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AJET Across Japan

The Magazine of National AJET
May-June 2004
Volume XV Issue 5

With the publication of this issue, my year as AAJ editor comes to an end. The conclusion of my term is just one more indication of the clock that's ticking down until August 5, 2003, the day I depart Japan. As the months wind down, I am reminded every day of the things that I may never see, smell, hear or experience again. Certainly there are some things I will be *glad* to never experience again — the smell of a salaryman-packed last train, or the rigid adherence to that all-important *procedure*, for example — but all those minor prickles (and major irritations) will be gone soon enough, left in the trail of smoke behind an America-bound Boeing 747.

So, in the limited time I have left, I want to concentrate on savoring and committing to memory all the day-to-day moments, sights and sensations of my life in Japan. It's those little things, not the crazy adventures and blowout parties, that have made up the bulk of my existence here. I can have crazy adventures anywhere, but nowhere else can I come home to the smell of warm *tatami* on that first hot day of spring. *These* are the things I will miss:

Hearing temple gongs at dawn on the way home from a long night out

Carefully coiffed orange mullets

Hunched-over women with huge bonnets

The taste of *mugi-cha* on summer days

Irraishai!

The willingness of my high school girls to hug me

The willingness of my high school boys to hug each other

The willingness of strangers to invite me into their homes

Hot drinks from the vending machine on a bitterly cold night

Monks riding mopeds

Stores for teenagers full of cute plastic crap

Catching the whiff of incense from a shrine



Making friends at the bar at 4 a.m.

People-watching on the train

Riding my *mama-chari* around town

Guys in business suits at punk clubs

"Gudo moooorning! Gudo baaaaai!"

Smap X Smap

Melon cream soda

Cranes flying overhead on my drive home

Candy and figurines shaped like poop

Cheap, delicious *teishoku* meals

Sake from strangers in the street at festivals

Smiling at people when I catch them staring

The first step into a *rotenburo* in the snow

Women in high heels at the grocery store

The attendants in uniform at the gas station

Toy-size cars

39 students trying to pronounce *Labrador*

... and laughing with friends, both *gaijin* and Japanese, in a thousand different places at a million different things.

I realize that some of the very things I will miss might be things that drive others crazy about Japan. But you no doubt have your own list of things that, while fleeting on their own, compounded comprise the bulk of your Japan experience. You'll probably have no trouble remembering the first days in Tokyo, the climb up Mt. Fuji or the trip to Okinawa. But those small, precious moments and sensations are easier to let slip. Pack them in a mental box and take them with you.

Ashley E. Atkinson

2003-2004 AAJ Editor

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AJET Across Japan is the magazine of the National Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (NAJET). It is published bimonthly for the benefit of NAJET members.

Unsolicited submissions, letters to the editor, questions and comments are welcome and encouraged. For submission guidelines, see aaj.ajet.net.

All advertising correspondence should be sent to ads@ajet.net



ON THE COVER

A jizo statue in quiet contemplation amongst the greenery at Kyoto-fu's Kannon-ji temple.
Photo by Amber Cordell, Kyoto-fu

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A brief meeting with a former Japanese exchange student brings back memories

To contribute to AJET Across Japan, see our guidelines at aaj.ajet.net.

From the Chair

a time of transition

As I'm writing this, I can't help but wonder when the snow will stop and the sun will start to shine. I'm hoping that by the time this is printed, cherry blossoms will be in full bloom and I will have emerged from my third and final winter in Hyogo. I'm looking forward to shedding a few layers and joining in all the traditional spring festivities. I can't really imagine a better way to spend a warm spring day than in the company of the flowers, the sun, a little sake and a few good friends.

Spring is customarily a time for new beginnings, and for AJET it means we will soon be handing things over to a brand new council. After speaking with the candidates, I'm assured that AJET will only continue to improve in the year to come. I'm especially pleased to announce my successor, Dave Cowland-Cooper, who after a productive and successful year as Block 8 Representative will take the reins at the end of May. From now until June, the outgoing and incoming councils will be working together to ensure a seamless transition into the 2004-2005 JET Programme year.

At a point of transition in pretty much every aspect of my life, I've taken some time over the last few weeks to reflect on my experience on the JET Programme. What exactly have I done with the last two and a half years? After coming up with a decent list of personal and professional accomplishments, I'm trying to feel less nervous about the uncertainty of the upcoming summer. Honestly, I'm still a little jittery, but at least I'll have a great armory of stories for my grandkids.

All that musing made me realize just how much AJET has improved since I first joined the National Council in May of 2002. I consider myself extremely lucky, having had the opportunity to work with two outstanding councils. In any large organization, change is going to take time. I've watched 40 dedicated people tackle issues and projects that have and will continue to improve the JET Programme. Even as volunteers, they have been more than willing to pour hours of their time into researching and preparing reports, reading and replying to emails, organizing projects and discuss-

ing the issues, not to mention constantly looking for ways to do it all better than ever before.

Some of AJET's more recent accomplishments came into the spotlight over a February weekend in Kumamoto. The National Council doesn't get to meet face-to-face very often, so it's nice to get everyone in the same room. It's even better when everyone brings a bit of good news. Our treasurer, Jason Wians, announced that AJET continues to be financially stable despite investing even more in programs like Peer Support Group, Tatami Time-share and AJET Across Japan. Our Corporate Team announced that the GAM program (which invites relevant companies to offer services and discounts to AJET members) has grown in both numbers and support. The addition of companies like Kintetsu International and the Kyoto Journal will mean that AJET will be able to make JET life just a little more comfortable in the year ahead. Guidebook liaison and general idea man Dave C-C brought creative improvements for the upcoming Re-contracting Conference Guidebooks which include haiku, photo and cartoon competitions. We hope that many JETs will take part in the competitions and renewing first years will enjoy the new format.



Interpreter Adam Chapin announced that the basic translations of the Web site are complete, and over the next few months AJET hopes to offer a completely bilingual site. The future of Tatami Timeshare looks bigger and brighter as Coordinator Ryan McDonald has plans to make next year's edition a complete travel guide including both well-known and not-so-well-known spots and travel hints. The list goes on and on, and there were many improvements made to the structure of the National Council as well. The big change will

be the split of the CIR-SEA Representative position into two separate jobs. The split should give both titles more focused representation; we hope that this will also encourage more CIRs and SEAs to join the AJET circle. Additionally, we decided to nominate two interpreters for the next year. Both come equipped with a high level of Japanese skills as well as varying talents that should prove beneficial as AJET moves to become completely bilingual (and hopefully, multilingual!)

If you have any questions or would like to learn more about AJET's recent accomplishments, please contact me. There are only so many ideas 20 people can come up with ... we'd be interested in hearing what else is out there. I hope the warm weather and cherry blossoms help inspire you!

BY AMANDA CORNAGLIA, AJET NATIONAL COUNCIL CHAIR

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New Anime/Manga Special Interest Group Created

A new Anime and Manga Special Interest Group (AMSIG) has been created under the umbrella of National AJET. The purpose of this group is to bring together JET Programme participants that enjoy the art forms of Japanese animation and comics. The group will discuss popular trends in Anime/Manga fandom in Japan and abroad, as well as ways to utilize the hobby in classrooms as a tool to teach English. This is a free SIG, and anyone is able to join. If you are interested, please see <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AJETAMSIG> or contact the founder, Trevor Lalish-Menagh, at jumex@trevreport.org.



New Japanese Culture Group Formed

A new special interest group, the Anthropology SIG, has been created to provide a positive forum for discussing, understanding, and describing Japanese culture from the JET perspective. The group will use anthropological theory as a starting point for interpreting experiences and evaluating the JET presence in Japan. Although a degree in anthropology is not required for participation, an interest in anthropology is quite helpful! Perhaps this can also be a starting point for those interested in learning more or those looking for a different viewpoint on Japan.

In fulfilling this purpose, members are asked to contribute articles, personal experiences, weblinks, general thoughts, etc. in order to encourage discussion of Japanese culture. Members are invited to share their thoughts and opinions in a respectful manner, facilitating sharing and building an understanding of Japan.

For more information, see <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/anthrosig> or contact moderator Shana West at anthrosig-owner@yahoogroups.com.



The ULTIMATE Weekend, June 5-6

Next up in the AJET Games series, Hyogo will host an Ultimate Frisbee Tournament on June 5-6.

Conveniently scheduled for the weekend immediately following the Kobe Re-contractors' Conference, take advantage of your trip to Kansai by spending the weekend in beautiful Tajima.

The tournament will open with round-robin matches at 10 a.m. on Saturday and finish up by 2 p.m. on Sunday. In addition to game schedule, social events include a barbeque and DJ party.

Team registration closed on May 14th, but teams may bring as many spectators as they like.

All details about the tournament are available at <http://www.geocities.com/tajultimate>. If you have any questions, please contact the AJET Games TAJ Ultimate Committee at: tajultimate@yahoo.com.



AJET-CLAIR-MEXT Meeting May 24

National AJET met with representatives of CLAIR and MEXT in Tokyo on May 24-25. If you have questions about the meeting procedures or results, please let your Block Representative know. Find contact information at www.ajet.net and look for full reports on all topics discussed at the meeting to be posted on the site in the coming months.

Talking to Nori

AND THE RIPPLE EFFECT

By Jesiah Shotton

“So, there are still a lot of problems with this program,” I say. “For example, the underutilization of ALTs. Not that I complain, mind you, as the free time I have allows me to ponder about the mysteries of the universe, and as you understand, that’s an important job, and somebody has to do it. Still though, it sometimes grates on me that things can’t be done better.”

Pausing, I take a sip of my tea before placing the small ceramic cup down, next to the disposable *waribashi*. “I just don’t feel that the students’ needs are properly satisfied, especially in regards to the English curriculum. This job does get frustrating, as no one wants to learn, and it makes it harder to teach. The motivation just isn’t there, and a lot of the students don’t give a damn about English. I’m just generalizing but that’s the way it feels. They are more concerned with the other important things in their lives, like how their hair looks, who has the latest fashion accessory and how thick that book is with all the print club stickers. It’s just like that, you know. Just like that.”

Awaiting a response, I gaze at the clock on the far wall ticking away, counting the seconds. One... tick... two... tick... three... tick. After the third second, the response finally comes.

Well..., the response begins. English, for Japanese students is very much the same as physics and calculus. Another difficult subject to study and they treat it that way. Only a few gems actually seem interested in it in order to actually communicate. Those are the ones that make the job worthwhile. The job is really fairly basic, although I guess you give yourself the challenge of trying to motivate the students. And while the job can be quite dreary at times, you are being paid a lot better than most other dreary jobs, for example, a factory worker or a labourer. You are here to do a job, and some of your students will benefit and appreciate the job you do. Although it may not seem like it now, you are making a difference. Like a ripple in a pond, the effect will eventually reverberate and spread, to be felt by all.

Your presence is the rock that will cause this ripple to occur. This is evident enough of the purpose you serve.

“Hmm...” I say, momentarily taken aback by the answer. It was both well-constructed and made sense. Mine was not and did not. Staring at my miso soup, I noticed the *tofu* and *nori* slices entwined together, dancing away in the swirls like a couple of tragic opera lovers. As if in silent acknowledgement, they turn and gaze back at me, smiling, before reaching a crescendo and settling down in the bottom of the bowl. *Life is not so grim, they seem to say, in unison. You have it easy compared to us. Just take a look at us. We’ve been cut, boiled, simmered and cooked all morning. That is our purpose. To serve others. Our need, our existence. We are all here to serve a purpose. Just relax and don’t think too much. Too much thinking will only twist you up. Don’t worry, things will be fine. It’s not so bad. Just drink us up and everything will be better. Go on. Just like that.*

***It’s quite
exhausting to do
nothing. It takes a
great deal of
effort, energy and
concentration ...***

Nodding, I pick up the bowl, and then look around, wondering if anyone else notices the soup talking to me. However, the cafeteria is noisy, erratic conversations buzz loudly, with the clamour of dishes being cooked and washed in the background. No one seems to find me talking to my lunch strange, to say the least. Finding ignorance in the happenings of reality around me, I finish my tea and drain the *miso* bowl, satisfied in its having served its purpose. Now with renewed warmth and vigour, I head back to the teachers’ office, to find the reason for my own existence and purpose here.

Even after being here half a year, life is still somewhat confusing. Seems like yesterday, I was in a different world, assured in my surroundings and way of life. Now though, all semblances of life and normality seem unbalanced, swept away in a huge sea of confusion and indifference. Even the daily conversations I have with my lunch is starting to border on the brink of insanity. How did all this

happen? Where exactly did my world disappear to? Like a black hole, it seemingly got swallowed up and vanished without a trace, with me as the only survivor, left to pick up the pieces.

Returning to my desk, I shake my head and dismiss the thoughts of my world having gone super-nova. Picking up the latest copy of *Asahi Weekly*, hoping to retrace the threads back to reality, I browse through the articles.

Celine Dion now has a star on the Boardwalk of Fame in Hollywood. She was officiated on January 6, 2004. Great! My heart will go on ...and on.

In a recent survey, 73 percent of American women dislike Britney Spears. Why is this important?

Virus outbreak in Asia, called the Avian flu. Chicken related. So far, 600 chickens have died and a further 35,000 chickens will be put down and destroyed in Yamaguchi prefecture alone. There are also cases that bad eggs have been sold to unsuspecting people. According to Japanese health authorities, eggs should really only be kept and consumed within two weeks. Guess this means I should throw out my eggs from last November.



Photo by Craig Allender

Not finding anything interesting, I fold the paper in thirds and put it away. Sitting at my desk, reminiscent of an old Roxette song, I spend my time, watching the days go by, staring at the wall. Looking around the office on this sleepy winter afternoon, I see teachers, survivors of a planet gone super-nova, dozing away, dreaming Japanese dreams, where everyone lives in an anime world, filled with bright colours and high pitched voices. The elders are in their fire-cave, breathing their Salems and Seven-Stars, while the womenfolk gather around the gas heater like some primordial tribeswomen around a fire, talking about the latest hand-painting designs to decorate their tatami-matted homes.

Unable to fully comprehend the language to communicate effectively, a feeling of isolation swamps over me, the sounds and noises alien, like the clicks and clacks of a machine often ignored. Met with a sea of

blank looks and strange gestures, confused in a language I barely understand, let alone speak, these rhythms and reverberations only compound the feeling of isolation. Feeling detached, disconnected and disregarded, I reach out, but only grasp empty air, the fading sunlight passing through my fingers. Living in this new world is not without its fair share of difficulties.

It's another empty day, I think to myself, the hours dragging on, and my very presence here alone is depressing enough to make me tired. It's quite exhausting to do nothing. It takes a great deal of effort, energy and concentration just to do nothing. This Art of Nothingness. An art that takes years of mental discipline and practice to perfect. Lacking the appropriate qualifications, my mind whiles away, seeking some form of mental stimulation. Not finding any, I'm left alone with my thoughts. Thoughts that aimlessly wanders, lacking form and purpose.

There's that word again.

Purpose.

Sitting in silence, and wondering what to do next, I thought about what the miso soup had said. We are all here to serve a purpose.

What exactly did the soup mean? Purpose? What

purpose? What is the purpose of purpose? Thinking long and hard for a whole minute, I quickly grab a pen and jot down the following: Suppose, you say, we have only one purpose. Say that our purpose is to serve another being of their purpose, which only exists because of purpose itself. If Being A serves Being B's purpose, would there be any purpose left for A? Then again, suppose that A realized that in reaching its very purpose, it would then lack purpose after, would A still fulfill its original purpose, only to have no purpose after? Maybe a new purpose would surface, but then Being B's purpose would be meaningless. Is that what purpose is really all about? Is purpose perpetual? Reading back through my notes, I try to relate this to the triangular JET Matrix, as I call it (ALT to teacher to student relationship). This only leads to more confusion. What a conundrum!

Regardless, I continue to write, a letter this time, to pass time, hoping to find **CONTINUED NEXT PAGE**

TALKING TO NORI, CONTINUED

a purpose. Maybe in writing, a purpose will manifest itself through my words. After all, words are all we have, the proof of our existence. Without them, without words, life may very well amount to nothing, if anything at all. Through words, we reach out to people and make a difference. It's nothing special or rare. Everyone has words, and everyone has something to say. It's just a matter of saying it. If you care enough to make a difference and to write, the words will breathe their own life, creating a story, a way of expression. This expression is nothing more than what we experience, a sum of our lives and memories. Thus, I start my letter.

* * *

"It is now 12.53 p.m. I am bored, so again, I have decided to write. Having finished lunch, I feel sleepy. I know this is a result of having blood flow to the stomach, to help digest the food, so the explanation is purely scientific. Regardless, I felt sleepy this morning before school, am feeling sleepy now, during school, and will feel sleepy later, after school. The only reasonable explanation is that I am sleepy, regardless. It is, after all, a sleepy winter's afternoon.

I have only one class today, and it isn't until period six, the last period of the day. A sleepy class. So, until then, the day is pretty much entirely mine. I have brought my latest Murakami book to read, "The Elephant Vanishes," and if fate dictates and boredom persists, I might even finish it today. Presently, this piece of writing will alleviate the stillness in my day and pass time, and also act as a buffer for my boredom. Hope you don't mind.

With so many hours in the day spare, I was hoping to have done something constructive. Ashamed to say, I have not. What then, have I done all day? It's all a blur. All I can remember are bits and fragmented images. I vaguely remember trying to get online to write an e-mail, but the server is down. Apparently, the mainframe at Yashiro is down for repairs so Internet usages for the high schools in Hyogo are out. Being in Osaka, I guess this won't affect you.

Have some shopping to pick up today after school. Mostly 'sundries,' which, you informed me, were household goods. I am still contemplating a heated fan, as there is only a month of winter left to go. Guess I could rough it out for another month just to save a few dollars, or yen, so to speak. Having said that, I am feeling pretty warm now in the teacher's office, what with all the fire breathing around. I'm sure that my decision will change tonight as I lay freezing in my apartment.

About the problems with your school, why don't you write to AJET? I'm sure someone would address the

issues of teaching alone. We shouldn't be made to teach alone, regardless what our schools or JTEs tells us, although I'm aware that many ALTs conduct solo classes. It breaches our contract, a dismissible offence, but then again, so is not abiding to our employers' desires. A double quandary. It's a shame that the Prefectural Advisor couldn't have been of more help.

However, don't dwell too much on the negative aspects of the job. As wise Yoda once said, "Anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering, suffering leads to violence." Something along those lines anyway. I might have gotten the order mixed up. Regardless, I don't suggest you resort to violence. It's very un-Jedi like, and would definitely be in violation of our contract! As we're constantly told, "Every Situation is Different," although this now sounds more like a curse. Yes, playing now in prefectural schools all over Japan, "Curse of the ALT," now showing!

Don't stress though, you're not the only one having problems acclimatizing. Sometimes I feel like giving up too, as there is no point being here. Although I adore Japan and the atmosphere, life at school can be the pits, given that that is a major part of our lives here. At times, it seems that our efforts are being neglected and/or wasted. With each passing day, a little bit more of us slip away, our sanity hanging precariously on the threads of reality and craziness.

At some point in time, we will get washed away in the tsunami of cultural indifference, feeling its unrelenting wraith and fury, and like ants struggling to escape after being sprayed with water, our desperate pleas for rescue and help will be ignored. Oh, what an existence! However, don't give up or despair. According to my miso soup (long story, I'll tell you about it another time), we all have a purpose, and we do make a difference.

Don't lament about things lost, or of a time past. Don't ponder about a world that's disappeared. Spending time contemplating questions about life's purpose – questions such as "Why am I here? What am I doing? What is my purpose?" – all the while trying to fit in and belong, seeking acceptance and contentment, will only lead to more confusion. Questions such as those have no definitive answers. After all, we are not here to find questions, but to discover answers.

All in all, don't ruminate or let things digress. We are here now, so live, exist and make a difference. That's our purpose. Inevitably, there will be obstacles, circumstances and events that will attempt to pierce through our safety bubble, pushing us to the limits, but never over them. That's all part of the experience. In years to come, we will be better people because of the adversity **CONTINUED P. 19**

Thumbs Up to Fuji Rock

By Kimberly Vlach, Saga-ken

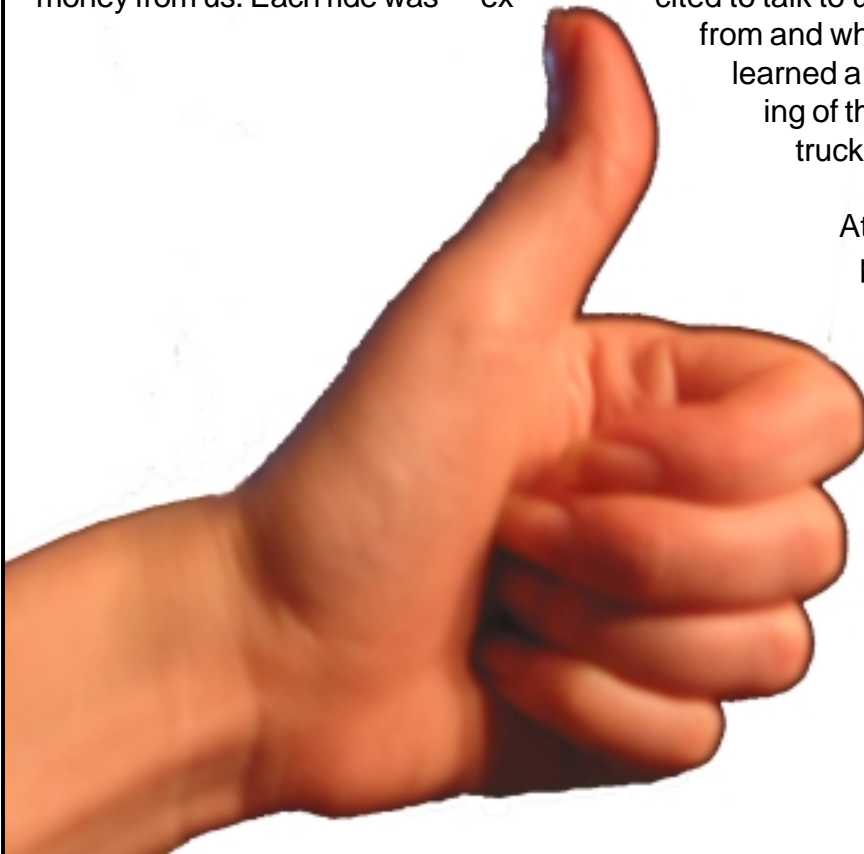
July 23, 2003 — We were standing in the drizzle next to a Kyushu expressway rest stop, holding out our thumbs, carrying a sign that said, “Oneigaishimasu.” My mouth dropped as an imported Mercedes Benz pulled up to us. This was our first ride on our hitchhiking adventure to Niigata-ken for the Fuji Rock Festival!

It took us 28 hours and only five rides to complete the 1,200 km journey, and each ride and each rest stop had its own unique imprint on the entire memory of Fuji Rock. Our second ride was from a 28-year old truck driver who had a TV and VCR and collection of porn in the seat next to him. Next were a father and his 9-year-old son whose shyness quickly dissolved when we became 9 again.

At 6 a.m., after seven hours of being rejected, barely awake at a rest stop, we were being stared at and contemplated by a couple, 68 years old. They had never picked up hitchhikers before and saw this an adventure for themselves as well! And then our last ride (talk about chance!) was a 24-year-old seasoned Fuji Rock veteran whose station wagon was filled with CDs of this year’s lineup. We could not have planned our door-to-door service any better — being able to roll into Fuji Rock, jamming out to the music we were about to hear live ... “luck” would be an understatement.

We gave each ride *omiyage* pastries from Saga, and generously, no one would accept money from us. Each ride was ex- cited to talk to us about where we were from and where we were going. We learned a lot as well, from the meaning of the three lights on the front of trucks to Osaka-ben.

At the end of each ride, pictures were taken and hugs given. Perhaps we even had an impact on the people we met through these random circumstances. No matter, they certainly left an impression on me.



THE ZEN OF BEER

*A ride and a six-pack — what more could you ask of a stranger?
Especially one you can't speak to.*

By Niccole Kunshek, Miyazaki-ken

I arrived in Miyazaki during the hot, humid summer. The night was muggy. I was sweaty and had had a few drinks. There is nothing like a cold Asahi beer to cool you off and make you think a bit unconventionally. The evening at the local ex-pat bar was ending. I decided it was a nice night, so I would walk back to my room. Well, more like I did not want to spend the \$20 cab fare to go five miles. Probably not the best decision for a single female at 2 a.m. when all the streets are deserted. I convinced myself, or rather the Asahi beer helped convince me, that a beautiful evening mandated a nice long stroll home.

So I began to walk. About 50 feet into it, my black kitten heels came off. They looked cute with my outfit, but the blisters they were giving me were not so pretty. Shoes in hand, I continued my hike. I wasn't even a fourth of the way home yet. That's when a white van pulled up beside me. The man inside began asking me questions in Japanese. Since I had studied French for eight years, I had no idea what he might be saying. In my pidgin Japanese – “O.K. desu” – I told him I was alright. Well, that's what I was trying to communicate, but my Japanese vocabulary didn't extend beyond sushi and sayonara. However, I had in actuality agreed to accept a ride from him. And he was not going to leave until he made good on his offer.

For the next 10 minutes he trailed me home. Despite frantic gestures that he should go; that I was fine; that, really, I wanted to walk in my bare feet, he would not leave. So, ignoring my mother's voice in my head telling me never to accept rides from strange men, even if they look like Buddha, I jumped into the passenger seat and prayed I'd indeed make it back to my room. The ride was short, as were the words we exchanged. Mostly we sat in monk-like silence.

I arrived at the hotel and my driver thrust a six-pack of Asahi into my hands. I shook my head saying, no, I couldn't take it. In my eyes, the ride was more than enough. But he insisted with a firm stare that indicated leaving the beer behind would be an insult. I profusely thanked him, repeatedly reciting “hairy otto,” which was what *arigato* sounded like to me at the time. He drove away into the night. And I was left to contemplate the zen of Asahi.



Photo by Ashley Atkinson

Looking Ahead

By Kristen Coco, Gifu-ken

For those of us who are beginning to wrap up our lives in Japan, there is certainly much to think about. Whether you've been in Japan for almost a year, or two or three, here are a few things to ponder when considering what path to take these last few months.

In a last ditch effort to visit every island, temple and "Top 3" of Japan, will you skip from place to place in a mad dash? "Let's see, I've got 2 days of nenkyu left. I've always wanted to see Himeji Castle. While I'm down there, I can do one last big night out in Osaka, check out Kyoto for the day, and shoot through Nara on my way back for a glimpse of the schizophrenic deer I keep hearing so much about." Or do you hunker down in your apartment, vowing to save every yen of your next three paychecks? "I will go nowhere. I will go nowhere. I can eat rice and instant wakame soup for the next three months straight, no problem. I will commit every bone in my body to finding the perfect job back home. I will not be broke, I will not be broke."

Of course, you must prepare yourself, because this is also the time when friends and family come out of the woodwork to visit Japan, even though you've been wishing them here for as long as the *obaachan* have been riding their *mama-chari*. It figures that right at the end, you will have a barrage of visitors, asking you to wave your flag and white-gloved hands. What happens then?

Will you give up on your Japanese? "Ahh, I can get around just fine these days. Why keep studying?!" Or do you work even harder at this last point, when your Japanese will be at its height from listening to the radio daily, watching Doraemon or that horribly cheesy drama on TV, and chatting with your students about your new boyfriend (i.e., any male over the age of seven they spot you standing next to at the train station)? Will you suddenly make 14 new Japanese friends and take three classes a week in

anxious anticipation of your return to the land of English, as opposed to Engrish? "The proficiency test is in December back home. I know I can pass it ... this time."

What about that boyfriend or girlfriend of yours? Will you spend every waking moment together and give up on all your other friends, both gaijin and Japanese, in an effort to bond before you leave for your respective countries and an uncertain future? Can you incorporate all people who are part of your life in Japan without too much stress?

And perhaps most importantly, what attitude will you take towards leaving Japan (because you will ultimately be leaving, if that's the decision you made)? Whether you are dying to get outta here, begging to change your re-contracting form, or somewhere in

between, what will your outlook be until you go? Will you spend your last days dreaming of air-conditioned homes and oversized plates of food, using the last of your nenkyu for the earliest flight possible home? Or will you make the most of the time you have left, realizing you can't recreate this experience with these people at this point in time ever again?

The answer, for me anyway, is all about balance. I realize that I can't go back and save the money I blew in Tokyo last week. I also can't make it to that one last festival two hours away I had always planned to go to, even though it took place on a weekday during PTA demonstration classes.

Additionally, it's about the goals I set for myself when I arrived in Japan. I can only be grateful for everything I have been able to do, for meeting the people who have influenced my life here, and for the goals I have been able to accomplish. The rest I'll just have to chalk up to the experience of it all. The way I see it, from here on out, I can only look ahead. And go to Osaka for one last big night out. ■



Photo by Emilie McGlone

QUIZ: Do You Want to Stay *Another Year in Japan?!?*



Photo by Dominic

By Craig Bennett

Your school is:

- A) a place I feel I can make a difference.
- B) a convenient internet café/place for lunch/Japanese lesson/place to sleep.
- C) a center for teaching anally-retentive social constructs, group psychology and cleaning.

Your teachers are:

- A) pleasant, able people, ready to adapt, take your ideas seriously and have a good or functional command of English.
- B) Not sure why they are here.
- C) Part of a decrepit, archaic system developed to keep everyone docile and continue the government's control of a placid population.

Your students are:

- A) genki, inquisitive individuals with all the strengths, weaknesses and problems kids have everywhere. Sometimes you love 'em, other times you hate 'em. When you leave, you'll miss 'em.
- B) asleep
- C) Borg Drones.

Your supervisor is:

- A) helpful, but cannot cope with every problem. If this happens, he/she always suggests someone else who can help and checks up on you from time to time.
- B) a sexist/racist/elitist/patronizing/ignorant prick.
- C) never there.

Your pay is:

- A) good.
- B) barely enough.
- C) the only reason why any foreigner would want to stay in Japan after a year.

Your position as an ALT, CIR, or SEA is:

- A) to be an ambassador for your country/the West and to further promote an interest in English language and western culture.
- B) to make tea and tidy up the staff room.
- C) to look good on paper.

You feel your position in Japanese society is:

- A) as a warmly welcomed cultural ambassador.
- B) transient to say the least.
- C) as an intruder that is politely ignored and endured by the public to pay lip-service to internationalization.

Your view of the Japanese government is:

- A) a group of intelligent people, who, as much as any government in the world, suffers because its only human.
- B) the biggest old-age retirement home in the world.
- C) A bunch of racist, sexist, elitist and ignorant old men; who are basically all employees of the Yakuza/major Japanese conglomerates and who would rally to the old Imperial flag should the right time present itself.

Your main interest in Japan now is:

- A) a place to continue my job, learning new perspectives and ideas whilst making plans to use this as a springboard in a future life either here or back home. Oh, and its culture and history.
- B) money
- C) hot chicks/guys.
- D) as a deferment of responsibility to commitments/obligations back home.
- E) videogames/films/music CDs/gadgets/toys/commercial products

Mostly As: You are a perfect bastard. Some day you'll be in charge of some great big company in Japan. Chances are you already had a good command of Japanese when you arrived here and secretly think that those who can't should be whipped and flogged. You have a great Kocho-Sensei who invites you for long fishing/golf holidays and the teachers happily sacrifice their scarce free time to go to restaurants/bars with you. You probably live in Tokyo as well, with your Japanese partner of three years who you intend to marry. We all hate you.

Mostly Bs: You are a lazy son of a bitch. You spend all your time at the bar. You very rarely cook, as the Local "conbeenee" has everything you need, but you eat "chicken teriyaki burgers" if you want to "eat local." After a year, your level of Japanese is less than the English level of a junior high first grader. You see Japan as a great place to get laid, paid and made. Your current Japanese partner is whoever has the shortest skirt/tightest t-shirt in the bar at the time and your apartment still resembles a university student's. The plus side is that your indifference to the issues pertaining to Japan helps you to chat happily to the teachers who secretly despise your blasé manner and long time on the only Internet computer.

Mostly Cs: You hate Japan. The chances are that it hates you too. You are probably overworked by an uncaring workforce in a small, isolated village with no one but old ladies who try to introduce you to their pathetic, toothless sons/daughters. People avoid you, even if you can speak good Japanese. There are no other JETs in the immediate area/prefecture and you forgot to get e-mail address of your "friends" at the Tokyo orientation. Everywhere you look, you can only see racism, bigotry, sexism and nothing good about it. You are always complaining about how great your country is in relation to Japan. The fact is, however, that you were complaining bitterly about your own country just prior to departing. You have no Japanese friends and have little or no interest about Japanese culture because you've already read loads of books and believe every sarcastic entry in the "Lonely Planet" book is completely true. You believe that your view of the world and current affairs topics is correct and will not be satisfied until everyone agrees with you. Go home, before you die of depression. ■



Photo by Robert Tunick

I came to Japan to disappear, to dissolve, to suddenly melt away from the life I knew so well I often didn't even know it was there. I yearned to lose myself, to really delay and reshape the regular rhythms and tendencies of my daily stride. So in agreeing to live here, at the bottom of a tiny peninsula attached to the southern most island of an archipelago, I was agreeing (as we all were) to a life with few directions, few recognizable signs – a life almost completely free of boundaries, traffic lights, and time.

Everyday I am reminded of this melting, of this dissolution into oblivion. Sometimes I seek out particular situations to explore my escape, and sometimes I need to feel found, to feel at home in an overwhelmingly coherent, familiar landscape. Most often I find myself involuntarily plunged into the one state when I am so desperately looking for the other. Take last night, for example. Getting ready to depart from Nagasaki City, alone in my new baby-shoe-sized car, the only thing I really wanted was to be back at my apartment and in bed with a good book. What transpired instead – a seemingly endless scavenger hunt along the curvaceously intestinal roads of a Sunday night metropolis – was certainly not unexpected, but was definitely less than satisfying than the solace I hungered for.

First I struggled to remove my car from a very much closed and blocked-off lot. The realization that I had left my wallet on the roof did not occur until I pulled off the road, fully distressed and lost in the center of the city, seeking to make a few “help me” phone calls. Somehow the wallet was still there, having survived a few wrong turns and sudden swerves. Somehow also no one in the JET family managed to be home to give me directions out of the Nagasaki's large and fully indigested digestive system.

LOST AND LIKING IT

Tales from that tumultuous first month

By Brittney Schoonebeek,
Nagasaki-ken

But still I continued to drive, acquiring a headache and occasionally turning into that familiar but so wrong right lane. You might blame all these mishaps on a number of things – the language barrier, my spastic driving, or the fact that most streets are without names and numbers, or perhaps on something much more indefinite and cultural. What that something would be, I don't know. What I do know is this: living in Japan as a foreigner who cannot read, write, or speak the language constantly reverberating around them is an intensely horrific, frustrating but also beautiful and satisfying thing.

So often the horror and frustration is too alarming – so distracting that I lose sight of that deep, inner solitude and the fact that I came here to dissolve, not to gain weight. Last week, long before my driving experience in Nagasaki, I was dwelling on September 11th, the hardships of school, and the language I can't ever seem to use. By focusing on the anecdotes of my exterior environs, I was forgetting to look inside, forgetting that I came to Japan to lose myself in the jelly – that new beauty – not in the rigors of its often impenetrable doughnut skin.

So to once again acquaint myself with Japans hidden treasures, I traveled with a few fellow JETs to a weekend-long rave at Mt. Aso. Dancing in the dirt, barefoot and smiling, letting the dull and consistently fierce throbs of the music sing through my blood, I knew that I was once again melting – voluntarily – into that mysterious center, that indelible orb of existence where the trees, young children, stray dogs, bedazzled foreigners, and all other living things speak a common language. Living and losing myself there, in the middle of the world's largest volcanic crater, Japan was suddenly so readable and warm. She was eager to help me swim through a series of not entirely unexpected moments, through that dream where I was so central and necessary that I was lost. The only thing she asked? For an attitude as open as a massively radiant window, a tiny sky that has never known night. ■

Let's Enjoy Japan!

Experience her deep within your bowels and be moved ...

By Michelle Luffingham

Being in another country always involves a bit of a roller coaster ride, and a tug at all sorts of emotions. This is what I personally like to do to keep me sane and on track – not to mention appreciative and grateful.

- 1) Find a patch of soil, sand or earth anywhere you fancy. Close your eyes. Dip your feet real deep and feel the texture. Run the earth through your toes and consider where you are: "To get to know a country, you must have direct contact with the earth. It's futile to gaze at the world through a car window." – Albert Einstein
- 2) History brother – just like you have history and baggage, so does everywhere else. It goes without saying – find out about it. It's the key to understanding where you are and will make your stay that much more interesting and rewarding. Better late than never.
- 3) We all know that the locals are the source. They've been around forever and they know the ins and outs. Of course there's always a hierarchy. So, find out who's at the top and make sure you nurture a budding relationship there. That goes for the neighbours, teachers, farmers, fishermen and businessmen – for everyone you come into contact with. And especially the yakuza. Befriend them. Probe them. Enjoy them. Let's internationalize.
- 4) Early rising always brings great surprises and rewards. Do both – watch a city wake up and a rural area slowly come to life.
- 5) Hang out at your local port – watch a fisherman teach his kid the trade and pass down the knowledge. While you're there make some connections and get out on a boat – experience Japan by sea, fisherman style. After all, the sea makes up 70 percent of the earth's surface. Experience it in the Far East.
- 6) Most of my weekends are unplanned. Spent on random missions to nowhere in particular. Taking back roads, following the small signs to parks, castles, temples, shrines, graves and other places of historical interest. I have a passion for photography, which usually means I don't get very far. Sidetracked by detail. Stop. Pause. Listen. Look. And let your curiosity roll ... There's so much detail to be appreciated ... second by second.
- 7) Challenge yourselves by land, sea or air – whichever does it for you. Cycle to another prefecture! Then jog all the way up a mountain!
- 8) Go hitchhiking – consult Dave at letsgethitched2004@yahoo.co.uk for his wicked insights.
- 9) Pachinko mate. It has to be done! And while you're at it, go check out the roof – often the best view in town. The ultimate sunset spot!
- 10) Snack bar is on my list. However haven't felt particularly loaded to be able to venture there yet. So, in the meantime it's porn at the Family Mart with the rest of the rabble.



Photo by Kristy Hunt

CONTINUED PAGE 18

stay or go

the fortuity of choice

BY BENJAMIN MYERS

I recently had a tough day at work. At my shogakko, two kids in the third-grade class bumped heads pretty hard. We hadn't started playing a game yet, but as I was teaching the vocabulary two of the kids saw a ball bouncing on the gym floor and broke for it, both diving head-first and knocking heads. One of the kids ran off victorious with the ball as the other writhed on the floor crying, the homeroom teacher began yelling, and looks of horror swept over the faces of the other 37 kids in the class.

The teacher had to call the parents of the fallen kid and I was told by the principle that the kid's father was extremely angry at the whole event, never mind that the game hadn't started yet, the kid wasn't paying attention, and he was doing exactly the opposite of what he was supposed to be doing. Later in the day I saw the kid no worse for the wear trying to koncho a fifth grader, but I somehow remained at fault for the incident.

I survived to teach another day. The relative insignificance of the episode and the fact that the kid turned out to be fine helped put it all in perspective, but a thought that often helps me get through difficult times I have in Japan – the knowledge that this job is temporary and I will someday be returning home, to the comfortable familiarity of my native culture – once again focused my energies on all the unique and enjoyable aspects of my life here rather than on the difficulties I might encounter. I don't mean to imply that every day is an epic struggle to deal with insurmountable difficulties, but we all have a tough day here and there, we all yearn every now and then for something from home that we can't have, and when I have these moments the surety of my return home reminds me to appreciate the here and now as much as I can at any given moment, whether I'm having a bad day at school, can't get good pizza, or the onsen mysteriously empties as I enter it.

Maria taught me to appreciate that surety, that inevitable return to my native land. Maria is Filipino. She works at a gas station in Akagi Village and has a daughter in the fourth grade at one of my schools. Ten years ago, when she was 22, she emigrated to Japan and now has a husband, a daughter, a house and irrevocable roots here. She speaks Japanese, but, though she has lived in Japan far longer than I, we face many of the same challenges in adapting to a new and rigid culture dissimilar from our own.

After one of the village Japanese classes some time before Christmas, Maria and I were talking. I would be returning home over the holidays, my first visit

home in two years. She told me she hadn't visited the Philippines since she came to Japan and when I asked why, a flicker of sadness swept across her face, the kind of sadness brought about by the acceptance of a less-than-perfect situation.

Maria told me that soon after her parents died she came to Japan. She had sold her parents' house and property, obtained a letter of invitation to Japan, and bought a plane ticket. She worked hard, but had little money and little time and the cost of returning home, even for a short visit, was to her an impossibility. After telling me this Maria smiled. "And now," she sighed, "I have a daughter and a husband and we are all very busy and, well, visiting the Philippines would be very difficult."

During my winter vacation in the States I decided not to re-contract. I told Maria that I'd be going home in July; that I'd decided I'd had my fill of Japan and that it was time to move on. It was then, as Maria smiled and told me she was happy for me, that I realized how lucky I am just to have the opportunity to return home.

Maria faces many of the same difficulties we all face as residents of a foreign land: discrimination, language and cultural barriers, and the desire for elements of the culture we left. Maria and I often commiserate, sharing little aggravations about Japan or mild yearnings for something from home. Maria, however, must face these challenges knowing that she committed herself to live here indefinitely; that she must adapt to these challenges and difficulties because the opportunity to return home is not a reality for her, whereas I approach life in Japan as a temporary state, as a small chapter in a grander scheme, knowing that at the very least I have the *opportunity* to return home.

I've always appreciated the great difficulties faced by those who choose to emigrate to a foreign country, an appreciation that has grown since living in Japan. I've also appreciated the sacrifices people make when they cut ties with their homeland and face an uncertain future. Now, as my tenure in Japan comes to an end, I look forward to seeing friends and family again, to eating good pizza, watching football, reading a newspaper, and driving on a free expressway. As I contemplate the numerous possibilities for my future, I truly appreciate the fortuity of my situation and I realize that as an English teacher in Japan I live a privileged life, that I'm pampered and well-paid, but the true privilege is the opportunity to choose whether to stay or to return home. ■

Glimpses

BY MICHAEL ACTON

We last saw Yoshi fourteen years before. In August 1989 he was in high school. I was in elementary school. He looked so tired when he stepped off the plane with his classmates. Their plane had just flown across nine time zones. He stayed in our downstairs bedroom for three weeks before returning to Okayama. My parents talked about going to visit him in Japan.

Today my father, my mother and I are all sitting in a coffee shop in Okayama. The hairs on their heads have turned grey. Their wrinkles are deeper. I am taller and have seen French castles, Sri Lankan slums and even the Great Wall. Across the table he sits, no longer a high school boy. Every day he wears a suit and tie as he works in his town office.

He pulled out the items from his suitcase one by one. Despite his exhaustion, I sensed the excitement he had to finally be here. He dutifully split the gifts between my brother and me. We were presented with plastic swords, storybooks, even yukata. He pulled out some colored paper and turned the sheets into birds, balls and cups.

The waiter places the cups of coffee on the table. My parents show him pictures from the past and present. "This is Uncle Henry." "I remember riding his tractor." My parents' smiles mask their exhaustion. They are tired from traveling across nine time zones and through the country on the shinkansen. We slowly drink the rich coffee, the aroma filling our heads.

He smelled different. He didn't smell bad, just different. I looked at his toothpaste, cologne and shampoo that sat in our bathroom. It was covered with strange writing. "Is this what Japanese looks like? It looks nothing like English!" He smiled with his toothbrush sticking out of his mouth.

My mother pulls out a carefully wrapped gift for him. It is a calendar featuring Northern California. He gives us each a package. My parents were given a vase and English information about his home town. The box I open has an earthenware cup, a town specialty. We accept each other's gifts, but we all realize it's not the gifts that we will treasure most from that day.

He was crying. Everybody was crying: the students and the host families. We had finished the farewell ceremony. We all knew they would leave the next day. Promises were made of keeping in touch, even of future visits. No one knew if they would be able to keep their promises.

We head to the entrance of the coffee shop. Our train will leave in fifteen minutes. He is happy to see us; we are happy to see him. He awkwardly grins as my mother and father give him a hug. We say goodbye, happy that we were again able to glimpse each others' lives.



Photo by Shawna McMurrin

LET'S ENJOY JAPAN, CONTINUED

- 11) Alternative *conbini* coasting – check out the range from Lawson to Yamasaki, Family Mart, am pm to 7–11. Find the one that does it for you, but whatever you do, don't get hooked!
- 12) Rooftops, ropeways, skyscrapers, cranes, cantilevers, air force bases – anywhere for height. Check it all out from an aerial view and get another perspective...
- 13) I frequently enter and exit random buildings at no particular time ...although public holidays might keep you out of trouble. It's amazing how easily you can cruise in, hang out, check around and cruise out again. Redesign your employment dreams. Pick up some useless information and re-ignite those ideas.
- 14) Go it alone. I find one of the best ways to improve my Japanese and meet people is to cruise to places alone. I've been doing it for eight years so by now it's pretty much the only way I like to do it. However, different strokes ... give it a go though, and smile a self satisfied smile thereafter.
- 15) Go to the temple early and watch the process ... people bowing, burning incense, chanting, meditating. Humility – she's your best friend at all times and in all places.
- 16) Go to the temple in the dead of night and experience the glory of its structures and stillness and the calm that pervades. Venture through a graveyard at the same time and do a double check on your courage!
- 17) Eat! Eat! Eat! Food is at the heart of every nation, and especially Japan. Try everything from *mimiga* (pig's ears) to *natto* to *ebi no odori gui* (dancing prawns). You may only be here once.
- 18) And last but not least shack up with your partner/lover/neighbour/willing friend at a love motel. Rejoice in the panoramic flat-top TV screen, play with the sex toys, enjoy the "vibrating payment machine" and much much more!

Live and let love!
Become conscious people! Next level up!
Wake up and smell the miso soup! ■

Results of the AJET Team Teaching Awards, continued from the March-April issue

Block Seven Winners

Konishi Tomoko, Kojo Junior High, Okayama City
Nominated by Michael Ross McCarrin

"More than teaching the grammar and vocabulary of the junior high school textbooks, the work she is doing at Kojo seems to me to be providing the students for a real foundation for studying English and foreign cultures – one that's based in a genuine enjoyment of their subject and a willingness to take risks, and which has the potential and momentum to develop into real understanding."



Mukai Chiko, Minami Neyagawa High School, Osaka
Nominated by Brooke Eplee

"Mukai Sensei sets the standard for teachers of the highest order. She helped me finally understand what it means to truly be fantastic at what you do for a living."

TALKING TO NORI, CONTINUED

... temperance and mental fortitude we experienced here in Japan.

Like you, and everyone else, I am also trying to live. To live, laugh and love. Just like that. Writing to you has been therapeutic, and it's a relief to express these feelings, even if you are giving me the silent treatment. That's okay, since this is a letter after all, and the conversation's pretty much one-sided. Thanks for reading. It's been fun."

* * *

Returning home after school, exhausted after another hard day practicing the Art of Nothingness, I park my bike outside my quaint two-storied apartment. Entering, I put down my shopping, mostly sundries, take off my shoes and replace them with slippers (now being used to this Japanese custom) before heading to the kitchen. Grabbing a beer out of the fridge and pulling clear the tin clip, I head to the living room and crash down on the expensive purple Mujin couch.

"Hi honey, welcome home!" calls out my partner from upstairs, before I hear the thud-thud-thud of her descent to the lower floor. "How was my baby's day at school today?" she asks, smiling, before giving me a hug, and then sidling up next to me. Kissing her forehead, I take a sip of my beer before relaying the day's events to her, including my daily conversations with the talking nori, a routine to which she has accepted. Or is now accustomed to anyway.

Waiting patiently for the entire minute and a half it takes me to finish talking, she then turns and looks me straight in the eyes, grinning. This could mean many things, and as a male, I've learnt to interpret it as either a good thing or a bad thing.

"We need a break. Let's go to Hokkaido." she says. "My JTE said it's nice this time of year." Making a mental note that it's still winter, I swirl the beer can a bit, gazing into the froth-less mists, lost in thought. Finally, I say: "Hokkaido? What's in Hokkaido, Beautiful?"

"Snow, ice and ... sheep." she replies, the meaning of the last answer lost to me. "Anyway, I've already booked a hotel. What do you say?"

I say, "What's the name of the hotel?" "The Dolphin Hotel," comes the answer.

The Dolphin Hotel. It has a nice ring to it, I think to myself. Taking another sip of beer, I lean back and close my eyes, imagining the future, another year in Japan. A new cycle of seasons approaches, beckoning another memorable adventure, with friends and students old and new. All the while, the ripple effect spreads further. ■

JET Setting

What are your fellow JETs up to?

New JET Charity Organization

Out Of Sight is a new JET organization that aims to provide JETs with easy ways to fundraise for and educate about good causes that usually receive little attention from the world's media. We are currently raising money to donate to the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo through the International Rescue Committee. If you are interested in helping us succeed in raising our target of one million yen, then please visit our Web site, www.outofsightjapan.org. There you can find details about how you can get involved and lesson plans to help promote international understanding. We are currently recruiting prefectural representatives to help co-ordinate Out Of Sight throughout Japan; a perfect opportunity for anyone committed to the project and looking to bolster their CV.

Africa Charity Challenge

Neville Keemer, an ALT in Osaka, and former JET David Oakes are organizing the "Across Africa Challenge" to raise money for Save the Children. The challenge will include a number of fundraisers in Japan followed by a sponsored cycle stretching 10,500 kilometers from Cairo to Cape Town as part of the 3rd annual Tour d'Afrique. The organizers are seeking both personal donations for the charity as well as corporate sponsorship that will help to cover the logistical costs of the challenge. For more information, contact acrossafricachallenge@hotmail.com.

Explore the depths of Hokkaido!

Would you like to explore Japan's most remote wilderness region? Chris Ballard, Hokkaido ALT and former professional Expedition Leader for the British Royal Geographical Society, is planning an expedition to Daisetsuzan National Park (Japan's largest) in the heart of Hokkaido. The seven-day adventure (August 1-7) will explore the furthest reaches of the park with a team of 20 to 30 JETs from all over Japan. If you would like to join, e-mail chriskballard@yahoo.co.uk or chriskballard.1978@docomo.ne.jp for more information.

parting shot



A young boy greets hesitantly greets a strange visitor from the sea. *Photo by Reuben Hernandez*