

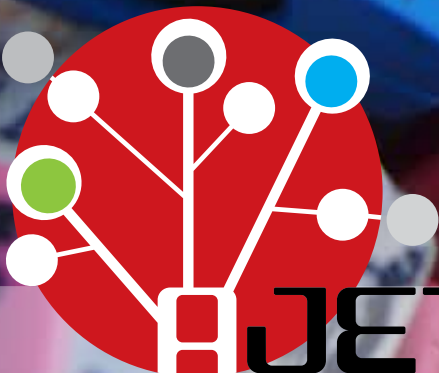
AJET

CONNECT

magazine

February Issue

2014



AJET

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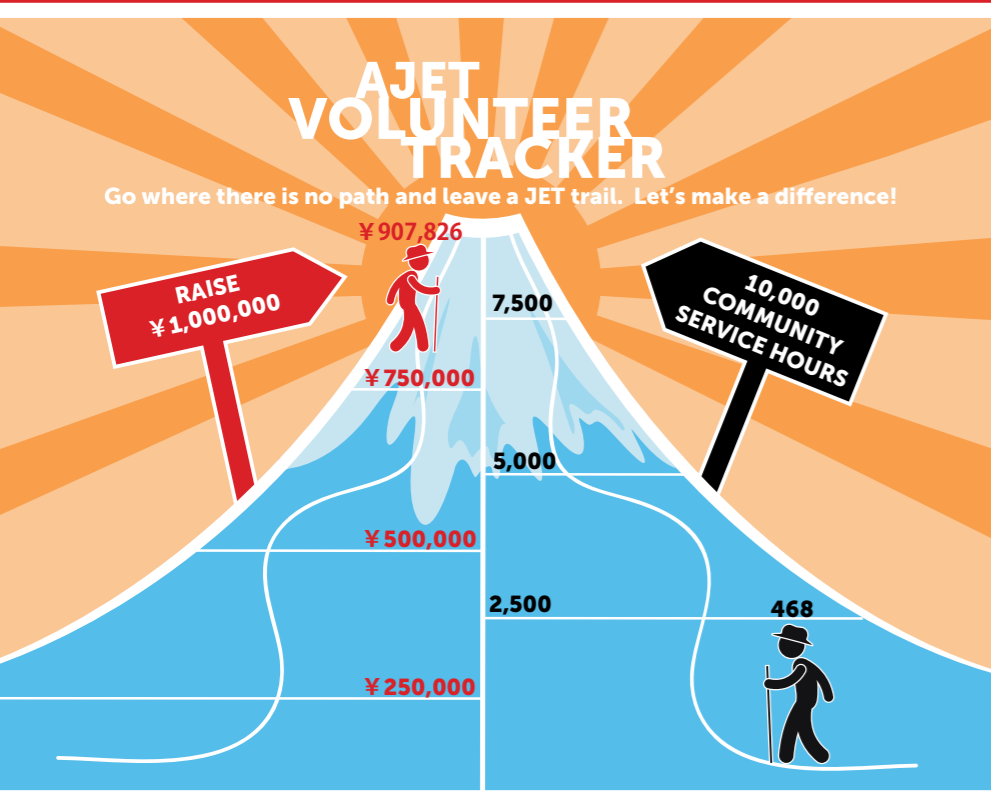
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The JET Community Service Tracker and the Race to the Top Challenge!

AJET wants to help you help others! Be the #1 prefecture in one of these categories and win ¥ 30,000 to help fund your next AJET Prefectural Community event/project!

Top 3 Prefectures: Charity Money Raised*

1. Saga - ¥ 400,000 (48 JETs)
2. Oita - ¥ 185,019 (80 JETs)
3. Niigata - ¥ 227,800 (102 JETs)

Top 3 Prefectures: Community Service Hours*

1. Saga - 294 hours (48 JETs)
2. Tokushima - 126 hours (82 JETs)
3. Chiba - 28 hours (55 JETs)

*Charity Money raised and Community Service Hours are recorded by using this form HERE. Did you recently hold a charity event or volunteer for any organization? Then fill out this form! Let's show how much impact JETs are making. Get involved!



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR OF CONNECT MAGAZINE!

Remember to submit your cover photos for the After JET Conference print issue of Connect to contest@ajet.net by Wednesday, February 5th!

Welcome to Part 2 of our slimline editions! Now that we've had our winter break, and with February done and dusted, it's back to full, fat issues of Connect come March. We're also hard at work on the special edition print issue of Connect for February's After JET Conference in Yokohama. If you're attending, look for it to be distributed directly to your hands. If you're sticking with JET for another year or simply not attending the conference, you'll find it online at AJET.net same as always! We're packing the AJC issue with tons of professional resources, alumni advice, and your JET stories. We're excited to show it to you in a few weeks.

As for this issue, there's plenty to be excited about. We have our first two official CrossConnect features. The first is from an ongoing photo series by the JET Alumni Association in Washington DC called "My Japan." Look for them at the end of this issue and in upcoming issues. The second is a great write-up on Sukiyabashi Jiro, the famous sushi restaurant featured in the popular documentary Jiro Dreams of Sushi, originally published on our reader David White's blog. You'll see the CrossConnect logo featured on these pieces, as well as links directing you to their original homes. All part of our goal to increase our community and connect with our friendly neighbor publications in Japan and abroad.

We also have a new feature to introduce, as part of our ongoing evolution. It's called Flashback. Did you know this issue of Connect you're reading right now is Connect #25? It's crazy! Our first issue was way back in July 2011. 25 issues means a lot of great content has been featured in the pages of Connect, but some of it was printed before some of you arrived, or printed before some of you started reading Connect. We wanted to bring some of those great pieces of past Connects back for a repeat performance. When you see this delightfully faux-classic logo,



it means the great article you're reading was featured in a previous great issue of Connect. We'll note the month and year so that you can go back and flip through the issue it was featured in originally. Our blast from the past this month is Amanda Horton's romance-crushing chemical breakdown of the science behind love.

We've also got some important AJET-related information in this month's issue. National AJET answers your questions regarding some recently announced changes to the CLAIR/AJET relationship, and we provide you with information about joining the National Council in the coming year. If you want to be more involved with the JET community on a national level, while working to improve things for the thousands of JETs across Japan, consider getting involved!

As always, if you have any questions about Connect, AJET, the JET Program, travel, food, love, life, the universe, and anything else, get in touch with us and we'll do our best to answer you. See something you like? Let us know. Got a great idea for an article? Send it over! We're always waiting to hear from you.

As for me, I'll be clearing space on my desk for all the giri-choco I'm bound to receive this month. Romantic or not, it eats the same! Until next month, readers!

All my best,

Steven Thompson
3rd-year Fukushima ALT, Head Editor of Connect magazine

NATIONAL
AJET
ELECTIONS



Do you love JET? Do you want to serve your JET Community? Here's how to run for a position on the AJET National Council!

ELECTED POSITIONS

Contact the current holder of the position you want to run for about your intent. Then submit a **platform statement** in English and Japanese to exec@ajet.net by February 10th, 2014.

APPOINTED (NON-ELECTED) POSITIONS

Contact the current holder of the position you want to run for about your intent. Then submit your materials to exec@ajet.net by March 10th, 2014.

See the Elections Rules on AJET.net for full details about running for office, what to expect as a National Council member and sample platform statements in English and Japanese.

ELECTED POSITIONS

CHAIR

Chief representative voice of AJET

Vice Chair

Ensures an efficient executive body

Treasurer

Supervises the AJET budget

Block Representatives

Connects JETs to social and professional opportunities locally and nationally

APPOINTED (NON-ELECTED) POSITIONS

Translation and Interpretation Coordinator

Oversees a variety of translation projects throughout the year

Online Publications Editor

Edits and coordinates contributions to Connect Magazine

Head of Visual Media

Designs the layout of AJET Connect Magazine, signs, posters, business cards, etc.

Website Coordinator

Manages AJET.net and all AJET emails

CIR Representative

Ensures that CIRs have a voice in AJET

Watch the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHb8YDXYpOA> to hear the current Council talk about their work and learn about what YOU could be doing for the JET community!

ELECTIONS TIMELINE

- February 10th** Platform Submission Deadline
- February 11th** Campaigns Begin
- February 13th** Online Voting Begins at 8:00am JST
- February 25th** Voting Ends at 11:59pm JST
- February 28th** Results Announced
- March 10th** Appointed Positions Application Deadline
- March 15th** Appointed Positions Results Announced



FROM THE AJET CHAIR, KAY MAKISHI...



Hello JETs,

It's time again for another frank and open update from your AJET Chair! This time, regarding the recently announced changes in the relationship between AJET and CLAIR. In case you missed it, check out Ask/Connect for a list of FAQs about them **HERE**.

To the best of my knowledge, these changes are based on the legal liability issues of having volunteers (AJET) at government-organized (CLAIR) events. AJET is a self-sustaining organization so budget concerns are not an issue. CLAIR has also expressed to AJET that they think our services add value to the JET Programme, and they want to continue our collaborative relationship.

AJET is completely run by volunteers, meaning we work to receive funding from various sponsors. Up until now, we have sold tables at the Tokyo Orientation and After JET Conference Info Fairs and advertisements in Connect magazine to allow us to make our services free to JETs, including eConnect News, Connect magazine, and the Peer Support Group.

In terms of my personal view on this situation, I do understand and respect CLAIR's responsibility for liability issues as a government agency. Remember, your AJET representatives are JETs just like you that volunteer their limited free time to create a better community. Our passion for service still exists and we're motivated to work even harder. I see this as an opportunity for AJET to reaffirm that our goals and projects remain focused on community building and support.

The truth is, the changes outlined above are only part of what AJET does. Most National AJET projects are independent of CLAIR, such as connecting you with companies to bring you discounts or products (e.g. TEFL certification), organizing Professional Development Conference Calls, writing and publishing this magazine you're reading, pooling cross-prefectural resources to hold block events including social and charitable functions, helping Prefectural Advisors (PAs) find speakers for the Skills Development Conferences (if they want our help), supporting PSG, collaborating with JETAA so JETs have more support finding

jobs/opportunities post-JET, and the list goes on. These are all initiatives organized and maintained by volunteer JETs—that is, AJET—and we'll continue to do our best to deliver those services to our fellow JETs.

In other news, AJET elections are happening this month! Amidst the CLAIR-AJET changes, there is really no better time than now for JETs who are motivated and want an opportunity to give back to their JET community to step up to the plate and take on a leadership role. This year will shape the direction AJET takes and what role we serve in the future. If you have a vision and passion for community service, this is a great opportunity.

If you are interested in learning more about the elections process, click **HERE**. The executive team is holding their 2nd AJET Exec eMeet & Greet: "Elections Q&A Forum" on Wednesday, February 5th at 9PM. To register, click **HERE**.

As always, if you have any questions, suggestions or any other feedback, feel free to shoot me an email at kay.makishi@ajet.net.

Yours in JET community service,

Kay Makishi
Chair, AJET National Council
3rd-year Fukuoka CIR

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This edition, and all past editions of AJET Connect, can be found online at <http://ajet.net/ajet-connect>. Read Connect online and follow us at <http://issuu.com/ajetconnect>.

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meet the CONNECT team!

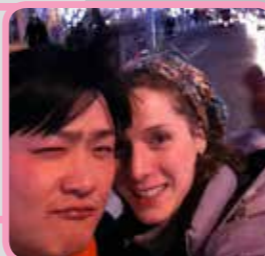


Steven Thompson Head Editor

After a few years in Japan, this Florida boy is starting to get used to the cold. I find doing things to defy the creeping chill like snowboarding or watching movies under the kotatsu actually have me looking forward to the snowy season these days. This month sees me juggling three issues of Connect while hitting the slopes on the weekends. Makes me wonder: can I juggle and board at the same time? Tell me about your hidden talents and interesting stories at connect.editor@ajet.net.

Melinda Lange Layout and Design

Happy Valentine's Day (just a little bit early...!) Do you have your chocolate-making utensils out and ready, girls? Guys, are you expecting something delicious in two weeks? This year, I'm gonna try my hand at making chocolate goodies and hope I don't burn my apartment down and the chocolate along with it! Meanwhile, I hope you enjoy this sweet February issue along with whatever plans you made this month! Good luck and I'll see you next month!



Josiah David Director of Public Relations

Hello Again! This month has been about tying up loose ends and buckling down for exam season. I've been blowing off steam by hitting the hills with friends. Both Niigata and Nagano have a plethora of great hostels and slopes for you to check out! Stay tuned this spring!

Sterling Diesel Assistant Designer

February is here! Can you smell love in the air, or is that just the local bakery's seasonal chocolate tasties? Whether you're buying sweets for yourself or a significant other, I hope you enjoy this final full month of winter. This month is also the time to celebrate the Chinese New Year. I hope it isn't too cold to get some good lantern viewing in! Come join me in Nagasaki city and enjoy the beautiful decorations it's got up for the year of the horse. □



Ola Weber Copyediting

At last the Snow Festival is upon us! I, like many others, am heading up to Sapporo to marvel in the beauty of Japan's winter wonderland. Apart from the festivities, I'm also going to get my ski on. I've been dreaming of ripping through Hokkaido's world famous powder for many years, and I'm sure the northern island won't disappoint. You'll also find me exercising my toaster-oven baking skills—which as of yet don't exist—on some heart-shaped Valentine's cupcakes!

Matthew Jones Culture Editor

Love is in the air, in every sight and every sound—or rather, in the female half of them! And all I'm doing is just sitting here writing a magazine—whew! Thrill-a-minute lifestyle right here. Try to contain yourself ladies! If you, or anyone you know, has a memorable Valentine's, and are willing to share details—the more embarrassing the better—please send them along to me at connect.culture@ajet.net

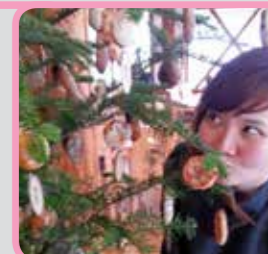


Tom Morin-Robinson Entertainment Editor

There's nothing quite like a holiday immediately followed by a vacation. I couldn't let myself get too stressed out; it'd be bad for my productivity. No more than two days back in the office after *fuyu yasumi* and I was out the door again, this time to Seoul. While I didn't quite have time to search the DMZ for that tunnel to North Korea, I did chow down on all the *bibimbap* in sight. My R&R complete, I'm finally ready to get back into the work groove. Get in touch at connect.entertainment@ajet.net!

Lineng Tee Fashion & Beauty Editor

After the feasts and festivities of December and January, February seems like a good time to reflect and recharge, at least before the pomp and promise of spring. In addition to familiar florals/pastels, sassy statement tees and sharp tailoring in luxe fabrics have started appearing on boutique racks and city streets, so here's our chance to enjoy the last of fur-lined boots and lightweight down. February is also the month of love and friendship, so how about heading out to socialise and enjoy sweet treats with your nearest and dearest? XOXO connect.fashion@ajet.net



Ariane Bobiash Food Editor

It's February, and love is in the air! Or maybe I'm just feeling a bit warm from all the influenza bugs floating around...Lately I've been gearing up to run in Kagawa prefecture's Marugame half marathon after an overly sedentary winter break, and soon I'll be blinded by all the fundoshis at Okayama's Naked Man festival! Recent successful kitchen ventures include mushroom tofu gyoza, turmeric roasted cauliflower, and miso-tahini dressing. Enough about me; Xan and I want to hear about your kitchen adventures! Hit us up at connect.food@ajet.net

Xan Wetherall Food Editor

Well, here we are, all hot and heavy into February! For me, February means chocolate, chocolate, chocolate. All the supermarkets are selling "make-your-own-sweets" kits, and I love trying them all! Last year they even sold kits for whoopie pies! Not to mention that in terms of conveying feelings, I've always felt that food was the best way to do it. I'm of the opinion that the way to *anyone's* heart is through their stomach, if the food is good enough! So get cooking, and then get writing to Ariane and I at connect.food@ajet.net about all the dee-licious treats you're whipping up! Stay warm! ♥



Hugo Dragonetti Sports Editor

Greetings! It's Valentine's Day this month, so prepare to be suddenly handed pieces of chocolate by your co-workers. February is also a time of marathons in Japan, so good luck to anybody running one this month. I'll be running around searching for Valentine's gifts as well supporting friends running in the Kumamoto Castle Marathon and the Ichigo Marathon, held every year in Tamana, Kumamoto. If you want to tell the world about something sporty that's close to your heart, please contact me at connect.sports@ajet.net

Caroline Bellinger Travel Editor

The Beatles told us it was all we need, Robert Palmer was addicted to it and Brian May said too much of it will kill you. No, they weren't talking about hard drugs—though some might say that love is essentially the same thing! Whether you're a lover of love, or have sworn off the stuff and will be avoiding the trappings of Valentine's Day like the plague, use this month to dedicate some quality time to people and things you really adore. Be it snowboarding or onsening, playing music or writing, volunteering or cooking, dates with friends or dates with lovers, February is all about spreading the love, baby, yeah!



Michelle Castro Volunteering Editor

It's freezing in Shimane. No, actually it's still enjoyable and I don't have to shovel my way out of my apartment and into my car. During winter I went home to sunny California to spend Christmas with my family in Los Angeles. I enjoyed the warm weather and watched the Pasadena City Rose Parade with my best friend and was able to catch up on eating some food that is not available in Shimane. I am looking forward to Oita AJET's 200km bike ride in late March. I hope you are staying warm where you are and enjoying hot drinks.

Kelly Merks Events Editor

February is a cool-down month for me (literally and figuratively) after holiday travels and starting a new school semester. And now that we're a few weeks into 2014, my Departing Japan Mental Countdown has started. I'm stocking up on things to send back home, like ceramics and stoneware, awesome knives, origami paper and stationery, and cheap lacy ankle socks—things that are uniquely Japan (well, maybe except for the socks). In the meantime, though, I'm thankful that the Kanto area has been spared a big snowfall. I want to hear about what's happening where you are! Email me at connect.events@ajet.net



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CALLING FOR VOLUNTEERS!

The AJET Peer Support Group, the JET community's anonymous listening and referral service, is currently recruiting new volunteers for the 2014-2015 JET Year.

Re-contracting JETs interested in volunteering several nights per month to the service may get further information, or request an application form, by contacting Volunteer Coordinator Melissa Huntley at psgapplications@gmail.com. Applications will be distributed until March 15, 2014. JETs of all backgrounds and experience levels are encouraged to apply!

ABOUT PSG:

PSG is a confidential and anonymous resource provided by JETs, for JETs. Our volunteers are trained to listen to and support callers through situations ranging from mild culture shock to full-blown crisis, and put them in touch with the appropriate resources.

PSG operates from 8 p.m. to 7 a.m. 365 days a year, as it has for nearly two decades, and is the only overnight support service designed to serve JETs nationwide.

WHO WE'RE LOOKING FOR:

Any JET participant (ALT or CIR) who is re-contracting for 2014-2015 is eligible to volunteer with PSG. We seek attentive, open-minded and dedicated volunteers with an interest in assisting other JETs around the country, and improving the level of support available to the JET Community.

PSG Volunteers are **NOT** professional counselors, but peers who train to be an effective resource for fellow JETs. As such, prior training in psychology or counseling, or service in support roles such as a Resident Assistant or a PA may be somewhat helpful, but are absolutely not required. All selected volunteers will undergo approximately 25 hours of training and role-play exercises to understand PSG's specific mission and techniques.

Finally, since we are a telephone-based service, all prospective volunteers must have *reliable* home internet service (not a smartphone). A landline telephone is also quite helpful, but not required.

TIME COMMITMENT:

Members typically volunteer one to two evenings each month to staff the PSG phone line. Volunteers must be available at least ten evenings each month (including two weekend nights), out of which one or two shifts will be assigned.

Additionally, successful applicants will take part in mandatory training sessions throughout mid-May and June.

QUESTIONS:

For further information, check out the National AJET Homepage. To speak to the Volunteer Coordinator, or request an application form, please contact Melissa Huntley at psgapplications@gmail.com by 15 March. *Please do not contact the hotline with recruiting-related inquiries.*



ASK / CONNECT

There have been some changes:

Ask/Connect is your space to get in touch with the AJET Council, Connect staff, and the Connect community. If you have a question about life in Japan, would like to know something about AJET, want to respond to any of the articles or editorials in this month's issue, or if you just want to say something nice about us, here's the place to do it! **Ask your questions at connect.editor@ajet.net or via the National AJET Facebook page and Twitter!**

This month, we're answering your questions about the recently announced changes between CLAIR and AJET. Immediately after AJET posted them, we received dozens of questions about the changes. The Executive Council and Block Representatives will address the most frequent concerns here on Ask/Connect.

To summarize, the changes are:

1. There will be no AJET Information Fair at Tokyo Orientation.
2. The management of the After JET Conference Information Fair will change from AJET to CLAIR.
3. Peer Support Group (PSG) volunteers will no longer participate in the Prefectural Advisor (PA) Conferences that have supplemented the organisation's internal training program.
4. The bi-annual Opinion Exchanges will now be held on an as-needed basis determined by CLAIR.

QUESTION: What happened to to pre-empt these changes? Did AJET make a mistake?

Not at all. This was an independent decision made solely by CLAIR. First off, AJET has been told by CLAIR that these changes are not due to budget cuts or financial reasons, as AJET is a self-sustaining organisation. CLAIR does appreciate AJET's services and believes it adds value to the Programme. AJET consists of volunteer JETs who are not technically employed by CLAIR, so legal liability is the main concern here. Primarily, CLAIR would like to do things "by the books," and limit the involvement of non-CLAIR entities in their official activities. There was no event or mishap to pre-empt these changes, and they came as somewhat of a surprise to AJET and our related groups. CLAIR has, however, been very open in communicating with us about these changes since making their decision.

QUESTION: Will there be no Information Fair at all? How will we purchase AJET publications like Planet Eigo? Will AJET have any presence at Tokyo Orientation?

The exact details for the next Tokyo Orientation are being hashed out, but National AJET and other prefectural AJET's publications can be ordered year-round online at <http://ajet.net/ajet-publications/>. Whether or not there will be a CLAIR-run Information Fair is still unknown, but will ultimately be CLAIR's decision. Possible liability is in relation to the contracts signed by corporations attending the Information Fair as well as the risks for accidents happening to volunteers at the event. This announcement is only in relation to changes affecting National AJET and does not extend to the other aspects of the After JET Conference, Tokyo Orientation or PA Conferences. We encourage the JET community to let CLAIR work out the details of the next Tokyo Orientation and announce them before making assumptions. We do not have any additional information than this pertaining to our role in these events. Be assured that we are collecting feedback from the JET community and will present it to CLAIR.

QUESTION: Is there anyway to fight this? I'm worried that CLAIR is shutting JETs out by removing their representation.

In short, no. As these events are organised by CLAIR, they have the final say in who is involved and how. Believe us when we say that we thought long and hard about how to respond and how to react. We are collecting all feedback we receive via email and social media regarding these changes, and will present your voices to CLAIR as we always have. Above all, we value our working relationship with CLAIR and have resolved as a council to work that much harder to continue to represent, inform, and support JETs throughout the country.

QUESTION: But how do you guys feel about it?

AJET is unhappy with all these changes, as we really enjoyed supporting fellow JETs at these events, and took pride in our work. While we understand, we are disappointed. For us, this simply means we'll just have to work harder to provide services to JETs. Many of our projects will continue to run independently from CLAIR as they always have, including the Professional Development Calls, block events, educational resources, and Connect magazine.

QUESTION: Are these the "big changes" AJET alluded to following the December Opinion Exchange?

No. Those changes are still pending and mainly concerned discussions we had with the Ministries regarding ALTs in the classroom and community.

QUESTION: Will this affect my plans to attend the After JET Conference? Will my BOE still pay for me to go?

CLAIR has always been in charge of both Tokyo Orientation and the After JET Conference, AJET ran the Information Fairs and maintained a presence there to assist and support JETs. These changes will not impact your BOE's travel funding for AJC.

QUESTION: What about Connect? The issue at Tokyo Orientation was one of my favorite things. [Ed. note - I promise I did not make this question up, a very nice person asked about it.]

I [Steven] would like to assure you that Connect intends to continue our publication of both the Tokyo Orientation and After JET Conference print issues of Connect magazine, as well as all of our digital editions throughout the year. CLAIR is actually working with us for February's conference to ensure that Connect can continue to be distributed to all attendees, as well as collaborating with us on useful content. Connect magazine is here to stay, not to worry!

As always, if you have any additional questions about this or other AJET matters, you can get in touch with us via Facebook, Twitter, or email Kay directly at kay.makishi@ajet.net. If you have questions or comments you'd like to see published and answered in Ask/Connect, you can email connect.editor@ajet.net!



CONNECT

READERS' POLL

Every month, we'll ask you guys what you think about various topics and questions submitted by members of the AJET community. You can find the results for last month's question, and this month's question [HERE!](#)

Cast your vote and add your voice at AJET.net. You can also submit your own idea for a poll topic at [connect.editor@ajet.net!](mailto:connect.editor@ajet.net)

This Month's Question:

Living in Japan, what social media site or program do you find yourself using the most?

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Tumblr
- Instagram
- LinkedIn
- Google+
- Mixi
- Other

Make sure to send your opinions to us at connect.editor@ajet.net in response to this month's articles and editorials!



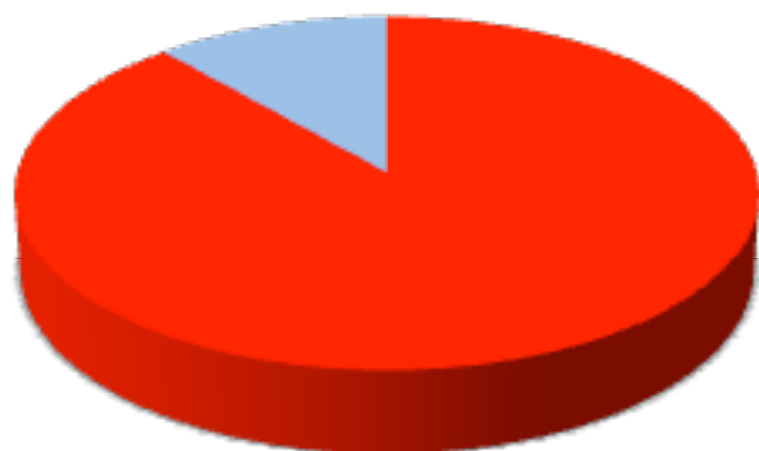
Last Month's Results

Because we had so very many resolutions sent in, we couldn't fit them all on just half a page! We featured as many as we could fit on the previous page. Thanks so much for sharing with us, guys.

For the "No" responses, here's a great write-in that we received:

"I didn't make a New Year's resolution.... but it's not that I think I'm already perfect. It's quite the opposite, actually. Being in Japan has taught me much about myself and how to live life—why wait and make a resolution that may or may not play out? Live for the now! I've been making more changes and living more positively since I've been here the last 6 months than I have my whole life, and with every day, I keep working on it and finding things I can tweak. I think that is worth more than any resolution out there."

Did you make a New Year's Resolution for 2014?



- Yes! (See next page for responses)
- No! I was already living them.



Your 2014 New Year's Resolutions

Last month, we asked you "What are your resolutions for 2014?" You all sent in tons of responses, ranging from serious to silly to downright inspiring. We fit as many as we can on this page! Good luck to all of you!

"My goal this year is to become more of a contributor to my global community. To that end, my resolutions is to upload something to the internet every day. Pictures of where I've been, videos of things I have done, and even paintings that I don't think are that good. In short, I want to share my experiences with the world daily."

"To write a poem, short story, or make a short (30-60 seconds) film, for every month this year about my experience in Japan in general, but also about the town I now call my home."

"I want to travel outside of Japan in 2014—not just going back home! I feel like I've been in my 'ken for too long and I'd like to leave familiarity and do some adventuring... if I have enough *nenkyuu* to do so!"

"Learn 1,000 new kanji. Do 100 pushups a day."

"I'm aiming to complete a half-marathon!"

"Read more poetry."

"This year I'm getting in shape before I climb Mt. Fuji in July!"

"Get recontracted!"

"I've decided to start small by giving myself measured, definitive goals that can easily be checked off a list: 1. Become able to do splits (both vertically and horizontally)... 2. Do an hour of yoga at least 3 times a week 3. Experiment with rice cooker recipes and perfect homemade breads. 4. Read more literature and scientific essays to keep my brain happy. I also had learning to snowboard on my list, but I actually was able to check it off

due to the AMAZING JET Block 2 Winter Wonderland Event at Zao! A special shout out to Sam, my super awesome volunteer instructor!"

"Cut down on chocolate."

"Pass the N3."

"Passing N2."

"To be more proactive about planning trips and using vacation time wisely."

"My resolution is to start a webpage dedicated to helping other ALT's with English Boards."

"I made a resolution to stop worrying so much! I'll be finishing my last year on JET and have been really nervous about entering the job market. It's important to get ahead and do your research but accept that what happens, happens. Life is short so it's good to keep your future in mind but also live in the present, too."

"My resolution is to try and cook more at home."

"I will put more effort into making more Japanese friends and reaching out to the other teachers in my school office."

"Travel to a new destination at least once per month."

"Connect more with the community and participate more into events organised in my town and district! Internationalization is not only made at work but also on the private level! I want to try volunteering to get new experiences and meet people from all kinds of horizons."

"1. Worry less about things that I have no control over. 2. Eat healthier."



INTERVIEW: BEN MARTIN

AUTHOR OF SAMURAI AWAKENING



Ben Martin

After five years with the JET Program, former Okinawa ALT Ben Martin has turned his passion for Japanese culture and history into a full-fledged writing career with the release of his award-winning young-adult fiction novel *Samurai Awakening*. Juggling a busy schedule as a representative of the Okinawa Deep Sea Water Research Institute's Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion power plant (OTEC) and blogger, Martin has recently released the second installment of the series—*Revenge of the Akuma Clan*—and is hard at work on his third.

Despite all of that, Martin had time to talk to us about his life as a JET, developing his writing career, and advice for fellow aspiring authors.

CONNECT: What was your experience like with the JET program? And in turn, did your experiences inspire your writing?

BEN MARTIN: Kitadaito is a very small island, so my experience could have been horrible or amazing, and luckily for me it was a very positive and life changing one. I was the only foreigner in my town and I had the opportunity to fully immerse myself in Japanese culture and interact with the people. I was able to participate in all of the festivals, learn Okinawan sumo, and even play sports with my students' fathers.

I'll admit it was daunting taking the plane from Tokyo Orientation to Okinawa, and then taking a separate plane to get to my tiny island. But, when I arrived, I could see people on their balconies with signs welcoming me to their community; it was a powerful moment for me. From then on I really wanted to give as much as I could to my students and community.

Allison Morris, Wakayama

What prompted you to begin writing your first novel?

BM: I began writing a year and a half after I arrived in Kitadaito Island. Living on such a small island gave me a lot of time to write, and I had this story [*Samurai Awakening*] that I wanted to tell. I also developed my blog (More Things Japanese) to accompany the photos I was taking; I found that I needed to write more to accompany my photos in order explain what I was seeing and experiencing.

How did you sell your first manuscript, *Samurai Awakening*, to Tuttle Publishing Company?

BM: When I'd completed my manuscript for *Samurai Awakening* and was looking for publishers, I looked at my own books and found many of my favorites were also released through Tuttle. Normally, you would need to book through an agent, but I was able to approach Tuttle on my own and pitch *Samurai Awakening* to them; I noticed that they had books for children and adults, but that the young-adult demographic was underrepresented, and they agreed with me.

What was the publishing process like for you? Especially since Tuttle Publishing has offices in both Japan and the United States.

BM: It's gone pretty smoothly so far. I've actually just finished the manuscript for the third book in the series and have been dealing with the editorial offices in Vermont. Though the firm has offices in Japan and the U.S., it deals primarily with English-language books about Asian culture and history.

Wow, a third manuscript finished? Will David's story become a full-fledged series?

BM: I plan to write six novels in the series, with short story collections like "The Tanner's Daughter" published in between each novel to tide readers over while they wait for the next installment.

How long does it take for you to write your manuscripts?

BM: The first two novels went pretty smoothly, but the third one has taken the longest to write. The first two novels took several

months and each are around 96,000 words, but I started book three in October of 2011 and finished the draft in October of 2013. However the first draft is always the hardest, and then you can expect to write five to ten more drafts after the first.

Would you like for any of your novels to be translated and released in Japanese?

BM: Yes, that's actually been a goal of mine from the start. Tuttle is an English-language publisher and a Japanese publishing firm would have to buy the rights in order to release it in Japan. The opportunity hasn't arisen yet, but I would definitely be willing to discuss it.

What do you hope your readers will gain or learn from reading your novels?

BM: As a JET, it is expected that we teach English as well as our home culture to our students, and there are a lot of great resources out there for Japanese students wanting to learn about modern America. However, there are not a lot of books about modern Japan for young readers. I hope that *Samurai Awakening* and *Revenge of the Akuma Clan* can complement the goals of the JET Program and offer a learning opportunity to teens interested in Japan and Japanese culture. I wanted to show Japan now and detail what I was seeing through my books; David's story is definitely a combination of my own experiences in Japan with my interests in Japanese history and culture I that studied in university. And of course, as a fantasy novel I do take some liberties by asking readers to suspend their belief and place David in a more mythical situation, but I still wanted the tone and setting of the novels to be current; as one of my reviewers said "it's a newer take on the samurai," since I wrote the story as what a protector of Japan would be doing today, instead of the standard Tokugawa era samurai.

You now work for OTEC on Kume Island, Okinawa. How do you find the time to write and stay motivated?

BM: It's great that I could stay and help develop the English programs and tourism industry on the island, but it is more of a challenge to write now that I work for the city [instead of a BOE]. Just within the last seven months we had 1,000 visitors to the island. I try to write 1,000 words a day, but realistically it's more like 500 words at the end of the day. But, writing whenever you can—even if it's a little bit each day—is better than nothing. As for a motivation, I feel like I'm able to really motivate myself with my goal of finishing the entire *Samurai Awakening* series so I can work on new projects.

What advice would you give to aspiring writers within the JET community?

BM: If you want to get published, write. Blogs are great for practicing, but fiction and personal blogs are very different—you need to just keep writing. Ironically, I used to hate writing as a child and it wasn't until I was in college that I became interested;



From the website

learning Japanese history and culture eventually led me to write. Initially writing *anything* was too daunting for me, but I had this story I wanted to tell. I started out with a screenplay, and realized that *Samurai Awakening* was better suited for a novel, so I switched mediums and I'm now two—working on three—books into the process.

It's also important to research the industry: Get your work out via Twitter, blogging, etc., so that you can start to get feedback. That's the most helpful tool. Also, growing a platform takes time, and the bigger your platform the more easily you can back up your craft. [Additionally], entering award contests helped me get published. I entered the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award Contest in 2011; I didn't win, but that experience forced me to learn how to write summaries and proposals for my novel, which I could then submit to publishing firms for review. Taking chances and putting myself out there was what got me attention from publishers who were willing to talk to me, even without an agent.

To keep up with Martin's current and future works, follow him on his social media platforms at:

More Things Japanese: <http://morethingsjapanese.com>

Facebook: <http://facebook.com/authorbenjaminmartin>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/morethingsjapan>

Website: <http://samuraiawakening.com>

Allison Morris is an elementary school ALT achieving panda status this year and hails from beautiful Wakayama-ken, famous for its ties to Shingon Buddhism, the Kumano Kudo Pilgrimage route, and – more importantly – as the birthplace of JR's only female manager: Super Stationmaster Tama the Cat. In between cooking, taking an annoying amount of photos, traveling and making copious amounts of flashcards, she writes about her Japanese experiences and Nippon Bucket List at <http://amms-year-in-japan.blogspot.jp/>

...which she regularly updates when she remembers that she actually has a blog.

BEN MARTIN'S REVENGE OF THE AKUMA CLAN REVIEW

Maggie Moor, Tottori

If your personal library could use more Shinto gods, modern samurai, shape shifting, and action-packed battles with Japanese mythological creatures, Ben Martin has got you covered.

Martin's books, *Samurai Awakening* and *Revenge of the Akuma Clan*, are young adult fantasy novels that take place in Japan. They feature an American middle school student who travels to Japan on a study abroad program and encounters not only modern Japanese culture, but is thrown into a world of Japanese mythology. These novels are targeted towards young adults to be sure, but they're enjoyable for anyone who loves Japan.

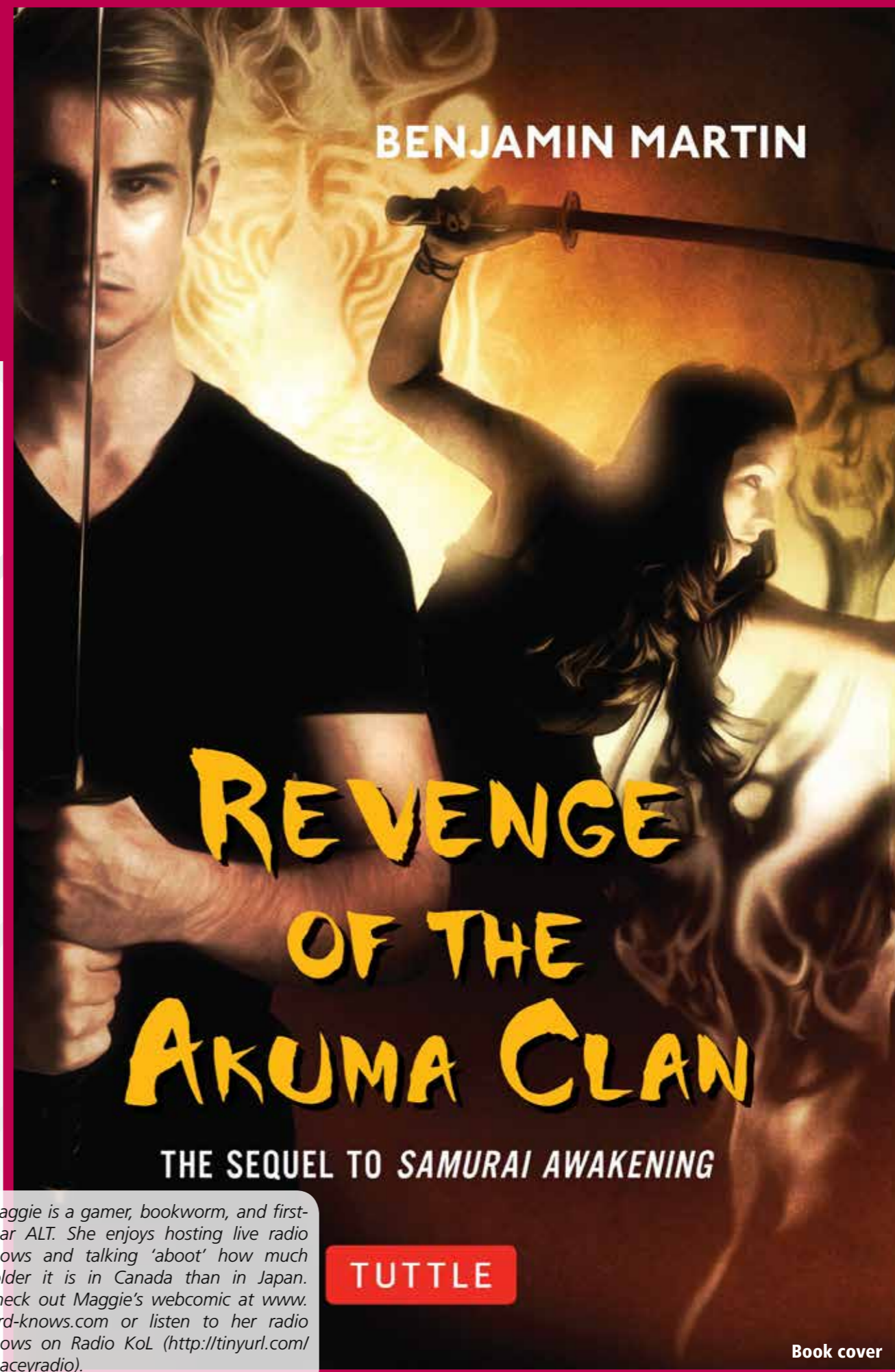
Revenge of the Akuma Clan picks up shortly after *Samurai Awakening* leaves off. This is perfect for fans of the first book to continue without spending too much time on recap, but for new readers I highly recommend reading *Samurai Awakening* first. Martin's novels are rich with many characters, and it can be easy to lose track if you wait too long between readings.

In the wake of *Twilight*, the young adult fantasy genre has become bloated with vampires, werewolves and other somewhat stereotypical fantasy creatures. *Revenge of the Akuma Clan* provides a refreshing escape from this pattern by merging martial arts, sword-smithing, shape shifters and legendary foes. The main character maintains a close relationship with a Shinto tiger god, which makes for some witty dialogue and a unique twist to the genre.

While the plot is certainly fantastical, the novel is fairly well-balanced between school life in Japan and thrilling encounters with the supernatural. Martin's experience as an ALT becomes evident in his detailed descriptions of middle school life for Japanese students, which helped me to better understand my own students. Even the Japanese work ethic comes into play as students pour their efforts into studying, after school sports teams, and training in martial arts to fight bad guys. Okay, so most students probably don't do that last thing.

Revenge of the Akuma clan is a blend of slice-of-life fiction and action adventure with a touch of romance. The pace of the book is fast enough to keep readers interested, although I felt that there might have been a bit too much everyday life while the stakes set so high for the characters. The novel definitely picks up towards the end, and although it finishes cleanly, it left me yearning to read the next book as soon as possible. The main characters, David and Kou, have developed quite a bit since the first novel, and they still have room to grow, which will be interesting to explore in the next installment of the series.

Overall, Martin's *Revenge of the Akuma Clan* is entertaining and informative. It keeps up the action while detailing Japanese culture from the past and present, which makes it the perfect light read for someone who loves Japan. There are some small editing errors throughout the book, but that doesn't stop me from recommending it. Whether you'd like to give the novel to a young friend to learn more about Japan or you want to indulge in some light fiction between lessons, *Revenge of the Akuma Clan* is a good choice.



Maggie is a gamer, bookworm, and first-year ALT. She enjoys hosting live radio shows and talking 'about' how much colder it is in Canada than in Japan. Check out Maggie's webcomic at www.lord-knows.com or listen to her radio shows on Radio KoL (<http://tinyurl.com/spaceyradio>).

MY JAPAN:

WHAT MY PREDECESSOR LEFT ME...



Each month, the JET Alumni Association of Washington, DC (JETAADC) indulges in a little harmless nostalgia by asking current JET participants to contribute a photo of "their Japan" to the JETAADC blog. Focusing on a different theme each month, the *My Japan* series gives DC-area alumni (and beyond) a little peek at what it looks like to be a JET today.

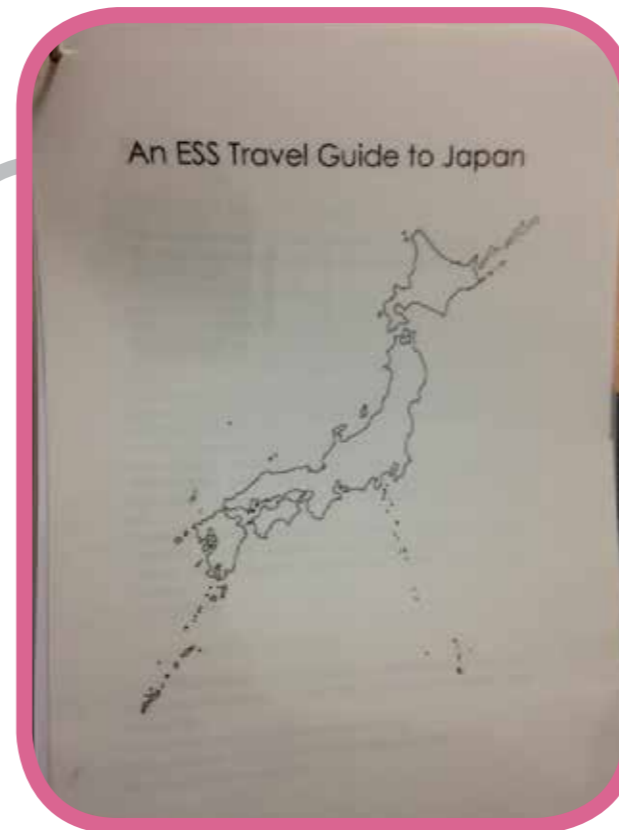
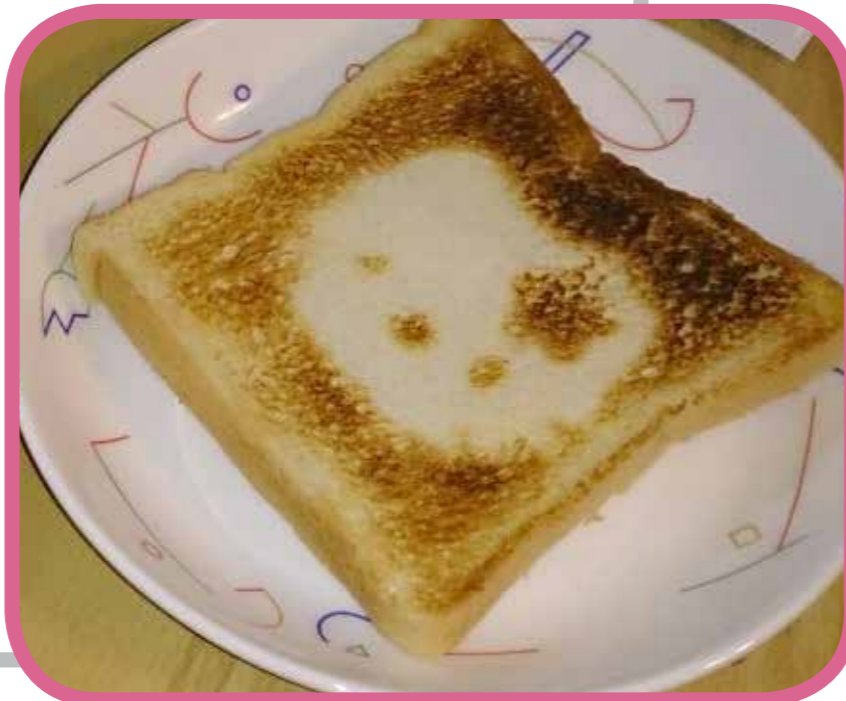
Last month, we asked a few current JETs to show us something their predecessor left behind—be it useful, wonderful or just plain weird. Here's what a few current JETs found in their apartment when they first arrived in Japan...



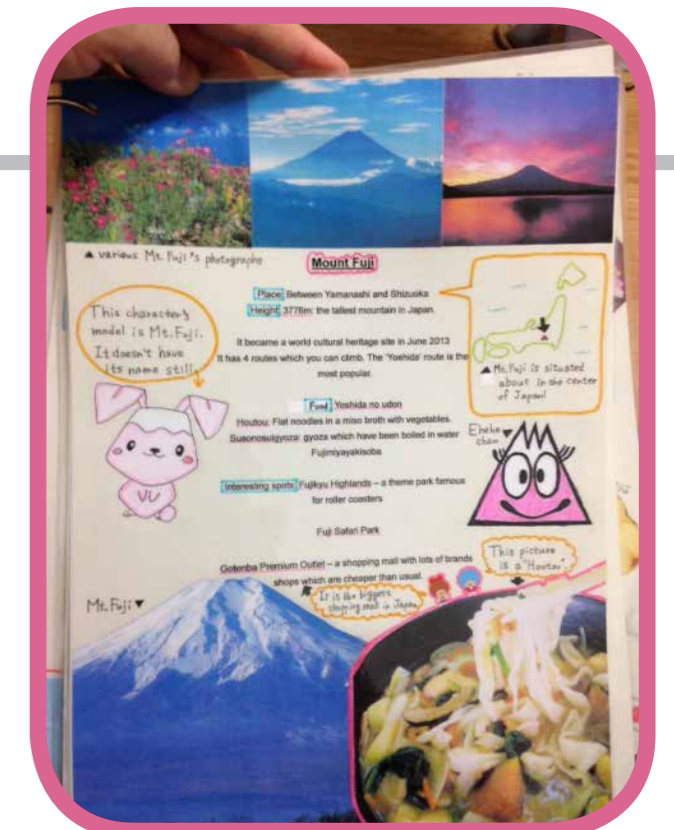
My predecessor (or maybe my predecessor's predecessor) left an entire Halloween lesson hidden under the microwave.
♥ Rosie Tabaj
Shizuoka-shi, Shizuoka



Here is a photo of one of the coolest things I found in my house when I arrived, and I still use it to this day. That's right, my Hello Kitty toaster! ヨッシャ!
♥ Cameron Brenke
Shintotsukawa, Hokkaido



As a parting project, my predecessor Rebecca had my English club members make me an info guide of Japan which they presented to me on the day of my welcome party! I have been to Japan before, but they were able to tell me things that I did not know before.
♥ C. Selene Della Queva
Saitama



Want to share "your Japan" with the world? Send us a photo of you staying (or attempting to stay) warm this winter. Photos will be featured on the JETAADC blog and our favorite few will make next month's *AJET Connect* magazine.

To submit your photo, send it and the following information to Kat Kovacs at newsletter@jetaadc.org:

- ♥ A one-sentence caption (two if you really need it)
- ♥ Your full name
- ♥ Your JET placement (town, prefecture)
- ♥ Your year on JET

JETAADC is the place for Washington, DC-area JET alumni to reminisce, reach out to their community, and realize their potential. Find us at jetaadc.org or contact Kat at newsletter@jetaadc.org if you're relocating to DC, Maryland, Virginia or West Virginia after JET.



CULTURE

THIS MONTH IN CULTURE...

Let's keep this introduction short and sweet, just like the nicest of chocolates! First up is my editorial, where I share the horrors of *giri*-chocolate, and how you should react to a pile of it showing up on your desk. Next, we have our very own Lineng has investigated the strange knack in Asian countries for assigning specific days to love. You may know of Valentine's and White Day, but what about Black or Orange Days? If you want to learn more, give it a read!

Finally, we will all see our teachers begin to work crazy hours as they gear up for the end of the year, so check out a little research I did on *karoshi*...

EDITORIAL *Giri-choco*

Let me paint you a picture; you're teaching a class. It's a nice Friday afternoon and you're looking forward to relaxing with some lunch and a cup of coffee to perk you up. The bell rings and you retire to the staffroom, dodging all the high fives and calls of "How are you, I'm hungry!" You amble over to your desk, and you see it, in all its terrible majesty... A pile of *giri-choco*!!

Obviously this is a catastrophe, but before we get into it, what the heck is *giri-choco*? *Giri-choco* is roughly translated to English as 'obligation chocolate' and that's exactly what it is. Chocolate that you get on Valentine's from people who feel obliged to give you, not because they want to give it.

Anyway, let's get back to the little horror story unfolding at your staffroom desk. Didn't everyone call you *kakkoi* (cool/handsome)? Could it be that perhaps you're not as beautiful as you were led to believe? Who gave you the *giri*? Was it your supervisor? A friendly JTE? That teacher who is REALLY friendly at the enkais but doesn't speak to you otherwise? Who!?

I'm not qualified to comment on other people's romantic lives, especially with fellow teachers, so let's say you find out it was from a few of your fellow teachers, how should you react? Remember:



huge emotional outbursts of tears aren't well received. Also, take a look at the teachers around you; if their desks are likewise loaded with chocolates, then you can stop checking the mirror to see if you've sprouted a few facial deformities. You've likely just fallen prey to another of Japan's little customs. The teachers are just saying that you deserve some chocolates today to remind you that you have friends in Japan.

Last year, at my school, several of the female teachers got together and gave me some lovely chocolates from Godiva. But they were very clear to show that it was a group gift, and they weren't trying to encroach on my girlfriend's territory.

So, to those of you who receive some unwanted *giri-choco*, don't feel bad. Just give a nice big '*Itadakimasu!*' and tuck in, it's the only thing you can do at this stage. Besides, it's chocolate, and who doesn't like chocolates?

If you get any spectacular displays of giri-choco, or non-giri choco, make sure to send me a photo or two to showcase in the magazine.

LOVE IS IN THE AIR

JAPAN'S COLOURFUL DAYS OF ROMANCE

Lineng Tee, Yamanashi

Valentine's Day (14 February)

Three years on, I still find it a little strange that girls here make the first move on V-Day. It is certain that across the islands, ladies, both young and old are engaged in much cookie and chocolate making and buying—sometimes enjoyable, sometimes frantic, often expensive.



If you are planning to do the same, be sure to plan ahead for the amount of *giri choko* (courtesy chocolate), *honmei choko* (love chocolate) and *tomo choko* (friendship chocolate) you'll require.

Last February, one of my teachers confessed to going without sleep for two nights in order to help her daughters

make enough *giri choko* to go round. On the other hand, the popular Geography teacher sitting across from me, left with three gigantic paper bags of confectionery.

White Day (14 March)

On my first White Day in Japan, I saw my supervisor getting gorgeous chocolate from several male teachers. I remember thinking she must have many admirers, before she explained that the teachers had probably felt obliged to buy them as return gifts.

Her experience mirrors that of Emmeline Tan, an ALT in Nara, who spent an evening making and wrapping up sweet V-Day treats for her colleagues. She was surprised to receive large boxes of expensive chocolate in return for her humble homemade efforts. What she hadn't realized was that handmade chocolates were highly-regarded since they represented the giver's effort and sincerity.

My English Club girls are usually an innocent and cheerful bunch, but they cynically observed that White Day was really a marketing ploy by chocolate companies. I thought that was quite an astute observation, until they told me they would love to receive roses, jewelry or a dinner date invitation on Valentine's Day...

Black Day (14 April)

Originally from Korea, the day is celebrated (although I'm not sure that's the right word to use) with *jajangmyeon*. Literally

"fried sauce noodles", *jajangmyeon* is delicious and easily recognisable—pork or seafood in a black bean sauce.

Black Day provides an opportunity for those who did not give or receive gifts on February 14 or March 14 to get together informally, and in Korea, there are noodle-eating competitions and parties where singles dressed in dark colors commiserate over unrequited love.

It hasn't taken off in a big way here in Japan, although that could be because it is impolite to ask or discuss one's relationship status. Nonetheless, *jajangmyeon* is easy to eat and make, so why not serve it at your next dinner party with single friends?



Orange Day (14 April)

A search on Google in English returned few results, but I got plenty of hits in Japanese. The idea comes from a group of *mikan* farmers in Ehime prefecture, but has not caught on in most parts of Japan.

On Orange Day, couples are encouraged to affirm their love for each other by exchanging oranges or orange-colored gifts. Why? Well, the belief is that orange trees are a symbol of love and marriage, orange blossoms are popular at weddings, and orange fruits represent luck and fertility.

A straw poll of twelve friends—male, female, older, younger, English and non-English speaking—returned the unanimous result, "I've never heard of Orange Day!" so surprise your significant other with some *mikans* this April!

Check out the Japan Anniversary Association website at <http://www.kinenbi.gr.jp/>. Some wacky ones include Washoku Day, Hobby Day and Futon Day. They've even published a 366 Day Anniversary Encyclopedia, so you'll always have something to celebrate!

When not serving as AJET Connect's Fashion & Beauty Editor, Lineng enjoys cooking, cycling, couchsurfing and celebrating.





AFTER HOURS

Have you ever been asked to stay at work for a long time after your working hours were over? Have you ever felt pressured to stay longer, or felt judged for leaving at your appointed time? Well, this week, Matthew takes a look at the reasons behind this bizarre phenomenon, and why many Japanese people seem content to be married to their jobs.

I, like many of you, leave my school's staff-room exactly as my work-day finishes. My fellow teachers don't usually finish until 16:30, yet many of them will stay much, much longer than that. The JTE who sits next to me, admitted that she frequently stays in the office until as late as 21:00.

When asked about why they stay so late, many of my teachers say that they have a lot of work to do, and they don't want to let their students down. There appears to be a belief amongst my teachers that if they cannot grade about 200 exam papers in an afternoon, then they are not working hard enough and that they need to make up the time by working after hours.

And this really is 'after hours', as the work is usually unpaid. That's right, teachers can work up to, or over, 20 hours of unpaid

overtime a week. Add national holidays and some weekends to this, and you can have people working themselves ragged day in, day out. The reason behind this is mainly down to the vagaries of Japanese culture, specifically, 和, (wa) or 'harmony' in the workplace.¹

HARMONY

The ideal harmonious Japanese work environment is one of peaceful unity and conformity. In this ideal workplace, all workers are friendly, get their work done on time, and most importantly, they work as a team. Now, imagine that you cannot get all your assigned work done on time, so you are forced to make up the slack after hours, to avoid letting your co-workers down. There is also a large amount of pressure not to leave ahead of your own superior, or risk looking like you don't really care about the team. But if your superior won't leave until their superior leaves... it can get tiring.²

Since this extra work is seen as voluntary, employees do not feel entitled to look for additional pay, and likewise, many companies

do not seek to give extra pay out. I once had a teacher tell me that the reason she did not have all her work done was because she was not good enough, and so she would have to stay late in order to do all the work she should have done.

Also, if a worker were to finish all their assigned work ahead of time, they may find themselves creating 'busy work' or stretching out an easy task in order to seem like they are working hard during these extra hours.

The online newspaper, Japan Today, conducted a survey as to why its readers felt that Japanese people worked so many hours. The results were varied, with reasons ranging from company loyalty to low productivity and stretched out tasks to fear that disturbing the status quo, and not doing what is expected of them will result in disciplinary actions.³

BLACK COMPANIES

There are companies in Japan that flagrantly ignore the regulations set in place to protect workers from abuses. These companies have been given the name 'Black Companies'. A survey in December, reported that of the 5,111 companies surveyed, 82%, or 4,189 of them were clearly violating labor laws or engaging in illegal business practices. Workers were often forced to work extra hours by receiving disapproval from co-workers, finding themselves passed over for advancement, or not having their contracts renewed if they were not seen to be devoting themselves to the company.⁴

The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare intends to publish the names of the companies in question, if they fail to clean up their acts. Yet, with so many companies in clear violation of the laws, it is unlikely that such a small measure will have an effect. The Ministry will need to implement harsher penalties to the Black Companies if they want to see any changes. This is especially true, with the ever increasing number of young people leaving the workplace, or worse, suffering from 過労死, or karoshi⁴

KAROSHI

Karoshi roughly translates as 'death from overwork', and it is somewhat ominous that Japanese has a specific word for this tragic circumstance. An extreme example of this would be the Watami Food Service Company, which hired a new female employee, and, according to an investigator, forced her to work more than 140 hours of overtime every month. Tragically, the woman committed suicide after enduring two months of such an oppressive work-environment.²

Karoshi is a terrible thing, and is one of the reasons attributed to Japan's extremely high suicide rate. Lower level employees are de-humanized by the faceless companies and feel alienated, as though they have nothing to live for but work.^{1,2}

Parents too, can feel out of touch, with many acting like the only time they can spend meaningful time with their families being on the weekends. It is a tragic fact that many men, who feel like

their job doesn't value them, go home to a house of strangers, and for some of these men, they can only see one way out.²

RELIEF EFFORTS

About a month ago, my school's Vice-Principal made an announcement during the morning meeting on a Friday. I didn't catch everything, but I heard a reference to the three day weekend. Of course, this made me fear for my day off, so I made a bee-line for the nearest English teacher. It turns out that he was actually saying that the staff-room would be locked at 6pm, and would stay locked for the whole weekend. That's good, right? The teacher did not think so. He said he had work to do, and by forcing him to leave the office, he would have to work at home.

This is by no means a once-off thing. Many companies, maybe in an effort to remove themselves from the black-list, have introduced similar practices, to try to force people to take time off. This has been met with mixed results, including reports of workers pretending to go home, then sneaking back into their office to work in the dark. Despite this, and resistance from other areas, these 'go home' days, are becoming more common, especially in the wake of the survey.

Of course, this is just like putting a band-aid on a serious wound. Sure it's a good idea, and it's a step in the right direction, but a lot more is needed. A lot of people, especially in the survey already mentioned, believe that such a major social change is next to impossible to achieve in Japan. They believe that the strict social hierarchies will prevent lower level employees from being able to take advantage of the new rules and regulations.³

So the next time you see one of your fellow teachers, or even a student, taking an inemuri (cheeky little desk nap) show a little patience before judging them, they may have been working since before your alarm went off in the morning, and will continue to try to keep up the effort until you're snuggled up under your kotatsu.

Matthew, while he is very fond of the occasional nap at work, doesn't work crazy hours, except to edit this magazine.

¹<http://www.japanintercultural.com/en/news/default.aspx?newsid=123>

²<http://en.rocketnews24.com/2013/08/26/five-things-that-keep-japanese-people-chained-to-their-jobs/>

³<http://www.japantoday.com/category/have-your-say/view/why-do-japanese-work-such-long-hours>

⁴<http://www.japantoday.com/category/crime/view/80-of-black-companies-guilty-of-illegal-business-practices-survey-finds>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karoshi>

ENTERTAINMENT

THE GIFU ART COLLECTIVE

Sasha Redkina, Gifu

THIS MONTH IN ENTERTAINMENT...

Happy February love birds! This month, the Entertainment section is celebrating beauty in art with a feature on the Gifu Art Collective by Gifu JET Sasha Redkina. Composed by JETs with an artistic streak, the collective is a place for those with talent to share their work with peers and connoisseurs. Take a look below for some of the great work they've put out! If you like to express yourself more physically, this month's Spotlight shines on Tokushima JET Robin Mele, a dancer who can throw a jeté just as well as she can pop and lock. Happy reading!



Sasha: Fire



Joy: Portrait study



Abigail: So Debonaire



Joy: Red Ribbon



Pamela: Dragon Trainer

Winter got you down? Tired of wasting away under the kotatsu watching TV? There is a cure! Conquer your winter blues with art! Last winter, Joy Pfeiffer, now a former Gifu JET, came out with a brilliant plan to combat the winter funk: creating art. She started the Gifu Art Collective on Facebook, where about once per month, for two days, we post our artistic creations, in any medium, and give each other encouragement and feedback. If you're interested, please join us at the Gifu Art Collective!

Here are a few words and works from some of our members:

Joy Pfeiffer

I started the Gifu Art Collective to connect the JETs across Gifu prefecture through art. Plus in winter what else is there to do? I never really did much for art before the collective but once I started, it was awesome to get feedback and encouragement from my friends. My passion now is painting. I'm working on portraits at the moment. I can't wait for the next challenge art will bring.

Pamela Kotila

Though I studied Fashion Design at university, much of my artwork these days is in comics. I do comics because I love them, which is why I've been doing them for most of my life. I find the mix of art and narrative enchanting and challenging. Also, because the genre appeals to such a diverse demographic, comics have the potential to reach great audiences.

Much of my free time goes into creating pages and keeping the story moving for my fantasy/comedy web comic, Spidersilk. For illustrations, I tend to draw people. I love drawing my characters and how they relate to each other. These kinds of images celebrate companionship and capture snapshots of life, though some are just an excuse for me to design clothes or armors. I can't stop drawing such things, but I'm not sorry. Time is always well spent with art!

Spidersilk can be read on mangamagazine.net

Steve Blankenheim

I like to write, but it's always better to have an audience—especially a small one made up of friendly people, most of whom you've at least met. Writing on a blog is fun, but you never know who's looking, and it's more fun knowing. I love seeing what can be created by people I know, and it motivates me to write when I know there are people waiting to read it.

Sasha Redkina

I love art in all forms, and have been doing it for years, but lately, life has been getting in the way. The Art Collective gave me great motivation to get back to it, and also to try new things. It's fun to share art with friends and to see what others have done.

Abigail Ahyong

I joined this group to read, see, and share artwork with other people. I thought it was a great way to get to know more about people I just met and those I haven't. It was also a really cool way to get back into drawing and painting and to explore photography. Since middle school, I've mostly stuck with musical art, but now I've gotten to bounce ideas from others, share my point of view through photography, and sketch fun artwork.

Sasha Redkina is a second year JET in the historic and picturesque Gifu Prefecture. She is loving her time in Japan, and all the culture and history she gets to experience through travel, work, and friends. Her current home in Gifu is the perfect place from which to explore ALL of Japan. As you all know, "Control Gifu and you control Japan!"

SPOTLIGHT

Robin Mele, Dance Student turned Teacher

My name is Robin and I'm a 23-year-old from New Jersey, USA. I'm currently a 2nd year JET in Tokushima prefecture.

I am glad that I can still do what I'm passionate about in *inaka* Japan, and I'm even happier that I can share my love of dance with my friends and the residents of Tokushima.

When I first arrived in my new hometown, I made it pretty clear to everyone that I enjoy dancing, particularly ballet and hiphop. Because of this, I was able to locate a ballet studio in my town, at which I take class once a week. This December, the studio will have a year-end recital, at which we will be performing the classic ballet Don Quixote and other smaller pieces. This will be the first full-length ballet that I have ever performed in, so I'm incredibly excited for it.

I was also able to find a few local hiphop studios, which was surprising, given that Tokushima is fairly *inaka*. However, the cost of taking one class at these studios is ridiculously high. I couldn't stand the thought of not being able to do hiphop, so I resigned myself to occasionally taking hiphop classes in Osaka when I'm there. I also created my own monthly hiphop workshop for which I choreograph 40-50 seconds to teach to other JETs and interested community members. Thus far, I have held 4 workshops, and the attendance has been steadily increasing.



FASHION & BEAUTY

THIS MONTH IN FASHION AND BEAUTY...

Two stylish gentlemen take centre stage in this issue of *Connect*. We're always keen to introduce readers to stylish JETs in their midst, and John Weber's nuanced, distinctive taste makes him a shoo-in for this month's Spotlight.

Plummeting temperatures have meant it's tempting to stay bundled up in nondescript winter woolies. Those wondering what the cool cats on the chilly streets of Tokyo are digging will be delighted with the return of "Do We Like It?" Leave it to Josiah David and his team to bring us all a much-needed shot of fashion inspiration.

See you in Spring!



SPOTLIGHT

John Weber, Colorful Collegiate

This month's Fashion Spotlight falls on John Weber, a 2nd year ALT who lives in the frozen hills of Oketo, Hokkaido. John has a good eye for color, composition and co-ordination, and eagle-eyed readers may remember his style advice from previous issues. A photographer and musician, John feels that style has conversational aspects similar to those art forms. And in case you were wondering about his taste in toothpaste, he prefers Crest over Japanese Aquafresh. In his own words:

I would describe my style as Warm. College professor elbow patches also help when playing the teacher role. I usually acquire wardrobe pieces one at a time, often with a special reason or story behind the item. I like preppy Ivy style merged with gear that would be appropriate for the Star Wars planet Hoth. My go-to brands are Engineered Garments, Nigel Cabourn, Pendleton and the ever-powerful eBay.

A simple rule of thumb is to love the clothes you buy and wear them in the right season. That linen suit looked great in July, but the wool jacket seems a bit more practical in February.



STREETSTYLE: DO WE LIKE IT?

WINTER EDITION

Josiah David, Yamanashi

Do We Like It? hit a bit of a snag this holiday season. On vacation back home, I saw nothing but our famed Canada Goose jackets in a subdued palette of browns and matte-blacks. I admit I thought fashion itself had perished in the cold. It may be a hell of a winter, but strategically mixing, matching and accessorizing simple items can make all the difference.

Thankfully, aspiring fashion photographer and 1st-year Saitama ALT Yuko Nakajima turned things around with her streets snaps featuring cool Japanese city folk rocking current trends. Yuko's photos show quite clearly that the Japanese way of styling both suede boots and leopard print exemplifies the fun, variety and whimsy that putting fashion co-ordinates together can bring.

Below, I break down what we saw on the streets and provide fashion commentary alongside Yuko and fellow Yamanashi ALT, the ever-so-chic Jody Dixon.

Call it a trend, a motif or a fashion item, it seems winter in Japan will never be without these two things. **So, did we like it? We tell you if it's a Yay, Nay or I Don't Hate It.**

SUEDE BOOTS

These aren't just shoes, they're statement pieces. Popular across age and gender groups, whether in velveteen, suede or faux skin, deep-colored boots provide a pleasing tactile effect that really pops. In contrast, the buttermilk (think Timberlands) shade helps pull together the retro 90s look when paired with a vintage style football jacket.

Suede boots are available in black, brown, blue, mauve and even neon colors, and in varying heights. Think of them as a no-fail addition to your wardrobe.

Yuko – Yay...if it's real suede. Also, weatherproofing is a must. High-high boots seem to be EVERYWHERE this season.

Josiah – I was worried for a minute, but...Yay!

Jody – Yay! I adore suede boots, since they can be worn in so many different ways. I especially like cobalt blue flat boots and ankle stiletto boots.



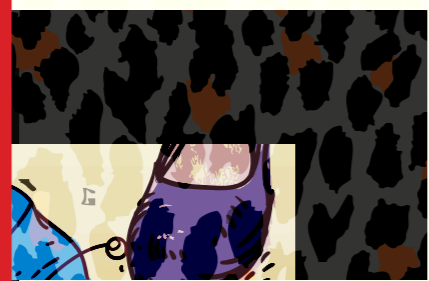
LEOPARD PRINT

Each year as the temperature drops, we start seeing leopard prints on things other than shoes, clutches or the detailing on a bra. Seeing how ubiquitous leopard print is—suffice to say—if you haven't embraced leopard yet, you haven't embraced Japanese fashion. Admit it, those spots look good whether as a scarf, the lining of a coat, or across an entire coat itself. They are everywhere, and in every form. Leopard print will stand the test of time in Japan, mark my words.

Yuko – YAY!!! Love! One of my most favorite things ever... when limited to one item or used to add a fun detail.

Josiah – Yay – hands down. As always, I'm a slave to prints. Gimme lots of prints. Prints on top of prints. Competing prints. Monochromatic prints. Colour-blocked prints. Prints all over my body.

Jody – I don't hate it, but I think leopard prints—or any animal print for that matter—should be worn with extreme caution. I'd recommend starting with smaller prints, with one leopard print piece per outfit being quite enough—no matching prints please. And make sure what you're wearing isn't so tight that the spots stretch from your thighs all the way back to Africa.



HIDDEN GEMS

Beanies, Fur Scarves, Football Jackets. Who says you can't be dressing up while dressing down?

Josiah David is a 3rd year JET living in downtown Kofu. Graduating with an honors degree in art history, his area of specialization is Japanese contemporary art and fashion.

Want to be part of the team? Itching to fire that camera? Hate the trends? Have something to rave about? Love fashion and interested in getting some exposure? We'd love to hear from you at connect.fashion@ajet.net



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FOOD

THIS MONTH IN FOOD...

For February's abridged edition of Connect, we foodies are bringing you a bit of a bloody Valentine to affairs and temptation! First up, a short editorial about taking a walk on the wild side of the plate—game meats in Japan, and their illustrious bad boy history! Following sharp on its heels is David White's flirtations, courting, and finally the reviewing of that well-known documentary dreamboat restaurant, Sukiyabashi Jiro. Loving all our food porn? Ready to share your own sultry shots and write-ups? Shoot me and Ariane an e-mail to connect.food@ajet.net!



EDITORIAL Ancient Japan's Secret Meat Love Affair

by Xan

With Valentine's day just around the corner, it's time to talk a little bit about relationships. Food relationships, that is — specifically, Japan and meat. In a nutshell... "It's complicated".

Sure, there's that whole "island nation", and "we have coastline everywhere so we eat predominantly fish" thing to start off with, but then in the 6th century, Buddhism stepped in, and really put its foot down on the idea of eating living things. Well, living animals, that is — fish, whales included, were totally fair game, undoubtedly a concession to the culture of the era. So while the country's coastal-dwelling peoples weren't exactly noticing a huge lifestyle change, Japan's mountainfolk were facing a bit of a problem. Food from the coast could take days, even weeks to reach the interior, by which time the aforementioned fish were starting to... well, let's just say it wasn't exactly sashimi-grade anymore. Sure, people were developing all kinds of new techniques to ensure fish kept a bit longer during the trek inland — drying, pickling, stewing, and preserving, to name a few — but in the meantime, forest protein was just looking better and better. What's a pious land-locked Buddhist parishioner to do?

Why, when life hands you unimpeachable doctrine, you make loopholes! Whale's meat, reasoned the mountainfolk, was a dark red, gamey kind of flesh. So, too, was the meat of the wild boar, deer, and horse. Were these animals not, then, related to the whale? Were they not, indeed, better referred to as mountain whales, or *yamakujira*? As an extra step of protection, the flesh

of each of these three inland animals was named after a plant that reflected its raw color. Deer meat was named maple leaf, or momiji, wild boar was a peony, or botan, and horses gained the light pink praise of the cherry blossom, or sakura. Even the most pious of Buddhists was occasionally caught dining on one of these "flower arrangement". As time marched on, *yamakujira* started to refer to pretty much anything someone had shot in a forest and was looking to sell. "Mountain whale" restaurants serving game meats were still popular as late as the Edo period.

Indeed, beef, pork, and chicken are all actually relatively recent culinary trends in terms of Japanese cuisine — until around the 15th century, chickens were prized and protected for their connection to Shinto gods as sacred messengers, while cows were viewed as working animals, raised for plowing or pulling carts. The idea of killing one for meat was laughable, while dairy was nigh-unheard-of. The consumption of this triage of proteins didn't even really start until the Meiji Restoration, when the idea of a more meat-heavy, "Western" diet was encouraged. The newly-crowned Emperor Meiji even went as far as to stage a New Year's feast in 1872, in which he was publicly seen consuming real meat.

Just imagine the difference in Japanese cuisine today if he'd eaten a hearty plate of *yamakujira* instead.

CROSS
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I DREAM OF JIRO: AN EVENING AT SUKIYABASHI JIRO

David White, Yamaguchi

For the record, I blame my friend Ryan for getting us into this.

We're sitting in an underground restaurant. It's as quiet as a Japanese classroom and devoid of diners except for the two of us. Facing us is an intense 86-year-old sushi master and his team of chefs. They ask if we want today's tasting menu: 20 pieces of mouth-watering nigiri sushi for an eye-watering ¥30,000. I tend to frequent conveyor-belt sushi places, so this is probably more than I've spent on raw fish in my life in total. But I say 'yes' anyway.

A few months before all this, Ryan casually recommended a documentary called *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*. It's about Sukiyabashi Jiro (すきやばし次郎), a 3-Michelin star, 10-seater place down an anonymous subway station entrance in Tokyo's moneyed Ginza shopping district. It's run by Jiro Ono, a national treasure who's 86 and has been making sushi for about 75 years.

The film examines every aspect of his restaurant: the staff (who have to be apprentices for about ten years before they're considered 'trained'), the sourcing of all the ingredients, from the rice (which the supplier generally refuses to sell to people because they won't know how to cook it properly) to the seafood that comes from similarly colourful characters in Tsukiji fish market, to the presentation and serving of the sushi itself. I defy anyone to watch this movie and not want to eat this food. I also defy anyone not to do a double-take at the price of a meal.

So as delicious as the food looked, I tried to put away my hopes of eating it. But the thought of world-class sushi wouldn't go away. Mad as it sounds, I started to daydream about Jiro and his sushi. I began to rationalise it with myself.

"What if I just didn't eat out for a couple of weeks, or, say, a month?"

"It's not really that much, is it, for the greatest sushi in Tokyo, and hence the world?"

Then Ryan and I started to firm up our plans to visit the Ogasawara islands, which meant being in Tokyo, which, as it happens, is where Jiro's restaurant is.



Author David, Ryan, and sushi master Jiro

We had to do it—not that it's as simple as dropping in and waiting for a table. Eating the sushi of our dreams means going through reservation hell. At the start of each month, Jiro's starts taking reservations for the next month. Usually a day later, the diary is full. You also need to be able to speak Japanese, and a lot of the time, they're way too busy to answer the phone. I called them almost 40 times on various days before I got through. I nervously asked them if they had anything for the Monday or Tuesday we'd be in Tokyo, and stressed that any time was fine. There was a pause. I held my breath. The voice came back and said 5:30 on Tuesday. My heart soared. Then the voice went into an explanation of something that was beyond my Japanese. I gave him my name, twice, and told him I'd get my fluent friend to call him right back.

Enter Whitney, who called Jiro another 20 times before getting through again, while I waited nervously by. It turned out that I needed to put down a deposit of ¥20,000 by sending the cash through the post. So, using a special envelope that I had to stamp with my personal seal three times, I sent my money off to Jiro. A few days later, I came back from a class to find a voice message on my phone, confirming receipt of my money. We were in. Only six weeks to sushi Nirvana.

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FOOD



The day of our meal is spent in a state of nervous excitement and tension. We arrive in Ginza two hours early to check that we can find the restaurant, leaving nothing to chance. We wander around for a couple of hours, feeling awkward and worrying that we'll embarrass ourselves somehow, as if we were about to have a job interview rather than a great meal. We arrive back 15 minutes early, and the doors are still closed. Is it a day off? Did we get the date wrong?

To our audible relief, at 5:20 a young chef takes in the 'closed' sign and approaches us, checking that we have a reservation. We step in. It looks just like the movie inside. I don't know why this surprises me. There are the ten stools at the counter. There are four places set, but it turns out we're to be the only guests eating. We have everyone's undivided attention. They give us a hot hand towel, and ask us what we want to drink. I wonder if it's a test. Surely they don't want us to kill the flavour of their painstakingly prepared seafood with acidic beer or overpowering green tea?

"Water," we both gasp with mouths conspicuously lacking in any.

They check if we have any allergies. They confirm that we want the chef's menu, the *moriawase* (盛り合わせ). This must be a matter of course: you're hardly going to book six weeks ahead and then have a quick onigiri.

It begins without any fuss. Jiro just starts shaping rice from a wooden bucket beside him. He takes care of the rice and the topping, working quickly, elegantly, and fastidiously. He's right in front of us, watching us. His son Yoshikazu is beside him, slicing the next cut of fish. There are five chefs total taking care of us: Jiro, Yoshikazu, and three others in the back bringing out the fish we'll be eating next. All the attention is unsettling—until Yoshikazu says something about being jealous of Ryan's hair. Our tension evaporates, and I start eating. I didn't really believe it when someone said this in the film, but the sushi has notes. There's a start, a finish and an aftertaste. I can imagine each bite being plotted on a wobbly graph. Yoshikazu catches me doing a double-take at some yellow-tail and smiles at me knowingly.

Jiro places each bite on a black plate in front of us and then stands poised, one hand toward the rice bucket. As soon as it goes in our mouth, he is moving, preparing the next one. We eat with our hands. There is less rice than I'm used to in Kansai, and more of a vinegar flavour. The other chefs smile as they work, but Jiro doesn't; he is intent on what he's doing. I am too, in my own way. I decided beforehand I wasn't going to talk or take photos

and thus distract myself from this shockingly expensive meal of indulgence.

We've done the maths already and noted that our 20-piece sushi dinner is costing ¥1,500 for each morsel. Still, there's no point in dragging each one out, and Jiro is right there in front of me, so I dutifully pop them in my mouth at a steady rhythm. The whole course lasts about 25 minutes, including walking in. Or ¥1,200 a minute. Three Michelin stars of eating, and it took less time than a big sandwich. Not that it matters.

Everything is good, even things I don't normally like, such as salmon roe and sea urchin. The stuff I expect to be tasty—the fatty tuna, the egg, the eel—is wonderful, but there are surprises too, like how good the gizzard shad and ark shell are. I've never even heard of these; why did no one point them out to me before? Nothing is served too cold, everything hums with flavour.

The octopus is a revelation, much softer than I'm used to, but still with some chew (they massage it for about 45 minutes). It reminds Ryan of potato. For the shrimp, Jiro drapes the thick crustacean over one long slice of rice, places his blade in the middle of the spine and gives it a solid tap, cutting it into two neat pieces. Yoshikazu tells us to use no soy on this one, only salt, and not to eat the tail. We leave it on our plate and it is whisked away heartbeats later.



Between bites, I try to watch it all: Jiro's hands, Yoshikazu's deft knife strokes, the other chefs bustling efficiently around, cleaning the sushi plates, carrying out the next ingredients. Throughout the meal everyone is smooth and relaxed, like they've done this all a thousand times before. Yoshikazu watches me watching his father.

Then it's over. Jiro wipes eel off his hands and steps back as one of the younger chefs presents the egg. It's a thick wedge of cooked egg, bright yellow and rich and heavy as cheese. Everybody retires to the kitchen. It has indeed been 25 minutes, though I wasn't aware of the time passing.

We are moved to some tables off to the side, to relax with more hot hand towels, toothpicks, green tea and melon. We take our time. We are still the only customers in the restaurant. We can maintain the fantasy that this has all been put on just for us.

We finally get up and Yoshikazu sweeps out of the kitchen to present us with the bill. ¥30,000 each, plus tax. Tension dissipated, we finally break out some Japanese, to their surprise. Babbling a little, I tell Yoshikazu he should come to Ireland, where, although the weather's a bit grim, the people are lovely. He says he's heard of it, but the closest he's been so far is Heathrow. Ryan talks to him about Spanish food. I ask him for a business card as a souvenir.

Then my heart skips a beat as he calls his dad over to come and take a picture with us outside the restaurant. It's more than I

would have hoped for. Jiro directs us where to stand and tells his chef where to take the picture from, ever the perfectionist. Jiro smiles as we bow and say goodbye. Yoshikazu tells us to come again, and we all laugh at the joke.

The food was terrific, as I could reasonably have expected it to be, but the biggest surprise was how friendly and down-to-earth, how gracious everyone was. I could see then why people would keep coming back, for the relaxed courtesousness as well as the outrageously good food.

Was it worth ¥30,000? No, but only because I personally don't think anything as transitory as food should cost that much. However, if I add in the weeks of anticipation and the fun of telling people about it afterward, along with the knowledge that I had an outlandish dream and made it a reality, the whole experience is pretty priceless.

David White is a fourth-year Irish ALT in Yamaguchi prefecture. He spends much of his time in a profound identity crisis, weathering a steady stream of questions about volcanoes, reindeer and the Aurora Borealis in his 'native' Iceland. Though he does appreciate the compliments about "how good" his English is. He's been keeping a blog since he arrived in Japan at safariidave.blogspot.com



SPORTS

THIS MONTH IN SPORTS...

With only one article, February's sports section is slimmer than usual. The one article is, however, an interesting and extremely well-written piece on the All-Japan Cross Country Championships at Lake Biwa. The article's author, Mike Hegarty, who also wrote a piece for last month's issue, ran in the 8km race. He recounts what it was like to run at the event and also notes the difference in participation levels and attitudes towards cross country in the UK and Japan. The article is an excellent read for anybody who is interested in running at a cross country event in Japan. Enjoy!



SPOTLIGHT

Joel Marrinan, Motivated Marathon Man

For Joel, long distance running is not just a form of exercise. It's a form of release. Tying his laces, putting on some loud music and locking the door behind him signals the start of his favourite time of the day. It's a chance to get out of the house, out of the office and into the great outdoors and spend some time daydreaming or sorting out the thoughts and feelings running through his mind. The training required for a marathon is a full on commitment of time, but it's also a reward in itself. He often feels at his best right after a run, even when he's counting the number of new blisters on his poor, abused feet. The actual marathon is often on his mind, urging him on during the hot summer days or cold winter nights. He has to keep pushing, getting himself ready for the big day. Running a marathon is like being in a dream. A hard, sweaty, soul-challenging dream, but one that leaves you feeling like you've conquered the world and leaves the door open for endless challenges in the future. This is why Joel loves marathon running.



Shiga Prefecture is home to the largest inland freshwater lake in Japan, Lake Biwa, and also the annual All-Japan Biwako Cross Country Race. There are few chances to run in competitive races across country in Japan. Elite Japanese runners largely avoid it, preferring road races.

In the UK, the autumn and winter racing calendar is stuffed with opportunities to tread over the rough stuff. Such races are part of the staple diet of club runners. The strong winds, undulating terrain and muddy conditions of cross country courses make times irrelevant and finishing position king. A widely shared belief amongst middle distance runners is that a season of racing in such conditions helps build strength and endurance, on the back of which you can unleash yourself onto a spring and summer of short and fast track and road races.

There were 1km, 4km, 5km and 8km races available. I entered the 8km race and was surprised to see only 60 senior men gathered on the start line. By comparison, at least 3000 men run in the annual English National Cross Country Championships. It was a 2 lap affair, gently undulating, with some twists and turns through a wooded section, but mostly over flat, well maintained grass. There were no serious climbs at all.

After the first three-quarters-of-a-mile, I found myself near the front of the second pack of runners, with the tail of the leading pack some 30-40m in front of us. I decided to see if I could work my way to the front of the second pack, and once I'd done that, I pushed on to try and catch the back of the front pack. As I came to the end of the first lap, I had caught a group of four runners that had drifted off the front pack, with the momentum carrying me quickly to the head of the group.

Not for long, did I have to wait, for a challenge. One of the four men in my group made three attempts to surge past me, though I gradually eased past him again each time. Surging in races like this is a poor tactic; running at a consistent tempo is best. As we left the woods for the last time, with one mile remaining, another of my group stole away, and I pushed on trying to follow in his wake. I caught a glimpse of the men who finished 1st and 2nd sprint to the line in a close fight, with less than 1 second separating them.

There was a purpose built podium and prizes available for the first eight finishers of each race. Unluckily, I finished in 13th place in 28 minutes 55 seconds, some 3 minutes behind the winner. I would like to be able to do a few more cross country races this winter. However, with only two other major cross country races on the Japanese racing calendar, the Chiba International Cross Country and Fukuoka International Cross Country each being held hundreds of miles away from my Kyoto base, I'll be returning to road racing very soon.

Mike Hegarty is a first-year British ALT in Kyoto Prefecture. Before joining the JET programme, he was a History Teacher and Head of Department in a senior high school in northern England for 10 years. His main hobby and passion is middle distance running. You can follow his blog at <http://running-gaction.wordpress.com>

ALL-JAPAN BIWAKO CROSS COUNTRY RACE

Mike Hegarty, Kyoto



The race starts



First lap



The winners

TRAVEL

THIS MONTH IN TRAVEL...

Is February all about roses and chocolates for you, or do you prefer hiding away with a bottle of wine and comfort food? Either way, there's something for everyone in this month's Travel section. If love isn't your thing, join Oita's Adam Douglas as he delves into Unexplored Fukuoka. Or, if you've ever wanted to peek behind the curtain of North Korea, join Saitama's Ciarán Duffy as he goes deep into The Hermit Kingdom.

Finally, for those wanting to embrace this Hallmark occasion, with the help of our readers I've compiled a list below of the five most romantic destinations to plan your next trip with a special someone. Have a question that needs answering or a travel tale to share from your winter holidays or a trip you want help planning? Then get in touch!

Contact me at connect.travel@ajet.net

Love you all!

SPOTLIGHT

Loved-up Locations

"Matsushima, Miyagi Prefecture, because I had my honeymoon there."

♥ Brian McDonough, Chiba

"Coromandel Peninsula, New Zealand during the summer. Watching the New Year sunrise. I'll show you the sunset, if you stay with me till dawn."

♥ Nick Gray, Hyogo

"I've always wanted to spend a romantic hot air balloon ride over the plains of Sub-Saharan Africa watching the migration of the wildebeest, zebra and antelope etc. as they travel to find water. To me, it is a perfect symbol of love; it's a difficult and long journey, and tragedies happen along the way—but by being united, they make it through, year after year after year—and are handsomely rewarded for their efforts. What could be more romantic?"

♥ Amanda Horton, Kyoto



"When you are in good company the destination is irrelevant. However, the Sea of Stars on Vaadhoo Island in the Maldives would be an awesome place. I think the cool tropical evening breeze, a blanket of stars in the night sky, the luminescence of the phytoplankton in the ocean, and the echo of the waves crashing on the sand would be enough to make you fall in love with the world all over again."

♥ Kei Yamamoto, Okinawa

"I was going to say Italy. Having spent time with my significant other there, I would say Florence, or even just Tuscany in general is very romantic. The natural beauty is astounding, and all of the art in Florence is absolutely breathtaking."

♥ Fiona Murray, Kagoshima



UNEXPLORED FUKUOKA



From top left to bottom right:

Fukuoka by night

Kushida Shrine

Fukuoka City Museum

Fukuoka's famous ramen

Adam Douglas, Oita

Fukuoka may be largely off the radar for most Western visitors—and it's true that it doesn't have as many cultural sites as Kyoto or trendy boutiques as Tokyo—but there's a reason that Fukuoka is the gateway for Asian visitors: it's a great city and the people are laid back and friendly. But what do you do when you've exhausted the sites in your guidebook? Actually, Fukuoka has lots of great options that the casual visitor might miss.

CULTURE

If culture is your thing, check out Tochoji Temple—right above Gion Station—which has the largest wooden Buddha statue in Japan. The expression on its face is beatific. Also worth seeing is nearby Kushida Shrine, with its giant *shimenawa* rope and Gion floats. If you're lucky, you might see a Shinto wedding ceremony.

MUSEUMS

The National Museum in nearby Dazaifu is deservedly famous but you don't have to leave town for a museum fix. The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (<http://faam.city.fukuoka.lg.jp/eng/home.html>) is a rarity in Japan in that it's devoted entirely to contemporary continental Asian art. The Fukuoka City Museum (<http://museum.city.fukuoka.jp/>), located out near Fukuoka Tower and the Yahoo! Dome in Momochi, houses cultural artifacts from Fukuoka's past, with an emphasis on cross-cultural items from the area's long history as a port of entry for mainland Asia. Both museums host permanent and visiting exhibitions.

SHOPPING

For those of us living in northern Kyushu, Fukuoka is often the go-to place for shopping. Tenjin is the neighborhood for the big department stores but wandering through the boutique-packed side streets of nearby Daimyo can yield some interesting finds.

FOOD

Fukuoka is something of a foodie's paradise, with a bewildering selection of both Japanese and foreign food. Fukuoka's most famous food is of course Hakata ramen, and the best place to try it is from a *yatai* (food stall) along the canal that divides Nakasu and Tenjin—near Nakasukawabata Station. The Ramen Stadium, which occupies the top floor of Canal City, features not only local noodle joints, but also ones from around Japan. Misono, from faraway Sapporo, offers a delicious miso ramen with *sakura* wood chip-smoked *chashuu* pork that's worth the trip alone. For something a little different, check out Kebabooz (<http://www.kebabooz.com/>), a Sudanese restaurant that fries up an amazing falafel, in Daimyo. Don't forget dessert—the baklava is incredible! If a cup of coffee and a piece of cake served by an anime-style maid is what you're after, you're in luck. Yes, Fukuoka has its very own maid café. Both men and women frequent Tenjin Style (<http://tenjin-style.com/>) and you'll be greeted appropriately at the door. Tenjin Style is unsurprisingly located in Tenjin and makes a great place to recharge after an afternoon of retail therapy.

Adam Douglas is a second year ALT in Taketa, Oita Prefecture. When he's not eating ramen or listening to Perfume, he's practicing for a taiko performance or visiting a local shrine.





Mammy Mountain

NORTH KOREA: THE HERMIT KINGDOM

Ciarán Duffy, Saitama

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a place that has fascinated me since I moved to Asia. Few people are aware that tourism to 'The Hermit Kingdom' is not only possible, but easy and safe. What's more, it's a culturally rich country with a half-decent nightlife too...but my God am I glad that I don't live there!

As tourism to North Korea is permitted solely through the state-owned Korea International Travel Company (KITC), tourists are required to book their trip through a China-based travel agency who liaise with KITC on your behalf. I booked with Young Pioneer Tours (YPT) who specialise in taking you to "places your mother would rather you stayed away from". They provide budget tours with a great balance of culture and partying.

Visa requirements are very straightforward. After booking your tour, which begins and ends in China, you are sent a document to fill out via e-mail. You e-mail it back along with a scan of your passport and a passport photo, and, provided you're not from South Korea, you'll most likely have yourself a North Korean visa...yes, even Americans. It doesn't go in your passport, rather it's a separate tourist card that must be handed back when exiting the country.

Upon meeting the rest of the tour group in a hostel in Beijing, we were briefed on the dos and don'ts of our trip, and encouraged have an open mind. Basically, they told us to be gracious guests and sensitive to their unique way of life. The guides are all expats living in China and are extremely knowledgeable about North Korea and its history.

The group consisted primarily of twenty-somethings from all over the world including Brazil, America, the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Malaysia. What's more, Young Pioneer Tours have an excellent policy of capping their tour groups at 20 to avoid the feeling of being herded around like cattle while on holidays.

We boarded the 26-hour sleeper train from Beijing to Pyongyang at 17:30 and began getting to know the rest of the group over some all essential 'train beers'. In the early hours of the morning,



Mansudae, Grand Monument, Pyongyang

North Korean visa - doesn't go in your passport, you give it back on exiting the country!

we crossed the Chinese-Korean border and awaited customs officers to inspect our passports and baggage. Prohibited items such as religious texts or cameras with GPS devices are what they're looking out for, but they're not overly strict. Mobile phones, smartphones, laptops and tablet devices are all permitted as long as you take them back out of the country with you. The guard will most likely note the serial number upon entry. The YPT staff have an excellent working relationship with the guards and really put everybody at ease.

Once we cleared customs, it was on to Pyongyang to meet our North Korean guides, who were patiently waiting for us at Pyongyang Central Train Station. They seemed genuinely flattered that we had chosen to come to their country and said they were very excited to show us their homeland and its culture. Naturally, the large group of foreigners walking through the bustling Pyongyang Central Train Station attracted a lot of attention, but nobody tried to kidnap us or put us in a gulag.

After dinner in the revolving restaurant on the top floor of our hotel, the Yanggakdo Hotel, (North Korea's second tallest



Final scene from the Mass Games

building), our guides let us relax and unwind after the long journey from China in the hotel's bar. The group was tired and most went to bed early in preparation for the early start the next day—it was actually forbidden to leave the hotel!

The next day, after an early breakfast, we went to pay our respects to the country's deceased leaders, as all foreigners are encouraged to do—those that had a problem doing this were told to speak up back in Beijing, but thankfully nobody had an issue with this formality. After laying flowers and a quick bow in front of the large statues of The Eternal President Kim Il-Sung and The Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Il we boarded our bus and continued along the sightseeing trail.

Pyongyang has a population of about two million people and it's a privilege for them to live in the nation's capital. It's fascinating to see North Koreans going about their daily routine. Most of them seem to live in high-rise flats in the city center, and everywhere you can see state advertisements for productivity and prosperity.

The old tarmac roads make for a less than smooth journey and, as Pyongyang often experiences electricity shortages, there are traffic girls at major intersections to direct traffic accordingly. We are taken around an impressive array of North Korean monuments, each with its own unique and fascinating story. Everything runs like clockwork and our guides never fail to remind us of their dear leaders and the people's gratitude towards them.

That evening was the main event, the highlight of the tour and, honestly, hands-down the greatest performance of anything I've ever seen, ever: the Mass Games. Held in the largest stadium in the world, Pyongyang's May Day stadium, with a capacity of 150,000 people, the Mass Games is a 90-minute performance of synchronized gymnastics, dancing and...er...page turning. With more than 100,000 performers, it is the largest spectacle in the world. The triumphant history of the DPRK is acted out on the field by thousands of gymnasts against a backdrop of schoolchildren creating the 'largest picture in the world'. Each child holds a book, which links with that of their neighbours' books, to make a giant mosaic. This mosaic can then easily be changed with the (synchronized) turn of a page. The whole thing is extremely impressive, awe-inspiring and finishes with a beautiful fireworks display. Tickets range from 11,400-42,600 yen, but it is well worth the money—presumably for locals it's nowhere near as expensive.



Posing for a picture with our friendly border guard

Food in the DPRK leaves a lot to the imagination. Having suffered a horrific famine in the 90's, the country is still crippled by food shortages. Foreigners, however, are treated to a plentiful supply of food—it's just unfortunate that it's North Korean cuisine! Rice, tofu, eggs, duck, chicken, kimchi and sausages are all served over the course of the week we are there to varying degrees of success. Opinions within the group of the food ranged from, "I managed to find a few things that I could eat without grimacing" to, "thank God they sell chocolate bars at the hotel!" Dog soup was honestly the heartiest meal we were served during our trip.

As well as Pyongyang we spent a day in Kaesong—a garrison town near the border with South Korea—and even took in the rural town of Sariwon. Having visited the DMZ from the southern side, I was excited to hear the story from the north. Our military guide was keen to impress upon us the might of the Korean army in defeating the 'American imperialists'. He was equally as eager to explain how Koreans, both North and South, desire a reunified Korea with peace across the entire peninsula.

This is restated again in more detail at the monument for the National Reunification of Korea, which also conveniently served as the gateway to Pyongyang upon our return to the capital. There are three basic principles of Korean unification:

1. It must unify all of Korea.
2. It must be done peacefully.
3. It must be done without outside or foreign intervention.

I found this particularly interesting as it reinforced what I had come to learn during my time in Korea. Although North Korea is best known as the world's largest propaganda peddlers, there is also a sizeable amount of propaganda being churned out by western media about the North. Tourism is really helping to open up the reclusive country and change it from within. I would wholeheartedly encourage everybody to visit North Korea, to learn about its history and see its beautiful countryside....just bring a good supply of chocolate bars with you!

Ciarán Duffy is a second-year JET from Dublin, Ireland, based in Soka City, Saitama Prefecture. He is very interested in music, language acquisition and travel. His favourite way to discover a new place is through attending a cooking class. He spends his free time playing piano, reading, cooking and researching trips he can't afford.



VOLUNTEERING

THIS MONTH IN VOLUNTEERING...

For the slim version of the Volunteering section this month, we have an interesting piece from Shimane's Niko Booth, who talks what it's like to be a house husband with a JET spouse. His advice is great for anyone looking to get more involved and use their free time wisely.

Then, in Spotlight, we focus on Connect contributor Adam Carter, who offers his advice on getting students interested in volunteering and international charity by providing real examples.



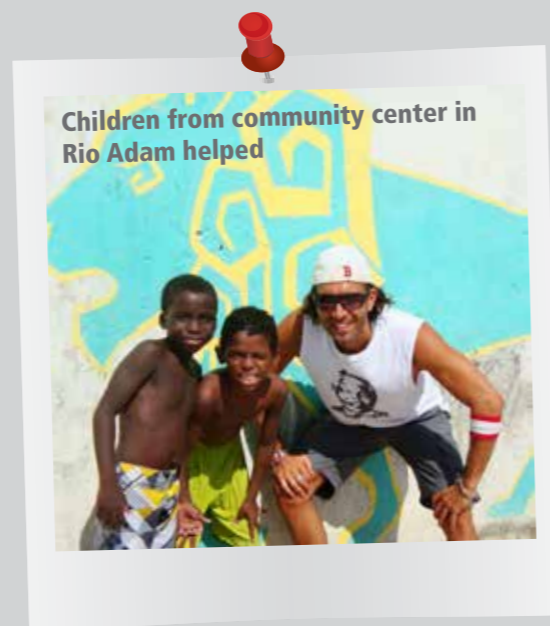
SPOTLIGHT

Adam Carter, Man of Many Marvels

Tips on how to get students involved.

Whenever possible, Adam Carter tries to broaden the world-view of his students and expose them to the often-grim realities that exist in other countries. In a recent class dealing with water for example, he showed the students an easy-to-understand video from Charity: Water which documented how African kids often have to walk four hours a day to fetch water for their family. He then had students lift a garbage can he had filled with 25 lbs of books and asked them to imagine walking every morning to the center of Kagoshima (15 km away) to fill this bucket and walk home with this heavy load on their head. And THEN go to school!

"You can throw statistics and facts at kids all day, but until you present it in a manner in which they can really feel it, you won't make an impact. I try to instill empathy because once kids make an emotional connection, they will be committed to understanding the issue and making a change."



Last month, we Spotlighted Fukushima AJET's efforts to raise money for Jimmy's Village School in Cambodia at their leavers party. We neglected to mention that former Fukushima JET, Karina Jenkin, was the originator of the idea and has worked extensively with the school in Cambodia.



REAL SHUFUS OF SHIMANE

Niko Booth, Shimane

TIPS FOR LIFE AS A JETPENDENT



Niko and Chelsea enjoying some calligraphy with friends

If asked to profile a standard foreign English teacher in Japan, many of us would conjure up a familiar image: a young, single, recent college graduate willing to put up with undue amounts of fascination, frustration, and fetishization in their quest for adventure abroad. A ride-along partner or spouse, however, is rarely part of the standard equation. As a JETpendent and self-proclaimed *shufu* (housewife, or, in my case, husband), I've come to learn that there are many advantages in taking on Japan as a team, and that there are plenty of important considerations unique to this arrangement to keep in mind. Whether or not you're a JET couple, I hope that this article can give some useful insight into highs and lows of the thrilling life of a JET spouse.

As a JET dependent, no matter who you are or what your ambitions may be, the biggest asset you have initially is time. Lots and lots of time. In a society still pretty accustomed to having one member of the family at home all day, this can make things a whole lot easier. Post office wants you to sign for your package but only makes deliveries in the early afternoon? No worries, *shufu's* got it. Bank closes at 5:00 pm and you don't want to take precious vacation time to change money or pay bills? *Shufu's* free. You get the idea, for all of the tedious, time-consuming daylight hour chores that sometimes come up, it's great to have someone with an open schedule. However, there's more to life than just being a glorified errand runner and get'er doner, how can we convert all of that free time into something enriching and fulfilling?

I've found a few guiding principles that are a big help in my attempts to stay productive as a kept man. The first is to organize your time. While it seems like a basic tenant of being an adult human, it's easy to feel that because you have a lot of time you



Niko and wife Chelsea on Halloween

have unlimited time to get done the things you need to get done. However, without some semblance of a plan, that big expanse of unstructured time can swirl down the drain quicker than you thought possible.

Nobody is going to set a schedule for you so that task falls right back in your own lap. In this, it's important to be detailed and specific. Personally, I've found that my days go pretty bad when my plan looks something like this: Work on that newsletter article, make progress on your blog, look for a job, practice kanji, and do laundry. I might start a few of those things and maybe even complete one or two tasks, but with a high probability of drifting off into a Youtube sinkhole, Facebook black hole or any other nefarious procrastination device. Conversely, if I give myself a time (start working on that article at 9:00), duration (practice kanji for at least half an hour), and goal (caption all of the blog photos from your Kyoto trip by the end of the day), I can get a lot more done in a day and justifiably feel much more accomplished.

This level of organization and responsibility is certainly not something I live up to each and every day. I'm still training my brain but when I do hit those marks, I do feel a lot better about how I've used my time.

So us shufus should all just sit at home making lists of chores for ourselves until the breadwinner comes home and needs us to go to the grocery store? No! (Unless you really are running out of food, in which case, go shopping). Another advantage of all this free time is that you're free to do stuff. Pop out of the apartment and explore your town, or the neighboring town, or that city an hour away, just get out. Again, you have this very valuable asset of free time, use it. See what you can walk to nearby, find out which museums are worth going to on the weekend, enjoy some of the beautiful natural scenery,

try to find the best ramen shop in town, and then share this information when breadwinner comes home, then take them out on Friday to that ramen shop you discovered. Anyways, you don't need me to spell this out for you. Just know that a day spent exploring is worth way more than a day spent binge-watching The Walking Dead.

While we're on the nebulous topic of do stuff, my personal addition would be to try to say yes to everything. You never know where you'll end up or who you'll meet and what opportunities might arise. The more proactive you are, the better chance you'll have and finding ways to spend your time in a fulfilling way. A great place to start is English conversation classes, they're happening. Wherever

you are, they're happening. Not only can you be a contributor to that slice of your city that wants to learn your native language, through your students you can find ways to engage with local life. Personally, I tag along on four different conversation classes each week and have had a number of great opportunities come my way through them form informal side jobs to interesting cultural experiences.

An additional great source of activities and events is your partner's school. Find an event that you can come to, make friends, find out if there's space for you to get involved in any way. See if there's a club activity or sports team that you could help out with, just remember that in Japan, saying "I'd love to come to your Wednesday English club" translates as "Nothing will stop me from besmirching my personal integrity by missing a minute of your club, like, I would jump over magma if it stood between me and getting to English club." These activities are not something to just dally in, so know if you've committed, you have to be reliable.



Serious business at community eikaiwa



Staying active and making friends playing ultimate frisbee

An important consideration while doing all of this gallivanting around, is that if you don't have a source of income here in Japan, the budgeting equation is quite a bit different for you and your partner than it is for most JETs. Basically you can take all of your leisure expenses and double them. While 5,000 yen for a night of izakaya and karaoke might not deter most people, tack on 5,000 more for the shufu and suddenly staying in seems like the reasonable idea. Meanwhile, splurging on a trip inside Japan or abroad is definitely something that requires a lot more forethought and planning than it might for single JETs.

Finally, there is one more worthy pursuit for those of us dependent on our JET partners and that is getting a j-o-b. Now, I've heard of various degrees of success with cracking this particular nut, and I'm still unemployed myself, but opportunities are out there. If your looking for small bits of side work, I can't stress enough the value of networking and putting yourself out there. There's nobody who goes around offering paid employment to people who aren't asking for it so I'm never shy about mentioning the fact that I'm looking for work, and neither should you be if that's what you want. Keep in mind that for formal employment, you should check your visa status as you probably need to register for a work permit before you can get started, this is something you'll need to clear with your local immigration bureau.

Niko is a proud house husband in Unnan City, Shimane-ken. He keeps busy with the laundry and dishes though they can pile up at times. Since arriving in August of 2013 with his wife Chelsea, he's memorized his first batch of kanji, gone camping on the shores of Lake Biwa, played in an ultimate frisbee tournament in Hiroshima, and learned how to fillet a fish from the internets.

EVENTS THIS MONTH IN EVENTS...

In this month's Events JET Spotlight, Niigata JETs Kai Wiesner-Hanks and Matthew Headland talk about their experiences creating the Block 2 Skills Auction. This was the first such event for Niigata and Block 2, and was by all accounts a big success.

Lynne Francis in Akita writes about another first for the JET community: the Akitan Dialect Speech Contest, the first of its kind in the prefecture. Teigan Babcock of Saitama AJET writes about an event where she got to experience one of her personal passions, and gives us some insight into how *yurukyara*, those adorable local mascots, become *yurukyara*—a primer to read before AJET unveils its own brand new *yurukyara*. And, as always, the Events Calendar is here for your perusal.



SPOTLIGHT

Niigata AJET's Skills Auction

On Nov. 9, 2013, Niigata JETs held a Skills Auction fundraiser to benefit Niigata International Charity Organization (NICO). NICO donates to NGOs in Papua New Guinea for new school construction in remote areas, and every year several JETs make the trek to help build the schools. JETs from all over donated items and services, from commissioned artwork to homestays and tours to a Mexican dinner for 6—the big-ticket item. The Block 2 community came through, raising 177,800 yen for NICO. Two of the organizers, Matthew Headland and Kai Wiesner-Hanks, told Connect about their experiences.

"Volunteering and charity fundraising have always been a big part of what JETs here in Niigata do. So when Xan [Wetherall, Block 2 representative] got in touch with me about doing a Block 2 event here at home, I got really excited. It was great that we had the opportunity to try an event that could potentially reach out to not only JETs and local people from Niigata, but beyond our borders as well. Despite it being a Block 2 event, JETs from as far away as Kyushu supported us in making this auction a success. As a result, those who attended and who won bids on the unique skills and services provided are now connecting with people from all across the country. I'm certain this will become an annual event and I'm excited to see how it will grow from here on in."

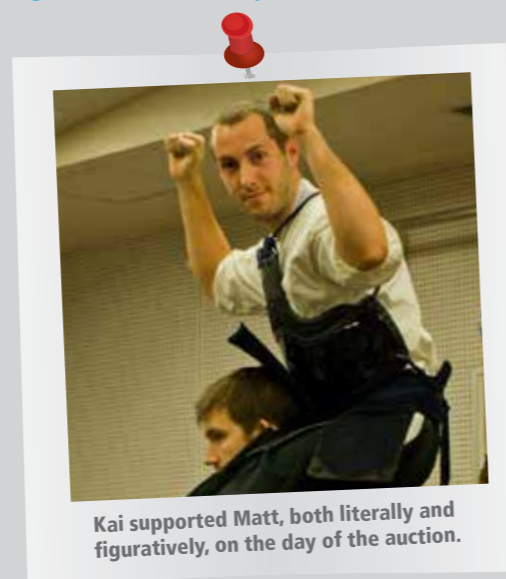
-- Matthew Headland, 3rd-year Niigata ALT

"We had talked about having some kind of auction in Niigata for a long time, so it was great to see it finally get off the ground. Matt contacted me asking if I could help him reserve a place and

arrange food and stuff. We had originally talked about doing it at a bar or restaurant, but eventually settled on a community center, with a trip to a local bar afterwards for those who wanted to go. I was a little apprehensive about how much people would actually spend, but I was blown away, both by the money raised and by how much fun people were having bidding against each other. We'll definitely be doing this again, and I'm excited to see if we can raise even more!"

-- Kai Wiesner-Hanks, 4th-year Niigata CIR

Connect wants to feature the stellar people in your community in our JET Spotlights. Recommend someone by emailing connect.events@ajet.net.



Kai supported Matt, both literally and figuratively, on the day of the auction.

WHAT DOES THE ALT SAY? AKITA JETS TAKE ON A JAPANESE SPEECH CONTEST

Lynne Francis, Akita



Lynne Francis, the author, acting out the differences between the Tokyo and Akita lifestyles.



Stephanie Hupp showing off her award—nothing fishy about it!

Many JETs every year spend hours in and out of school judging, coaching, or attending speech contests for our students. However, not many of us get the experience to stand on the platform ourselves and try to avoid tripping over our words in another language. This year, Akita prefecture's Oga City, most known as the home of the *namahage* (ogres who live in the mountains and visit yearly to scare children who've misbehaved), was host to the first annual Akitan Dialect Speech Contest.

Ten contestants from America, Canada, Malaysia, Laos, Taiwan, and Thailand gathered to give speeches not only in Japanese, but also using the local dialect of Akita, or Akita-ben. Six contestants were JETs, including Stephanie Hupp, Meagan Peat, David Razini, Jan Rambaud, and Kenneth Grant, who organized the JET contestants. Topics ranged from daily living, culture shock, and language, to personal stories of how Akita has changed our lives.

A lot of us had not done speech contest in many years, if not ever. Back in high school, I placed fourth in the Midwest Regional Japanese speech contest. I had my first experience coaching and judging for speech contest this year. Like many ALTs, I spent hours coaching my students and working with fellow teachers. Now, my co-workers became my guide, helping me write and re-write my speech to include the right amount of the local language.

We each had our own techniques for studying, similar to those we use with our own students. Stephanie Hupp, a third-year JET, said, "When I was rehearsing my speech, I used the same techniques as I did with my students: starting off by saying each word, then sentence, then paragraph." Some of us resorted to the college model: wait until the last minute and wing it, or scribble notes. I personally was able to relive my time at Earlham College by practicing by repeating my speech over and over while drinking tea from a Mason jar the night before.

On December 8th we all came together, judged by a panel at the Oga City Cultural Hall. I know my heart was pounding until I got on stage, and then I just let loose. Despite doing one of the biggest no-nos in speech contest (reading off your paper), I tried to act out as much as I could, since that is what I harp on my students the most for. Five special awards were given, including best overall and the hard-worker award. However, everyone won a participation prize of a whole salmon, since Oga is known for its seafood. I was lucky enough to win for the funniest speech, and it was awesome motivation to help my kids (and myself) do better next year.

In the end, we all felt exhausted, and were able to reflect on our experiences standing on the podium. "Doing [a speech contest] from this side made me realize how much patience and time I need to prepare both myself and my students," remarked Hupp. However some of us, including Jan Rambaud of Akita City, and myself, simply thought: How are we going to get this giant fish home on the train?

Lynne Francis is a 1st-year Hooiser JET in semi-rural Akita. She loves teaching her kids American lingo, spending her weekends at the mall, and trying to make Tex-Mex as often as possible while craving Taco Bell.

How do you celebrate or practice your local dialect? Have you participated in a unique speech contest? Tell the JET community about it by emailing connect.events@ajet.net.



Like many other women, I was obsessed with horses when I was a child. All of my friends grew out of it. I didn't.

Over the years my love and interest in horsemanship grew deeper, culminating with having my very own horse. I came to Japan a little over two years ago, and since then I have had to put that particular lifestyle on hold. Living in a Tokyo suburb has made interaction with my soft-nosed equine friends all but impossible, so these days I cherish even seeing ponies at zoos.

For Culture Day last November, I was lucky enough to simultaneously cross off another item on my Japan bucket list while enjoying a little horse interaction. The Ranzan Jidai Matsuri hosted a *yabusame* event: archery on horseback.

Yabusame is an old samurai training event that involves racing down a narrow lane and trying to hit three elevated cedar targets. The practice is continued mainly for sport these days, although there is often a strong Shinto element included, such as pre-event blessings and a judge panel of priests.

Ranzan is a tiny town in the west of Saitama Prefecture, surrounded by foothills and forests. When I arrived at the festival grounds, my glee and excitement were barely containable; however, I had no idea where the *yabusame* event was. Thankfully, my friend Takeshi, an employee of the Ranzan municipal office, was working the event and pointed me in the right direction.

The horses blended in beautifully with the environment, and both horses and riders were dressed in amazing period costumes. Bells softly jingled as stone-faced women rode by in pastel kimono, gauntlets and glittering crowns keeping their hair swept back. The men were in full armor and played up their fierceness by galloping back and forth while waving *naginata* and bellowing battle cries. One older rider was particularly proud of his deerskin chaps, and gleefully showed off the stunning embroidery on the underside to the only rowdy section of the crowd, the local elementary school soccer team. In all, there were eight participants riding horses much smaller than Japan's standard racehorses.

After a drawn-out Shinto opening ceremony, the first rider was up. Each rider took a turn barreling down the track, trying their best to hit the targets positioned at the beginning, middle, and end. The spectators were eerily quiet as the horse approached—you could hear the snorting like it was right behind you—and the pounding of the hooves grew closer and louder and... there was a *whoosh*, a loud crack, and we erupted in cheers as the Shinto priest raised a white paper flag ("A hit!"). It was a horse-loving adrenaline junkie's dream! Two priestesses cleaned up the splintered pieces of the target as the enthralled audience continued its applause.

Archers' arrows are blunted in *yabusame*—as a precaution in case of a miss—because the priest and priestesses sit right beside the targets. Luckily the only misses that day were contained to the cloth backdrops behind the boards. In fact, the entire day passed without any serious incidents. Two riders fell from their horses, but displayed great horsemanship by climbing right back in the saddle.

As the event wound down, I noticed a small crowd of children gathering around a purple-clad figure in a clearing at the end of the horse track. The closing ceremony had just finished, so I meandered over. Takeshi was there, escorting the figure, the



Ranmaru-ken and friendly rival, Kumamon

town mascot, Ranmaru-kun (嵐丸君).

Ranmaru-kun is, as far as I'm concerned, far cuter than Kumamon and perhaps only second to Kagoshima's Greboo. He's not famous outside of Saitama, or, indeed, outside of Ranzan, but he's quite charming and, unlike some *yurukyara*, very normal. Takeshi is in charge of Ranmaru-kun's PR in Ranzan, and he graciously let me pick his brain with questions about Ranmaru-kun.

Q: Who first created Ranmaru-kun?

A: In 2011, the Ranzan town office wanted a design for Ranzan-machi's mascot character. They opened a contest and 147 designs were submitted. Mrs. Negishi, a Ranzan resident, submitted the winning design.

Q: Did she name him also?

A: No, the first contest was just for the design. A second contest was held to select a name. "Musashi-Ranmaru" (むさし嵐丸) was the name submitted by Mrs. Kawakami. His name was announced at the Ranzan festival on Nov. 6, 2011, so he is now 2 years old.

Q: He looks a lot older!

A: He is! He is supposed to look like a 7-year-old boy!

Q: Yurukyara have very distinct personalities. If he is 7 years old, what does he enjoy?

A: Ranmaru-kun likes normal boy things. He likes to go bug hunting around the town because there is a lot of nature. His favorite food is the local type of *yakisoba*. He also enjoys playing "Jintori Kassen" with his friends.

Q: What is that?

A: It's like tag. Children on different teams try to take over other teams' home bases.

Q: Sounds like fun! I really like his costume design. What's the meaning behind it?

A: Well, Ranzan had several famous samurai, such as Yoshinaka Kiso and Shigetada Hatakeyama. That's why he has a samurai helmet.

Q: But why is it purple?

A: The helmet is designed like the Great Purple Emperor butterfly. It's the national butterfly of Japan and Ranzan is part of its habitat.

Q: Wow! That's neat. So he's very symbolic of the city.



Ranmaru-kun with his signature butterfly net

Does his design ever change?

A: A little. There are 77 different styles now. I'm currently working on a Christmas version. All of them are available on the town's website.

Q: How do you come up with different designs?

A: Ideas come up by themselves. He is very active in my brain. I draw Ranmaru with [Adobe] Illustrator.

Q: What sort of events does Ranmaru-kun go to? Besides culture festivals, that is.

A: He helps out at almost all the town events, sports meetings, ceremonies, and so on. The costume is rented out from the tourism association office, so many shops, companies, and groups use it. Of course, you can use it too! He went to the 2013 Yurukyara Summit in Sapporo and met many of his friends, like Gunma-chan and Kumamon. He had a good time and met many new people too. Ranmaru-kun also helps out at live events for the Ranzan junior idol group "Pieace."

You can read Ranmaru's personal profile in Japanese on the Ranzan-machi website (<http://www.town.ranzan.saitama.jp/000001040.html>). Did you know AJET has its own official *yurukyara* now? Stay tuned to the March issue to meet this adorable little character, or like AJET on Facebook.

Connect's Culture editor Matthew Jones weighs in on Japan's lengthy relationship with *yurukyara*.

Do you know how old Hello Kitty is? If you guessed that the aging kitten is pushing 40, then you were right. The kitten is most definitely not a "chan" anymore, since she is older than many of our students' parents, never mind the students themselves.

It's true: Japan's obsession with *yurukyara* is by no means a new thing. But over the last few years, the popularity of *yurukyara* has exploded. Indeed, they have become such a part of Japanese culture that it is rare not to see one of these mascots at events or in shops.

At the same time, western mascots have seen a decline. The U.S.'s Geico Gecko, and the UK's PG Tips Chimps have been firmly retired. Even Australia's Syd, Olly, and Millie, who together were mascots for the Sydney 2000 Olympics, have faded into obscurity.

Not so in Japan. It seems as though the love for animation here has contributed to the longevity and revival of these animated mascots. There are even popularity contests held for the various *yurukyara*. Kumamon, the vaguely terrifying black bear from Kumamoto Prefecture, was voted as the most popular *yurukyara* of 2012. The mascots are delightfully quirky, and are firmly a part of Japanese culture.



EVENTS CALENDAR FEBRUARY

Let us know about what's up in your block for next month! Your area's event could appear on the next Event Calendar and be promoted by AJET at ajet.net/events! Send them to connect.events@ajet.net.

BLOCK 1

Yokote Kamakura Snow Festival
Feb. 15—16
Yokote, Akita

In one of Tohoku's more charming festivals, more than 100 *kamakura* and many smaller ones are built all over town in this centuries-old tradition. Come for the candlelight and *amazake*, and stay for the Bonden Snow Festival on the 16th and 17th.

<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e3690.html>

Yubari International Fantastic Film Festival
Feb. 27—Mar. 3
Yubari, Hokkaido

This resort town has held the YIFFF since 1990, welcoming foreign actors and directors such as Quentin Tarantino, Jon Voight, Kim Ji-hoon, and Steve Martin, as well as screening films by aspiring Japanese directors.

<http://yubarifanta.com/>

BLOCK 2

Japan Ramen Festa
Feb. 22—23
Kitakata, Fukushima

Kitakata, home to one of Japan's most famous regional ramen, hosts one of Japan's largest ramen events with 51 shops signed up to participate. One bowl is 600 yen, so choose wisely.

<http://www.kitakata-kanko.jp/winter/2014/ramen.html>

BLOCK 4

2014 After JET Conference
Feb. 20—21
Minatomirai, Yokohama

This conference serves JETs completing their tenure this year, including presentations by JET alumni and business professionals and a bilingual career fair. Any questions? Email the folks at clair.afterjet@gmail.com.

BLOCK 3

2014 Yukigassen Championship
Mar. 8—9
Hakuba-mura, Nagano

The first-ever grand championship of Japan's regional snowball fights. Pool Play on Sat., Mar. 8, and Final Tournament on Sun., Mar. 9.

<http://www.jyf.or.jp/>

Tokamachi Yuki Matsuri
Feb. 14—16
Tokamachi, Niigata

Japan's longest-running snow fest has been going since 1950, and is said to be one of the best events in Snow Country. There is plenty to enjoy, including ice and snow sculptures, fireworks shows, and a variety of other events.

<http://snowfes.jp/wp/>

Japan Amusement Expo
Feb. 14—15
Chiba, Chiba

Game fiends, rejoice! For this international expo is sure to have something for all kinds of gamers, from RPGers to arcade gamers to amusement riders. Entrance fee is 1000 yen.

<http://www.jaepo.jp/english.html>

Tokyo Marathon
Feb. 23
Central Tokyo

One of the world's largest marathons with 36,000 runners, 10,000 volunteers, and more than 1,500,000 spectators and sponsors—all squeezed into the streets of Metropolitan Tokyo.

<http://www.tokyo42195.org/2014en/>

*The block colours are coordinated to the map.



BLOCK 5

Toyohashi Oni Matsuri

Feb. 10—11

Toyohashi, Aichi

What happens when an *oni* meets a *tengu*? They dance, of course! This festival is full of *kagura* dedicated to Akumikanbe Shinmeisha Shrine as prayers for good harvest and to banish evil spirits.

<http://www.honokuni.or.jp/toyohashi/>

BLOCK 6

Daigoji Godairiki-san

Feb. 23

Kyoto, Kyoto

The largest event at this shrine has its tradition roots, but has gained popularity in recent years from its mochi-lifting contest: bolstered by wishes for a healthy year, women lift rice cakes weighing 90kg, and men lift 150kg.

http://www.daigoji.or.jp/events/events_detail1_e.html

Baikasai

Feb. 25

Kyoto, Kyoto

It doesn't get more Kyoto than this: *maiko* and *geiko* serve green tea under the many blooming plum trees at Kitano Tenmangu. Adv. tickets: 1500 yen; garden entry only, including tea and sweets: 600 yen.

<http://www.kyotovisitorguide.com/baikasai.htm>

BLOCK 9

Saidaiji Eyo Hadaka Matsuri

Feb. 15

Okayama, Okayama

In this eccentric festival, 9,000 mostly naked men pile upon each other, scrambling to claim a *shingi* and other talismans thrown to them by a priest. Spectators crowd around and egg them on, adding to the thrill.

<http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/spot/festival/saidaijiejohadaka.html>

BLOCK 8

Tosa Okyaku

Mar. 1—9

Kochi, Kochi

A week-long, citywide party celebrating the Shikoku and Kochi lifestyle, including markets, music, sports, food and drink, and arts and culture.

<http://www.tosa-okyaku.com/index.html>

BLOCK 7

8th Tenma Tenjin Umeshu

Convention

Feb. 15—23

Osaka, Osaka

During this month of *ume* blooms, Tenman Shrine welcomes *umeshu* producers who make their craft using local plums and locally made alcohol at one of Japan's largest *umeshu taikai*.

<http://umesusu.jp/taikai/>

BLOCK 10

Konaki-zumo

Feb. 3

Hirado, Nagasaki

The first in a series of that most famous event of sumo wrestlers spooking year-old babies into crying. But it's more than just yelling and wailing; this crying contest pays homage to the Japanese proverb that "crying babies grow fast."

<http://www.city.hirado.nagasaki.jp/english/events/janfebmar.htm>

BLOCK 11

Shinwa no Takachiho Kenkoku Matsuri

Feb. 9—11

Takachiho, Miyazaki

This festival commemorates the town's founding by appointing the best "goddess" and "beards," after which the winners lead a parade of 800 people dressed as Japanese *kami*. Enjoy some tradition foods, performances, and bazaars, too.

<http://bit.ly/1dv7GBH>

Naha Sakura Festival

Feb. 12—16

Naha, Okinawa

Come of Japan's very first sakura of the season at this free festival in Yogi Park.

http://www.goyah.net/okinawa_event/festival/sakura_matsuri.html

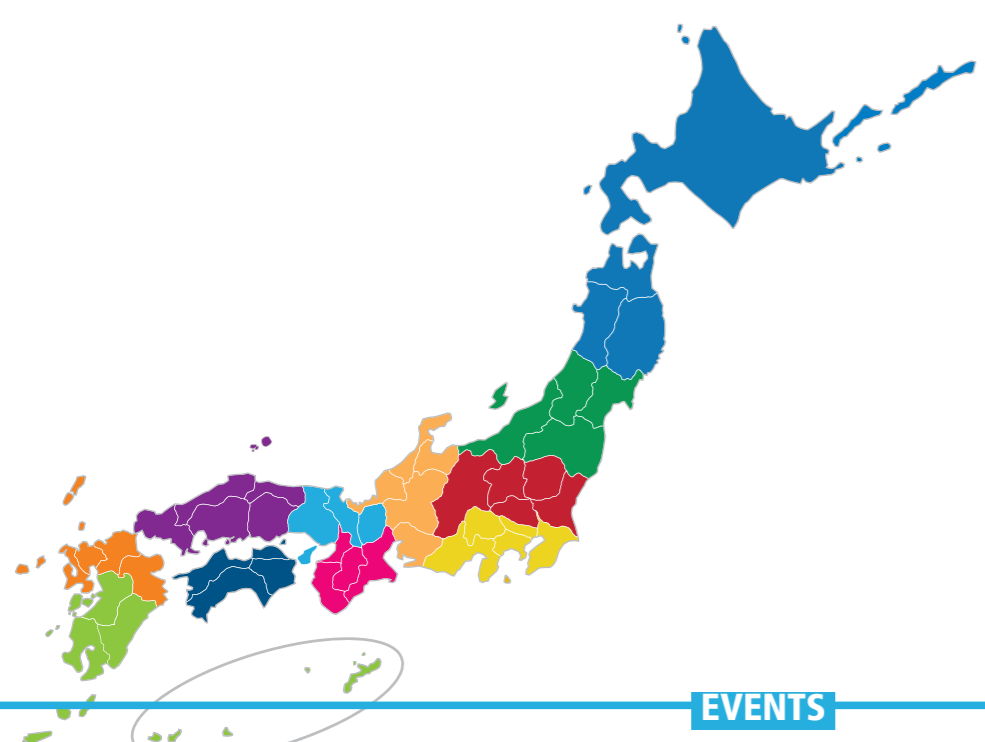
Tsubaki Festival

Feb. 15—Mar. 30

Hagi, Yamaguchi

While most of Japan celebrates *ume* and *sakura*, Hagi champions the beautiful *tsubaki*, or camellia, flower with this weeks-long, weekend-and-holiday-only festival. 25,000 trees of 60 varieties grow on 10 hectares. Park entrance is 300 yen.

<http://hagi-kankou.com/event/28/>



CONNECT CONTESTS AND CONTRIBUTING

CONTRIBUTING

Go somewhere amazing recently? Have kitchen tips to share? Organizing an underwater Quidditch tournament? Here at Connect, we're looking for new writers **each and every month** to talk about their interests and adventures. Everyone is welcome to write, no matter your experience or style! So if you have an idea you want to see in these pages, reach out to our Head Editor, or any of our awesome section editors.

Not every article is an essay! We feature interviews, infographics, top-ten lists, recipes, photo spreads, and more.

SPOTLIGHT

Every section of the magazine features one JET (or non-JET!) every month who's doing something interesting or praiseworthy. From fashionistas to volunteering superheroes to master chefs, tell us about them and what they do! Can't pick just one person to Spotlight? Tell us about a group, a town, or an event! As long as our readers are involved, we want to share it!

ASK/CONNECT

Make your voice heard! Do you have a question about workplace etiquette? Did you go to an event we highlighted? Want to comment on last month's articles or editorials? Just feel the overwhelming need to tell our editors how much you love and appreciate them? Each month we'll print your questions, comments, and witty observations so you can get Connected with us!

PHOTOGRAPHY CONTEST

Get the perfect shot of the perfect moment here in Japan? Your photo could be next month's cover of Connect magazine! Every month we'll collect your photos select our favorite for the cover! Email all photo submissions with your **name and prefecture** to contest@ajet.net.

Photos should be a minimum of 1280 x 720 resolution, portrait-oriented, and belong to you. If they identifiably feature other people, you should have their permission to print the photo. Submit as many photos as you like! If your photo isn't featured, feel free to submit it again next month!

HAIKU CONTEST

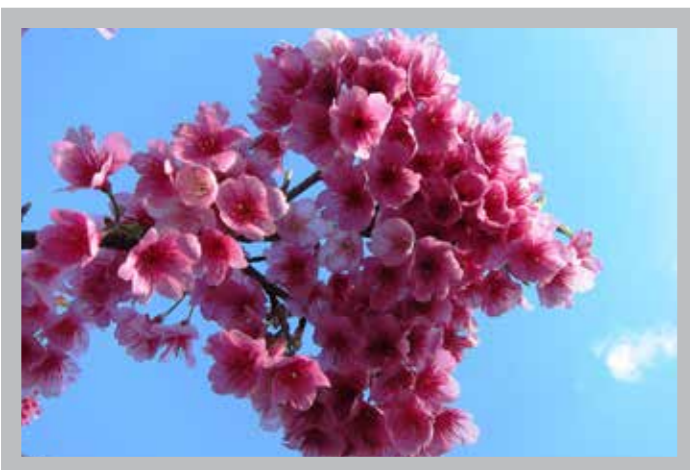
Each month Connect will feature haiku from our readers. Haiku are simple, clean, and can be about anything you like! If you're an aspiring wordsmith with the soul of Basho, send all of your haiku along with your name and prefecture to contest@ajet.net.

GET INVOLVED WITH CONNECT!

CONNECT HAIKU AND PHOTO CONTESTS

Our cover photo and haikus are all provided by current and former JETs from around the world. You can submit your entries any time to contest@ajet.net. One photo will be selected for the cover of Connect magazine! All photos and haikus received will be featured here each month, so give them all a little love!

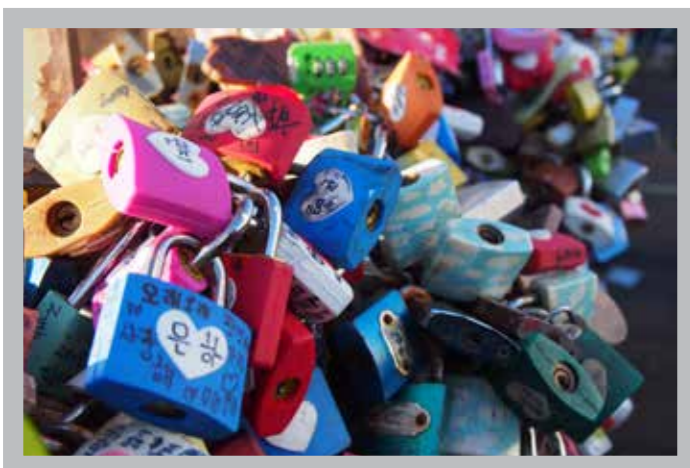
You've already seen Dan Brooks's winning cover photo this month. Here are all the fantastic submissions we received!



"Winter Sakura Blossoms" – Kei Ida, Okinawa



"First Snowfall" – Orrin Heath, Kyoto



"Locks of Love" – Dan Brooks, Yamagata

HAIKU

Fires above earth
Hiss, toss, fizzle and rupture.
A map of the past.

🔗 Giuseppe di Martino, Yamagata

Want to see your photo and haiku here next month? Check out the guidelines on the previous page and send them in to contest@ajet.net by February 25th!

LIKE A BOSON: THE SCIENCE OF LOVE

Amanda Horton, Yamagata

February is here and Love is in the air. Millions of girls are laboring over chocolate heart shaped declarations, and back home, couples are clamoring to make plans for the big night. So your friend has set you up on a blind date. You turn up, determined to judge your date fairly based on personality and conversation over the next few hours. Your hormones are much faster. It takes between 90 seconds and four minutes for your body to decide if you fancy someone or not. Only 7% of this is based on what comes out of their mouth. A whopping 55% is conveyed through body language and the remaining 38% is from the tone and speed on their voice. Simply put, first impressions count.

Let's say that the first four minutes weren't a disaster and you have decided you quite fancy your date. How do you go from that initial "I can't wait to get you into bed" to "let's get married and have babies"? Helen Fisher of Rutgers University in New Jersey, is one of the best known researchers into love. She proposes that there are three stages.

First stage – Lust

This is the overwhelming desire to strip someone, kept in check only by social propriety. It is governed by the sex hormones testosterone and estrogen (in both boys and girls, so no pointing fingers). These hormones are the ones that drive you to that love hotel across the road with someone you've only known for three hours. They flood your body with a need for physical contact and can make you go a little crazy.

Second stage – Attraction

The sex hormones aren't going to see you past a one night stand, let alone into marriage. Stage two is when it starts to become real. This is the stage when you feel on cloud nine and run up stairs two at a time because you are bursting with excitement and joy. This is the stage which makes you feel invincible, like Superman, Iron Man, Batman and Thor combined. There are several hormones, called monoamines, at play to make you feel like this.

♥ **Adrenaline.** You know that moment when you bump into your crush and your palms get sweaty, your heart starts doing ten to the dozen, and your mouth goes dry, so when you finally do manage to say hello, it comes out as a weird croak? That's adrenaline at work. Falling for someone activates your stress response, kicking adrenaline and cortisol production into overdrive. That on-edge feeling is great for dangerous situations,

but isn't so useful when trying to appear cool and collected in the face of your newfound love.

♥ **Dopamine.** Ever wondered why smokers find it so hard to quit, even though they know smoking kills? That is because nicotine activates dopamine receptors. Dopamine is the brain's reward drug. It gives us a rush of pleasure, and encourages us to repeat rewarding behaviors. Many addictive substances act on dopamine receptors. Love-struck couples had their brain chemistry examined and it was found that these couples had high levels of dopamine. These people had more energy, less need for sleep or food, more focus, and tended to take delight in life's little pleasures.

♥ **Serotonin.** Those people who are constantly talking about their crush, doodling their lover's name absentmindedly anytime they hold a pen, and become unable to hold a conversation because their thoughts keep drifting onto their partner, are acting like that because of serotonin. They become obsessive about their love. Dr. Marazziti of the University of Pisa, discovered that the serotonin levels of new couples were the same as people with OCD.

Third stage – Attachment

Love is blind. In fact it needs to be. Couples in a relationship need to feel their loved one is perfect, despite the flaws, and that the relationship is special. This causes us to stick with it long enough to enter the attachment stage. It also causes endless Facebook updates about how and why a partner is special. The hormones linked to attachments are:

♥ **Oxytocin.** This is the cuddle hormone. It is released by women during childbirth, creating in them a strong attachment to their new child. It is also released by the hypothalamus during orgasm in both men and women, which is why people often feel the desire to cuddle after sex. It basically conditions us to be faithful, as the more often we have sex together, the deeper the attachment. This hormone is so powerful that at the mere sight or sound of her baby, it causes a mother to release breast milk. Studies show that if this hormone is blocked, then rats reject their young and when it is injected into virginal females, they treated another rat's offspring as their own. This encourages a couple to be together for the time it takes to raise children. It is why people can stay married for seventy years and still love each other more than newly-weds.

♥ **Vasopressin.** This hormone controls your thirst in conjunction with your kidney. Prairie voles are highly sexually active, more so than is necessary for reproduction. Like humans, they form fairly stable pairs. It was found that when Vasopressin was suppressed in male prairie voles, they lost their devoting attitude towards their partner, failing to protect her from new suitors. Eventually the bond between them deteriorated. So it turns out that as well as controlling when you drink, Vasopressin also controls your desire to maintain your bonds.

Now you know how you stay in love, how do you start falling into it? What uncontrollable, seemingly random factors go into love?

DNA. Studies show we are attracted to people with the best genes. It is in our genetic interests to mate with people who have good genes, as these will then be passed on to our children.

Faces. Men like symmetrical faces, but women are more attracted to small facial scars, as they look for people who can provide and protect.

Measurements. We are, in fact, attracted to people who look similar to ourselves. Correlations have been found between couples regarding lung volume, middle finger length, ear lobe lengths, ear size, neck and waist measurements, and metabolic rates. Mensa also found that couples share a similar IQ regardless of their individual education level.

Nostalgia. What we really want, scarily, is someone who reminds us of our parents. In heterosexual couples, girls look for their father in a partner, and boys look for their mother. Cognitive

psychologist, David Perrett, at ST Andrews University in Scotland, morphed his students' faces into the opposite sex, and then asked them to pick the most desirable face. The students were unable to recognise their own face, but felt attraction towards it. This is possibly because it reminds us of familiar features we already love and trust in our parents.

Smell. Dr. McClintock at the University of Chicago found that heterosexual women desire men who smell similar to their father. This may be because a man with genes similar to a woman's father is likely to have a good immune system, but he is also genetically different enough to prevent any dangerous mutations arising from inbreeding. Another study at the University of Bern in Switzerland showed that hetero women prefer the smell of men with an immune system different to their own.

This is all well and good, but you can hardly go around sniffing people before you date them. So how can you fall in love without conducting a science experiment? A York psychologist, Professor Arun, has the answer: **Step 1 : Find a complete stranger. Step 2 : Talk intimately about each others lives for thirty minutes. Step 3 : Stare silently into each others eyes for four minutes.** He asked couples to carry out those three steps, and after 34 minutes most of his subjects said they felt deeply attracted to the other person. One couple even got married afterwards. Of course, people may run screaming or the hills when your first questions isn't weather-related, or get a little freaked out when you engage them in a staring contest, but no method is perfect.

ANYWAY,

**HAPPY
VALENTAINE'S DAY!**

