and excess—a night to steal a kiss from a stranger, to make wild promises, not to lounge in pyjamas, at home. That's not really my style anymore. I've become envious of the Lunar New Year: full of symbolism and tradition and spirituality.

The Vietnamese have retained many Chinese aspects of the Tet holiday (such as tiger dancing, and giving lucky money to children in red envelopes) and adapted many aspects to suit their own culture. For example, there are many unusual superstitions that were imported by the Chinese, such as the belief that you shouldn't sweep during Tet, lest you sweep away any good luck. It's also believed that you shouldn't cut your hair or nails during this time (in case you cut off the good luck . . . ?) but many of Tet's private ceremonies and public displays are different.



Decorations and Celebrations: How to Celebrate Tet



The Vietnamese begin to prepare for Tet, a week in advance. They buy paper cloths and living carps, for the ceremony to bid farewell to the Kitchen God. It is said that the Kitchen God will report back to the King of Heaven and tell him about the family's affairs throughout the year.

The Vietnamese like to decorate their homes by planting in the garden, a small bamboo tree called a Cay Neu and a yellow blossom called Hoa Mai that represents spring. Red banners are placed on the door, as it is believed that red wards off evil spirits from entering the house. The night before, incense is burned and the graves of ancestors are visited. On the day itself, the whole country erupts in an explosion of noise, parades and excitement. Many people wear masks and mimic the Mua Lan (a magical creature supposedly based off a unicorn).

The night before the New Year, the Vietnamese like to offer up a boiled chicken head and rice, roses and joss paper to the gods. They have an indoor ceremony too, lighting incense and praying for dead ancestors. Families generally prepare for Tet by cleaning their house and buying new clothes to wear. Children are given red envelopes full of lucky money.

In many public places, there are stages set up with free displays of music and entertainment. Many people throw bangers on the road to scare away evil spirits. That sounds borderline terrifying to me but I can imagine getting swept up in the excitement. Although I won't actually be in Vietnam to experience Tet in its entirety, I know I will take in some of that same energy.

An Unknown Future— What Does the New Year Mean for Me?

For many of us, the turn of a new year is full of uncertainty. It is the time of recontracting papers, of grad school applications, of Skype interviews. It is all of these things for me too. Since coming to Japan last year, I've had to consider what my next step will be. Quite surprising myself, I've decided to stay for a third year.

The JET Programme has a shelf life built into it. It's a cultural exchange, not a long term career. I've changed since coming here. I want different things, I'm not the person who arrived, two years ago, with a heavy suitcase and no idea what to expect. She walked into a bare apartment. I wouldn't recognise that girl anymore. She was blinkered and so anxious. Since then I have grown into a woman. There's so many reasons why I've decided to stay

another year. I started to figure out how to be happy. It took me until midway through my second year to make it all work.

This was the year I started taking antidepressants. This was the year I started seeing a psychologist who specializes in the therapy that works for me. This was the year I found myself in a serious, loving relationship. This was the year I began volunteering for something that I find exhausting but important. This was the year I began to write for *CONNECT*. Now I feel like a different person. I laugh every day (even on the days I cry). I read books. Sometimes, I even cook lunch the night before to save time. It would take a lifetime to tell you all the ways in which I can hardly recognise myself these days.

Some Things Change Some Things Stay the Same

There's something about New Year that always makes me wistful. Back in Ireland, sometimes I would ring in the new year with a sense of disappointment and dashed hopes—a party I didn't go to, a comeback I didn't say in time, a path I should have taken but didn't. I would wonder if anything would really change for me, from one year to the next. Sometimes, frankly, not much changed. But I'm entering the next year with a sense of hope and excitement. I don't know what will happen in 2020. There will be downs as well as ups, undoubtedly. The process of life is change and the process of change is loss. For whatever I gain, I will lose: opportunities, old friends, jobs I could have taken, choices I could have made, love, time, and family members I'll never get back again. That is the nature of life.

I am hopeful, though. I know there are aspects of my old life, my old self, that I will never get back again, and I will not miss them. I think 2020 will be one of my better years. I'm still committed to changing, adapting, incorporating and adjusting. I'm looking forward to another year in Japan, of learning more about myself and the world around me.

The Lunar New Year this year falls on January 25th. Each year is represented by one of twelve zodiac animals. I was born in 1995, the year of the boar, and 2019, my zodiac year, was a fortunate one for me. 2020 is the year of the rat, the zodiac year for those born in 1960, 1984 and 1996—here's hoping for all you rats that 2020 will be a good one for you.



References:
“[Tet, a Celebration of Rebirth](#),” Asian Nation

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.

SPORTS EDITOR

A Fun Time To Do *Absolutely Nothing*

Rashaad Jordan (Kochi)

The end of the year is frequently a time for reflection, but it is also a chance to look ahead to a (hopefully) more enjoyable year.

As much of the country is off during the New Year's holidays, it's an opportunity for relaxation. I certainly intend to get my share of doing absolutely nothing in as I look forward to not having to see the inside of the teachers' room for several days.

But more importantly, the New Year's holidays provide me a very fruitful opportunity to prepare for a memorable several months. I have a lot to look forward to in 2020, including Kochi City's Ryoma Marathon in February. The 2019 edition was one of my year's biggest disappointments. Already behind in my training, while running not too far from my apartment one month before the main event, I foolishly put myself in a position where I could easily get myself injured—and I did. I twisted my right ankle and could barely run afterwards.

Despite the injury, I participated in the Ryoma Marathon anyway, and somehow willed myself across the finish line after having walked the latter half of the race. Although I was cleared by a doctor, it wasn't the wisest decision to participate. Making sure I don't foolishly get hurt while training is a major goal of mine during the New Year's holidays.

Speaking of training for the Ryoma Marathon, it can actually be fun. Through a long run or two, I might discover a new bit of Kochi Prefecture. Not too long ago, I was on one of my normal running routes, but instead of stopping at an *onsen*, which often represented the "It's time to head back home!" point, I decided . . . why not keep going and going? Sure enough, I ended up in a city I forgot existed—not that I discovered anything really amazing. But I might on a new route.

Also, I look forward to more time for Japanese study. Theoretically, it should be easy to improve quickly in Japanese if you are willing to put the work in. But





generally, my time in the staff room is devoted to lesson planning so that puts a dent in study time. Being at home, however, should provide a more relaxed setting for studying.

Finally, as I will not renew my contract, I'm entering my last several months living in Japan. But the end of my JET stint is not a cause for sadness. It's actually a spur to accomplish what I want in Japan before going home. Improving my Japanese is one of those goals—as well as making plans for my Olympics experience. The great news is I got tickets! Of course, I have several months until the fun in Tokyo starts, but it's never too late to start planning.

The New Year's holidays . . . a time to do absolutely nothing but plan for bigger and better things.

Rashaad Jordan is a JET Program ALT in Kochi Prefecture. He is excited about 2020 because he is eager to finish the Ryoma Marathon running instead of walking. While the Tokyo Olympics is obviously the 2020 event Rashaad is most looking forward to, the new year will hopefully bring forth more opportunities to do taiko, show visitors around Kochi City as well as meet more people.



COMMUNITY EDITOR

Warmth on Winter Days

Date Ideas for Couples and Friends

Clare Braganza (Fukushima)

Winter. Love it or hate it, the season conjures up images of frozen trees, steaming mugs of hot chocolate, and the rattle of my poor car as I struggle to de-ice it before work. This is what I expect of my first winter in Japan, with an added dollop of snow and homes lacking central heating. The icy weather inevitably forces us indoors and tempts us to cancel our weekend plans. I would spend my first Christmas in Japan hibernating, except that my boyfriend is about to hop on a plane, fly across northern Europe and Russia, and join me in snowy Fukushima. Commence a scramble of Google searches about nearby ski slopes, *onsen*, and ice rinks, and I've found a few winter date ideas to keep us busy. Even if you don't have a partner, try these with your friends! We all need a bit of love and warmth in these freezing months.

Hit the Slopes

Number one on my list is taking advantage of Japan's range of ski slopes. Fukushima in particular has world-renowned powder snow, with resorts that offer gear rental, ski schools, and a variety of ski passes. If you or your partner have never skied or snowboarded before, enroll in a ski school. Even if your instructor doesn't speak English, skiing is a physical sport and much can be taught through actions and the odd key word. More popular resorts, like Zao in Yamagata or the slopes of Hokkaido, do offer English-speaking instructors. I've decided to teach my boyfriend on the baby slopes, which will probably end with him sprawled in the snow as I look on, laughing—how all couple outings should go. Returning to Yamagata, I highly recommend seeing Zao's snow monsters, or *juhyo*. Formed from snow-covered trees frozen stiff by the wind, these peak around mid-February. You can always reach the snow monsters via a gondola if you'd prefer not to send yourself hurtling down a slope.

Fulfilling the Cliché

In the West, Christmas is a time for family and New Year is the time for friends. Japan celebrates these holidays in the opposite way. Christmas here is for couples and cosy dates with friends, so I've decided to take my boyfriend on the most clichéd romantic outing: an evening under the winter illuminations. Sendai in Miyagi-ken is currently lit up with brilliant lights, and also hosts an ice rink and many shops not found in my small-town placement (the Pokemon store and Shonen Jump Shop are even next to each other!) Combine them all, plus a hearty dinner of steaming ramen or soup, and you have the perfect date night with friends and partners alike. My poor boyfriend has also never ice-skated before, so he has to settle with me and my roller-blading skills as his instructor. How a 5-foot-5-inch woman will hold up a 6-foot-2-inch man with his arms windmilling everywhere has yet to be seen. Either way, it should make for another memorable outing.

I hope this has inspired you to spend time with the important people in your life this winter. Whether with family, friends or partners, I can think of nothing better than enjoying this season with them. The cold days won't last forever. As Percy Bysshe Shelley said in "Ode to the West Wind," "O, wind, if winter comes, can spring be far behind?"

*Clare is a first-year JET who is about to spend her first Christmas away from home. Although she'll miss the mince pies and Yorkshire puddings of an English Christmas, she's looking forward to seeing actual snow and building lots of snowmen. When not editing **CONNECT**'s Community section, she can be found reading, writing, and updating a blog you'll find [here](#).*

Then Hit the Onsen

What's better than gliding down a mountain in good company? The onsen afterwards! Perfect for aching muscles and numb fingers. Most onsen nowadays are gender segregated, so I decided to treat us with a night at a *ryokan* with our own private onsen. A traditional breakfast and dinner made from local ingredients are normally included—the perfect opportunity to try a type of Japanese cuisine that is often too expensive to make at home or find in Sukiya. The onsen we chose is in Higashiyama, just outside the samurai castle town of Aizu-Wakamatsu, Fukushima-ken. From mid-December onwards, candles are lit throughout the snow-covered onsen town, illuminating the ryokan like the setting of a Ghibli film. If you want a magical winter experience, a night here would not disappoint.

Greeting the New Year

January, unfortunately, means a return to normal working life. But before that, we get to celebrate the New Year. In England, we stay up with glasses of prosecco, join hands to sing "Auld Lang Syne" when the clock strikes midnight, then wake the next morning with a hangover. In Japan, people don't stay up late—they get up early. At dawn on New Year's Day, they visit their local shrine. This could not be more different from my usual celebrations, but I've decided to embrace it. There are many beautiful shrines in my local area, as I'm sure there are around yours. We plan to join the neighbourhood as they pray for good health and watch the first sunrise of 2020.

In the second week of December, I had the opportunity to exchange my usual mountainous backdrop for Lake Biwa in Shiga as I attended a week-long training for the JET translation and interpretation course. This also meant that I was able to escape the cold and go for morning strolls to see Japan's biggest lake from Karasaki Shrine.

Despite being brain-fried from the intense course, I decided to stay a night in neighbouring Kyoto after the training ended, to catch the tail end of the *momijigari* (lit. autumn leaf-viewing) period. The decision proved to be an excellent one, as the fire-red leaves warmed my heart before I had to return to icy Nagano.

It was a short stay and we could not hit up many places, but my friends and I wholeheartedly recommend these spots you might want to check out for autumn in 2020!



Dawn at Karasaki Shrine.



(八千代)
Yachiyo

This is a 湯豆腐 (Yudofu, tofu hot pot) restaurant with reasonably-priced, yummy food and a nice zen garden, located along the road leading up to Nanzenji.



(小森)
Komori

This dessert shop in Gion has a wide array of parfaits and amazing *warabimochi*.



Happiness in a bite—
Fluffy-looking Warabimochi.

TRAVEL EDITOR

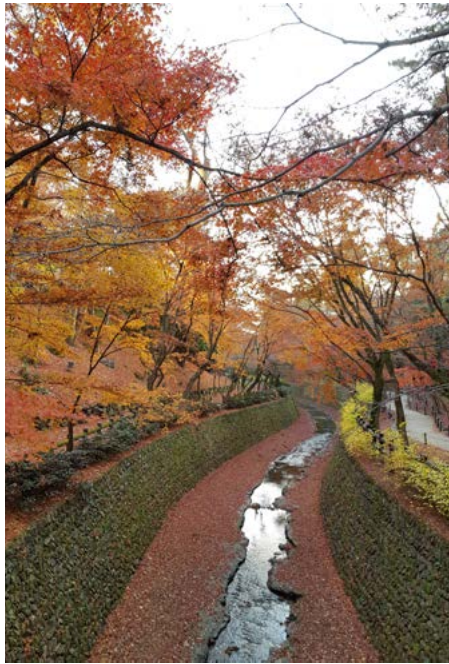
Autumn in the Ancient

Hoong Shao Ting (Nagano)



(北野天満宮) Kitano Tenmangu

The shrine's garden features a river lined with maple trees, and a plum tree grove which should be gorgeous in spring too!



Kitano Tenmangu's Momiji Garden carpeted in red.



Reflections in Kodaiji



(高台寺) Kodaiji

The illuminations at the pond and in the bamboo grove add wonder to the quiet night. There is also a beautiful, lone weeping cherry blossom tree you can see in spring.



Bridge, water and maple leaves in Eikando.



(永観堂) Eikando

Every corner of the place is interesting (think grand prayer halls, quaint gardens, etc.)!

the Capital

When she is not discussing Sumikko Gurashi with her elementary school students, you can find Shao Ting planning her next trip or looking for yummy desserts. Find out what she has been up to [inSakuraLand!](#)

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

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

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

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

HAIKU

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

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