

AJET

CONNECT

News & Events, Arts & Culture, Lifestyle, Community

FEBRUARY
2018

You've heard of Kendo, but not like *this*

New Year fun the Japanese way - your holiday stories!

New home, new moves: one reader's passion for dance

Gynecology in Japan - everything you don't want to ask (but definitely need to know)!

Day one to bucket list spot - How the Snow Festival put Sapporo on the map



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

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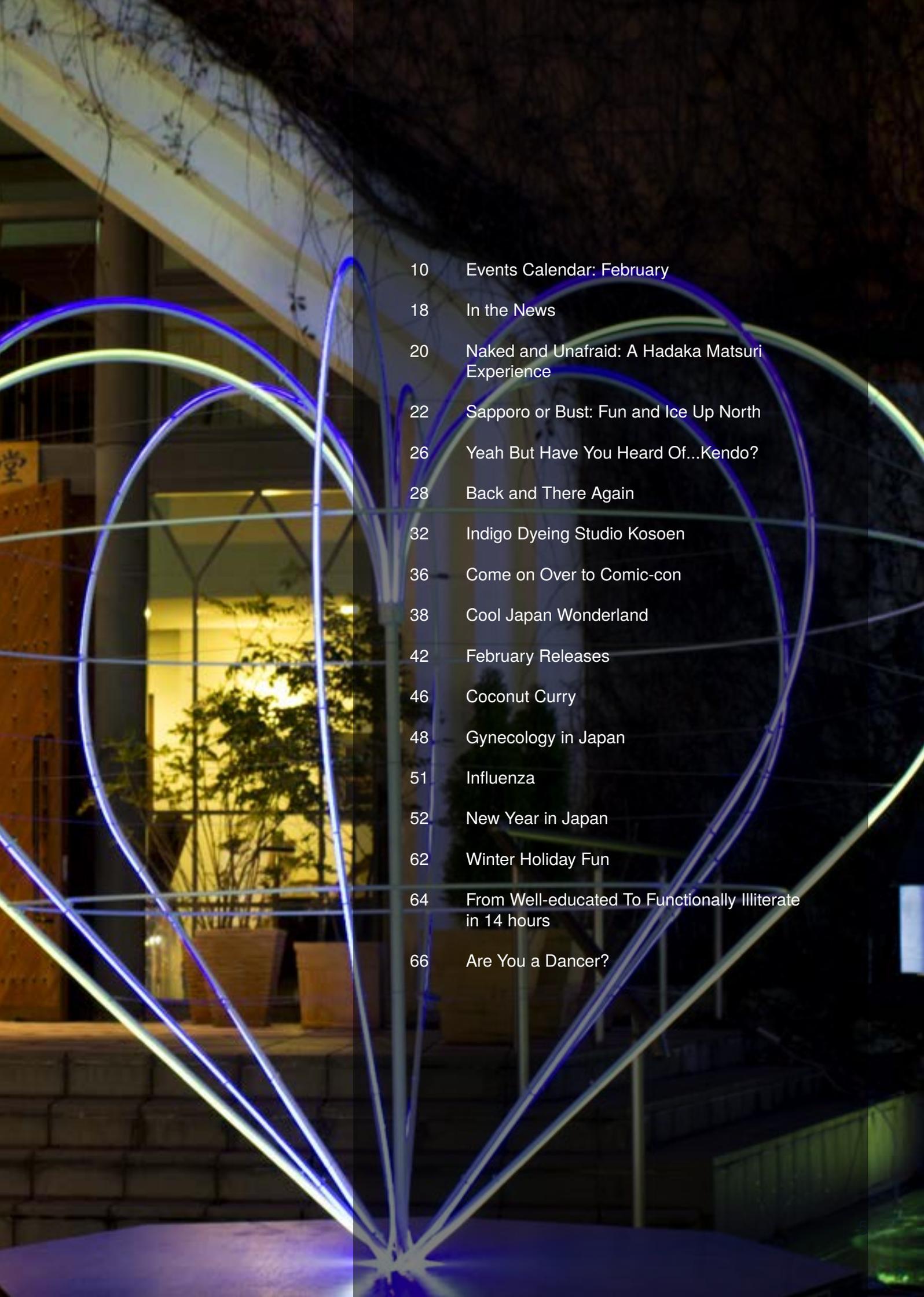
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

We're now in the middle of winter with snow falling down, even in Tokyo! We hope that you're staying safe and warm during this time of year and taking advantage of the best that Japan has to offer you. Such as: skiing, snowboarding, *kotatsu*, *nabe*, snow festivals, *shabu shabu*, natural outside onsen, illuminations, orange chocolate cocoa from Family Mart...

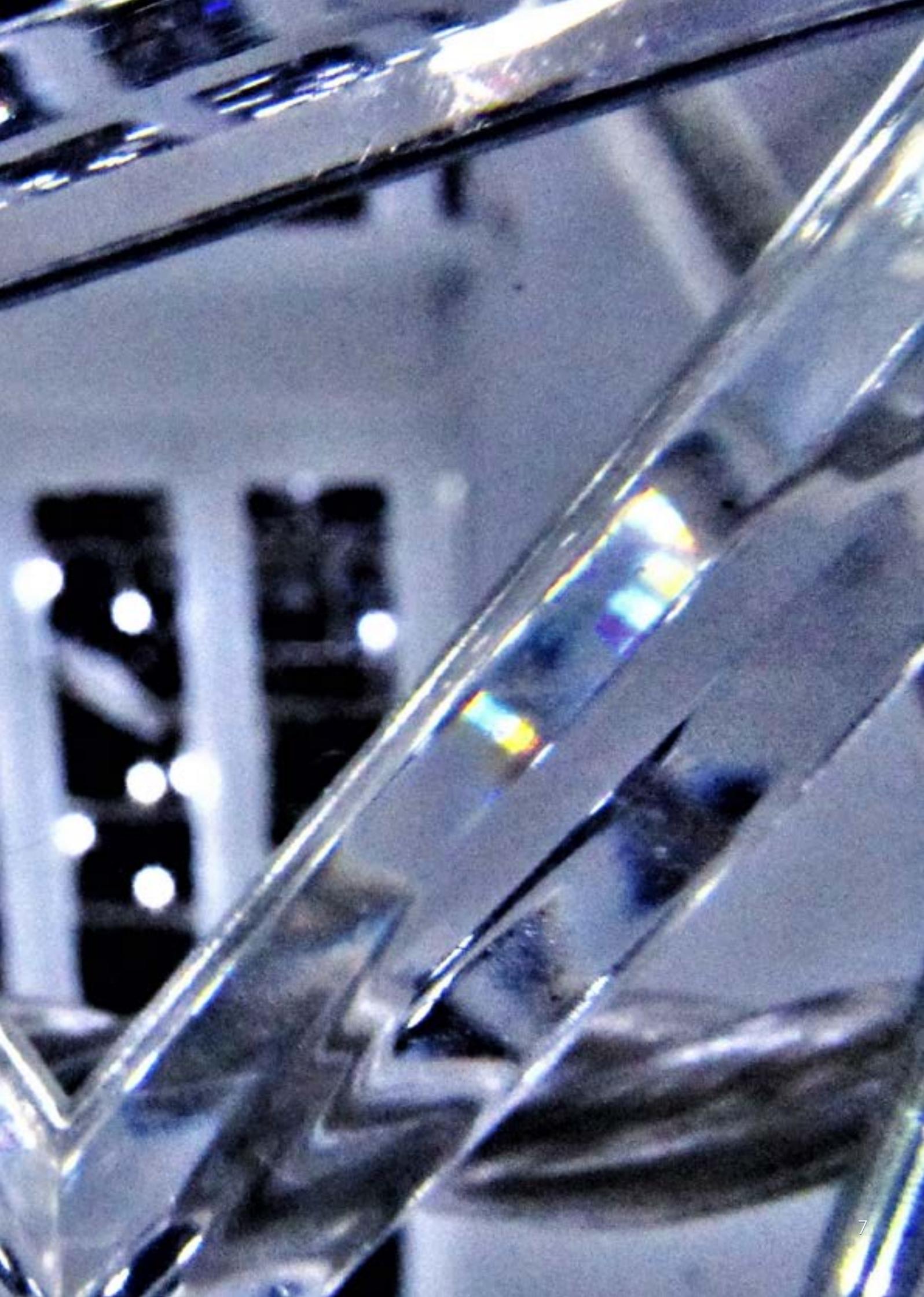
CONNECT brings you another issue full of events and activities to keep you occupied outside — we're diving in into traditional Japanese classics like the Sapporo Snow Festival and the art of kendo — as well as articles to keep you entertained inside — you can read up on Japanese indigo dyeing while making some coconut curry, yum!

Whatever it is you fancy, take a peek to see what we've got. Thanks for reading!

Lilian Diep
Head Editor
3rd Year Toyama ALT



Photo: Hannah Martin



NEWS AND EVENTS



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Tresha Barrett

*"I look for inspiration in the shadows of insanity."
Acidschizomunky*

EVENTS EDITOR

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Bailey Jo Josie

Photo: Shantel Dickerson



Events Calendar:

February

Bailey Jo Josie (Miyazaki)

Block 1

Hokkaido
Aomori
Iwate
Akita

Block 2

Miyagi
Yamagata
Fukushima
Niigata

Block 3

Ibaraki
Tochigi
Gunma
Saitama
Nagano

Block 4

Chiba
Tokyo
Kanagawa
Yamanashi
Shizuoka

Block 5

Toyama
Ishikawa
Fukui
Gifu
Aichi

Block 6

Shiga
Kyoto
Hyogo

Block 7

Mie
Osaka
Nara
Wakayama

Block 8

Tokushima
Kagawa
Ehime
Kochi

Block 9

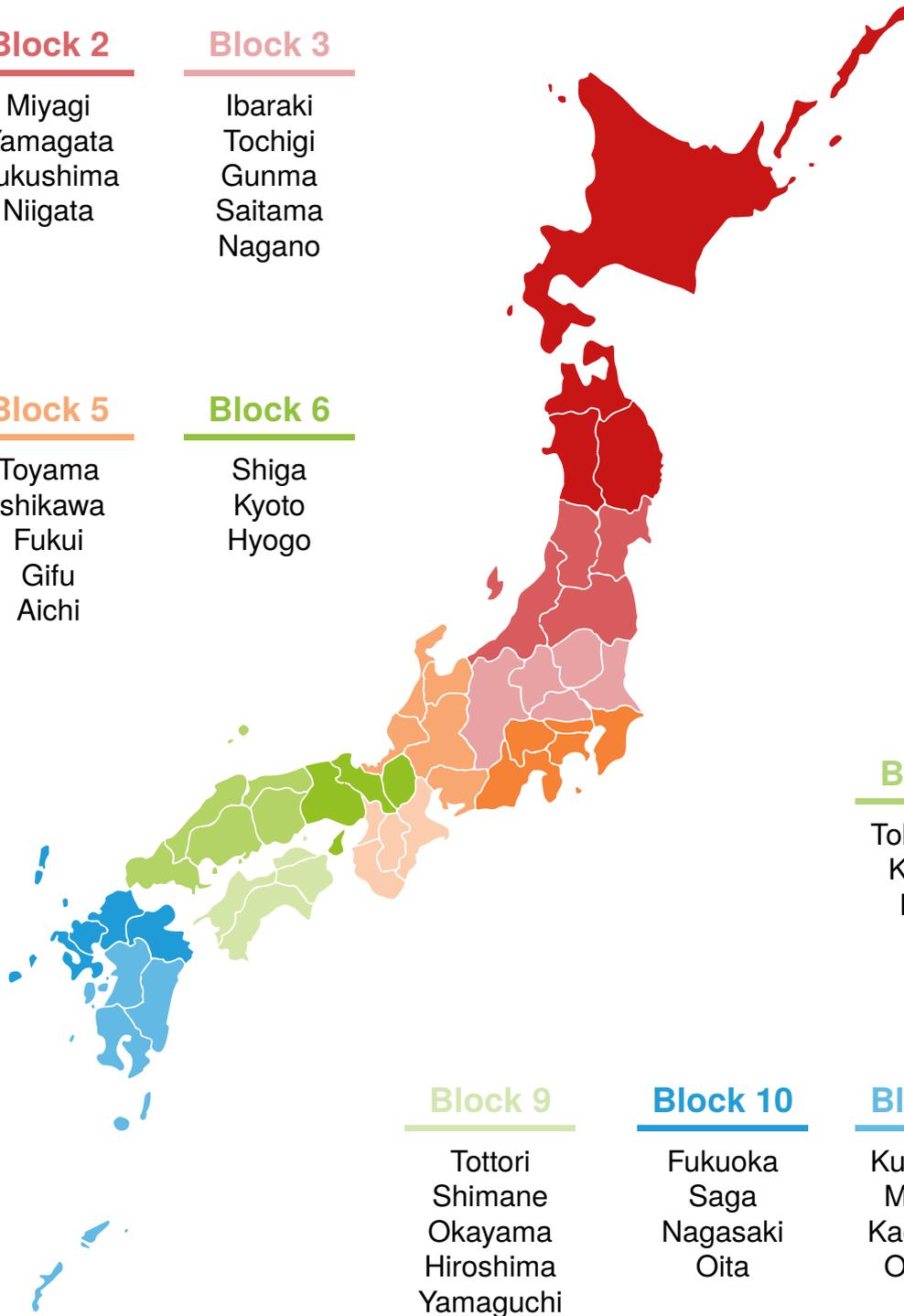
Tottori
Shimane
Okayama
Hiroshima
Yamaguchi

Block 10

Fukuoka
Saga
Nagasaki
Oita

Block 11

Kumamoto
Miyazaki
Kagoshima
Okinawa





Block 1

69th Sapporo Snow Festival

1 February – 12 February
Sapporo City, Hokkaido Prefecture
[Website](#)

Oyasusukyo Shigakko Festival

3 February
Yuzawa City, Akita Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

59th Asahikawa Winter Festival

7 February – 12 February
Asahikawa City, Hokkaido Prefecture
[Website](#)

Namahage Sedo Festival

9 February – 11 February
Oga City, Akita Prefecture
[Website](#)

Hirosaki Castle Snow Lantern Festival

9 February – 12 February
Hirosaki City, Aomori Prefecture
[Website](#)

Otaru Snow Light Path Festival

9 February – 18 February
Otaru City, Hokkaido Prefecture
[Website](#)

Inukko Matsuri

10 February – 11 February
Yuzawa City, Akita Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Iwate Snow Festival

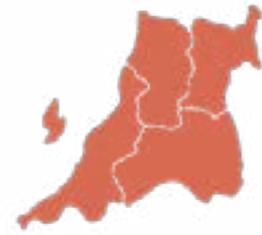
14 February – 18 February
Shizukuishi City, Iwate Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hachinohe Enburi

17 February – 20 February
Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture
[Website](#)

Naked Festival

22 February – 23 February
Oshu City, Iwate Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 2

Snowman Snow Statue Contest

3 February – 4 February
Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tochio Snow Festival

3 February – 4 February
Nagaoka City, Niigata Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Aizu Candle Festival

9 February – 10 February
Aizuwakamatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Snow and Fire Festival

10 February
Mishima City, Fukushima Prefecture
[Website](#)

23rd Ooyama Shinshu Sakagura Matsuri

10 February
Tsuruoka City, Yamagata Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Minamiuonuma Snow Festival

10 February – 11 February
Minamiuonuma City, Niigata Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Ojiya Balloon Festival

24 February – 25 February
Ojiya City, Niigata Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)





Block 3

Ashikaga Flower Park

22 October – 5 February

Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture

[Website](#)

Yunishigawa Kamakura Festival

27 January – 4 March

Nikko City, Tochigi Prefecture

[Website](#)

Setsubun Costume Parade

3 February

Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Akagi Mountain Snow Festival

3 February

Maebashi City, Gunma Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Choco-Run 2018

4 February

Midori Ward, Saitama City, Saitama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

North Karuizawa Fire Festival

10 February

Naganohara Town, Gunma Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

36th Iiyama Snow Festival

10 February – 11 February

Iiyama City, Nagano Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Mito Plum Festival

17 February – 31 March

Mito City, Ibaraki Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Chichibu Whiskey Matsuri

18 February

Chichibu City, Saitama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 4

Sagamiko Illumination 2017-2018

11 November – 8 April
Sagami Lake Resort Pleasure
Forest, Sagami City, Kanagawa
Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Edo-Tokyo 100

28 November – 4 February
Shizuoka City Tokaido Hiroshige
Museum of Art, Shizuoka City,
Shizuoka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Lake Kawaguchiko's Fireworks in Winter 2018

13 January – 18 February, Saturdays
and Sundays
Kawaguchiko City, Yamanashi
Prefecture

[Website in Japanese Only](#)

Yokohama Chinatown Lunar New Year

16 January – 2 February
Yokohama City, Kanagawa
Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Saiko Ice Festival

27 January – 12 February
Fujikawaguchiko Town, Yamanashi
Prefecture

[Website](#)

Setagaya Plum Festival

10 February – 4 March
Setagaya Ward, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Chiba City International Fureai Festival

11 February
Chiba City, Chiba Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tokyo Game Music Show

24 February
Ota Ward, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 5

Geisha Experience

10 June – 24 March
Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hida Takayama Winter Light Up

1 December – 28 February
Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Studio Ghibli Layout Design Exhibit

8 December – 11 March
Fukui City, Fukui Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Foodpia Kanazawa

27 January – 28 February
Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nagoya Ramen Matsuri

2 February – 12 February
Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture
[Website](#)

Toyama Nabe Jiman Taikai

3 February – 4 February
Nakanikawa District, Toyama Prefecture
[Website](#)

Echizen Ono Winter Story Festival

3 February – 4 February
Ono City, Fukui Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nenohi Kurabiraki

11 February
Tokoname City, Aichi Prefecture
[Website](#)

Takasu Snow Festival

17 February – 18 February
Gujo City, Gifu Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 6

Kobe Illumination

11 November – 12 February
Kobe Fruit Flower Park, Hyogo City, Hyogo Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

The 67th Nagahama Bonsai Exhibition of Ume Trees with Blossoms

10 January – 11 March
Nagahama City, Shiga Prefecture
[Website in Japanese Only](#)

Yukitouro

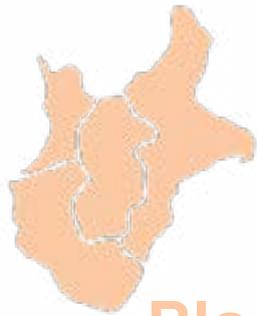
27 January- 3 February
Nantan City, Kyoto Prefecture
[Website](#)

Kawanishi Machinaka Art Museum

18 February – 4 March
Kawanishi City, Hyogo Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shurakukai

27 February
Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 7

Exhibition of Buildings of Ghibli 2017

2 December – 5 February
Abeno Ward, Osaka, Osaka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Happy Dream Circus

22 December – 26 February
Naniwa Ward, Osaka, Osaka Prefecture

[Japanese](#)

[English](#)

Yu Noen Farm Muratake Strawberry Picking

Mid-January – Mid-June
Izumi City, Osaka Prefecture

[Website](#)

Owase Ya Ya Matsuri 2018

1 February – 5 February
Owase City, Mie Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Onda Festival

4 February
Asuka Niimasu Shrine, Takaichi District, Nara Prefecture

[Website](#)

Kumano Otani Festival

6 February
Shingu City, Wakayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 8

Marugame Castle Stone Wall Light Up in Winter

29 November – 4 February
Marugame City, Kagawa Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Wan! Park Inu Exhibition

14 December – 6 February
Kochi City, Kochi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Nanrakuen Plum Festival

27 January – 4 March
Uwajima City, Ehime Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

19th Shikoku Sake Matsuri

24 February
Miyoshi City, Tokushima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)





Block 9

Golden Island Zipangu Illumination

6 December – 8 January
Matsue City, Shimane Prefecture
[Website in Japanese Only](#)

Kanmuriyama General Park Plum Festival

10 February – 4 March
Hikari City, Yamaguchi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese Only](#)

Tottori City Student Exchange Painting Exhibition

13 January – 12 February
Tottori City, Tottori Prefecture
[Website in Japanese Only](#)

Chikara-Mochi Eyo (Power Lifting)

4 February
Mimasaka City, Okayama Prefecture
[Website](#)

Mihara Shinmeiichi

9 February – 11 February
Mihara City, Hiroshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Rabbit Carnival

18 February
Hiroshima City, Hiroshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hinase Oyster Festival

25 February
Bizen City, Okayama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 10

Ureshino Hot Spring Matsuri

27 January – 12 February
Ureshino City, Saga Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Agano-yaki Valentine Ohoco

1 February – 14 February
Tagawa City, Fukuoka Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Doll's Festival

15 February – 31 March
Hita City, Oita Prefecture
[Website](#)

Goto Camellia Festival

17 February – 4 March
Goto City, Nagasaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Japanese Ume Apricot Festival

18 February – 18 March
Hita City, Oita Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Genji Temple Reconnaissance Party

22 February
Bungotakada City, Oita Prefecture
[Website](#)

Ainoura Azagochi

24 February – 26 February
Sasebo City, Nagasaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)



Block 11

Takachiho Kami Akari

1 November – 19 February
Takachiho Gorge, Nishiusuki District, Miyazaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hitoyoshi Kuma Hinamatsuri

1 February – 21 March
Hitoyoshi City, Kumamoto Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

33th Shinwa no Takachiho Kenkoku Matsuri

11 February
Takachiho Town, Miyazaki Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Kagoshima Ramen Championship

16 February – 18 February
Kagoshima City, Kagoshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Naha Sakura Festival

21 February – 25 February
Naha City, Okinawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Photos:
Illaura Rossiter
Duncan Cox
Shantel Dickerson
Illaura Rossiter
Illaura Rossiter



In The News

Tresha Barrett (Kyoto)

Japan's Recruit Holdings to Join Forces with Airbnb

Recruit Holdings Co., Japan's largest provider of temporary staff, announced recently that it will team up with Airbnb, the leading U.S. source of vacation rental, to offer short-term housing options to travelers in Japan.

This collaboration will provide Airbnb with information about temporary accommodation from Recruit subsidiary, Suumo, which has a database of over 6 million properties. The available properties will later be listed on the Airbnb website.

According to Recruit officials, during the busy periods of March and September, a time when many

people tend to move house, several properties are left vacant for months at a time if they're not rented on a temporary basis.

Recruit will encourage property owners and management companies to allow their unoccupied rooms to be available for vacation rental.

"Our aim is to increase the profitability of rental properties," said a spokesperson for Recruit Sumai Co., a Recruit subsidiary that operates Suumo. She added that the company is open to joining forces with other vacation rental platforms.

Recruit's collaboration with Airbnb comes months ahead of a new law, which will come into effect on June 15. This law will allow private property owners to open up their doors for short-term rental — specifically, for a maximum of 180 nights per year if property owners register with local governments.

Sources:

<http://bit.ly/2Bivfgv>

<http://bit.ly/2BjcWl7>

Image Source:

<http://bit.ly/2BjcWl7>

Tokyo Wants Foreign Visitors to Splurge on City's Nightlife

In an attempt to capitalize on the number of foreign tourists entering Japan, the Tokyo Metropolitan government will be conducting a targeted survey to find out what visitors enjoy about the city's nightlife. According to *Japan Today*, the survey aims not only to target these preferences, but also encourage tourists to spend.

The Tokyo government plans to spend up to 50 million yen on the project in fiscal year 2018. The results of the survey will be optimised to promote

a number of popular spots around the city on the Tokyo government's website.

This venture is seen as an imperative means of combatting the decline in the average spending per traveler – a drop seen in recent years despite a rapid increase in tourism. In 2017, the number rose 19.3% from the previous year to a record 28.69 million, with a total spending of 4.42 trillion yen.

Still, the average expenditure per visitor fell by 1.3% to 153,921 yen in 2017, a continued decline from the previous year's decrease of 11.5%. According

to the Japanese government, a goal of 40 million annual visitors should be achieved by 2020, when Japan will host the Olympics.

On such a note, the central government is considering a similar survey in their own attempt to increase tourist expenditure.

Source:

<http://bit.ly/2rpAScS>

Image Source:

<http://bit.ly/2Bk6foR>



NAKED AND UNAFRAID: A Hadaka Matsuri Experience

Chris Golden (Miyazaki)

Ah, winter: the bane of seemingly every Japanese person's existence. Granted, there are worse things out there; earthquakes, tsunamis, freakishly large-but-harmless spiders, and the equally freakish-but-not-so-harmless centipedes immediately come to mind. But that's just me. Having experienced winters in places like Baltimore, Seattle, Minnesota, and New York City, where temperatures can easily reach and stay at -22C or lower, seeing Miyazakians wearing huge, puffy jackets and layers upon layers of heat tech on bright, sunny,

15 degree days always makes me chuckle. Most people in Miyazaki see the temperature gauge drop and immediately pull out the ol' *kotatsu* for some cozy avoid-all-cold-experiences time. But, there are a few brave souls who, every year in January, look outside, think of the cold air, the frigid ocean water, and think "Let's get naked and jump in there!" Enter, Japan's Hadaka Matsuri.

The one I participated in was in Aoshima. However, there are festivals like it all over Japan around this time of year. They exist for a variety of different purposes: praying for good luck and blessings, mental and spiritual purification, testing your mettle. There's lots of different customs for the festival, depending on where it is. They run the gamut of everything from a moshpit-fight over



a wooden figurine, a joust between men holding bamboo poles and a water hose, romps through the streets to the local shrine, a king-of-the-rope climb, etc. But nearly all of those festivals involve cold water in some way. And all of them involve being nearly completely sans-apparel...

I've wanted to do this festival for a few years now. But, between that sans-apparel part and the chubby little man who lives in my stomach and very often screams "CHEESEBURGER!!!" at me, I'd been stricken with very acute but temporary case of selective memory around signup time. But this year, my mettle won over my personal cookie monster, and I signed up with some friends to take the plunge.

We showed up on the appointed day, and got our special clothes. That term is funny now when I think about it in context, because "clothes" actually meant a headband, a pendant necklace, a pair of tabi, and the underwear that was around before there was underwear, called *fundoshi*. Anyway, we put on the ceremonial clothes and went out for an adventure in purification.

Aoshima's festival involves a short jog to the beach in front of the local shrine, followed by some warm up exercises to center yourself. Then, you take a double shot of insanity sauce, and wade into the brisk sea water, squat down until the water is up to your neck, and pray/make a wish/meditate/wait until you see the people ahead of you stand up and turn around before you do so you're not the

first (that part is about 2 minutes). Then you get out of the water, go directly to the shrine to pray again, then run past another priest and his cauldron of onsen-temperature water, which he will "bless" you with using a special tree branch. To complete the ceremony, you will then jog to Aoshima's main shopping street, do a pseudo ice-bucket challenge, tag-team some old fashioned mochi pounding, and then head back for a dip in the onsen and some food.

This was a great experience for me. It was cold, then hot, then cold again, then warm and relaxing (onsen for the win). Granted, I did forget to make a wish while I was in the water. But there I was, naked and unashamed, being a part of the local community, and experiencing another part of Japan's rich history and age-old traditions. If you're like me and prefer winter over summer, I recommend you try this festival. If

you're not like me and hate the cold, I still recommend this festival. If not for the community, the adventure, and the overall wonderful experience, do it because participating in this festival is apparently worth 1000 normal, any-other-day, fully-clothed shrine visits. An hour in a *fundoshi* in the middle of winter for a sweet, community-building, friendship-deepening (or starting) adventure, and *kami-sama's* blessing, and +1000 luck points... that's a fair trade in my book.



Image Sources:
Chris Golden

SAPPORO OR BUST: FUN AND ICE UP NORTH

Bailey Jo Josie (Miyazaki)

Even after more than a half century, the Sapporo Snow Festival is still going strong, and this year will be no exception.

As millions (yes, millions) of people flock to its icy fortitude, it's hard to ignore the Sapporo Snow Festival. Though it is well-established to Japanese people, the massive event can still take foreigners and JETs by surprise, myself included.

When I first think of Japan, I don't necessarily think of enormous ice sculptures or even any snow at all. I think of hot and humid summers, of sunshine and cherry blossoms, though it doesn't help that I live on the east coast of Kyushu island, where it took an entire class of students a while to remember the word "snow". Obviously, I am wrong in this, but

nonetheless, when I tell the folks back home about the snow festival, they can't believe it because their mindset is that ice sculptures exist in places like Russia, Norway, Canada, etc. I think maybe it's because of this naïve perspective that the festival in Sapporo is so intriguing.

From the beginning, the festival was a huge surprise. According to the snow festival's website, the very first event was held at Odori Park in 1950, where the local high schoolers made only six sculptures. With the help of the snow sculptures — which included a bear and a person reclining like a model in a baroque painting — and other activities surrounding the festival, over 50,000 people attended the event. It took another couple of years for the rest of the country to catch on to the event, but by 1965, the snow festival

had become so large that a second location was sought after.

Fast forward a couple of years, and the festival was reaching international fame, thanks to the 1972 Winter Olympics held in Sapporo. From here, more sites were added (currently, Odori, Tsudome, and Susukino) and the event has grown into what it is today — a monumental achievement in artistry and ice in the harsh Hokkaido winter.

"I absolutely love all the sculptures and the detail that goes into them," says Lina Orta, a JET alumnus, currently living and working in Sapporo. "For the past couple of years, the festival has added projection mapping to some of the bigger sculptures. These shows are a must-see."





Though I haven't had the pleasure of attending the festival, I would like to see it in the next few years. As I said, I live on Kyushu island, so plane tickets to Hokkaido can be very expensive for me, especially since I would have to pay for two tickets (can't just go have fun in the snow without the husband, you know?) I can find cheap tickets through Google Flights that are below 30,000 yen per person, but that can be a lot if you don't plan properly, and planning is needed when you consider that the Sapporo Snow Festival lasts 12 days with a ton of things to do.

Like what, you ask? Well, at the original Odori site, there will be a skating rink, a jumping platform for amateur and professional skiers and snowboarders, food vendors, and the chance to marvel at 118 different sculptures. Not only will there be

Japanese sculpting teams, but teams from all over the world who participate in the festival; another great reason for JETs to make their way to the event.

"As busy as it gets," Orta said, "I highly recommend going on the first couple of days while the sculptures are still in their prime."

At the Tsudome site, there will be a snow slide, where people can ride inner tubes down a large, snowy hill; a spot for "snow rafting", which is when you ride in a rubber raft that is pulled by a snowmobile; a sled run; a spot to play a hybrid game of soccer and golf named "Mini Snow Foot Golf"; a snow labyrinth, and many more events. Tsudome is geared more towards families and people who want to do more than just look at the sculptures.

The Susukino site is, more or less,

where you can see and touch the ice sculptures and be there as teams actually create them for a grand contest, which you can then vote on. Also, there are a few bars (one had a literal ice entrance last year) and outdoor eating tents where you can warm yourself up with fried food and hot (or cold) drinks before wandering around. This is the site that is geared more towards adults.

The Tsudome site is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. from February 1 to February 12. The Odori and Susukino sites can be visited at any time, but the official activities at these sites run from February 5 until February 12, which is when the entire festival ends. There's no use dawdling though; everything will be destroyed the next morning.



Photo source:
Bailey Jo Josie

ARTS AND CULTURE

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Jack Richardson

No, YOUR house is cold.

ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

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Sabrina Zirakzadeh

The days may be chilly but at least they're getting longer! Come on, spring!

FASHION EDITOR

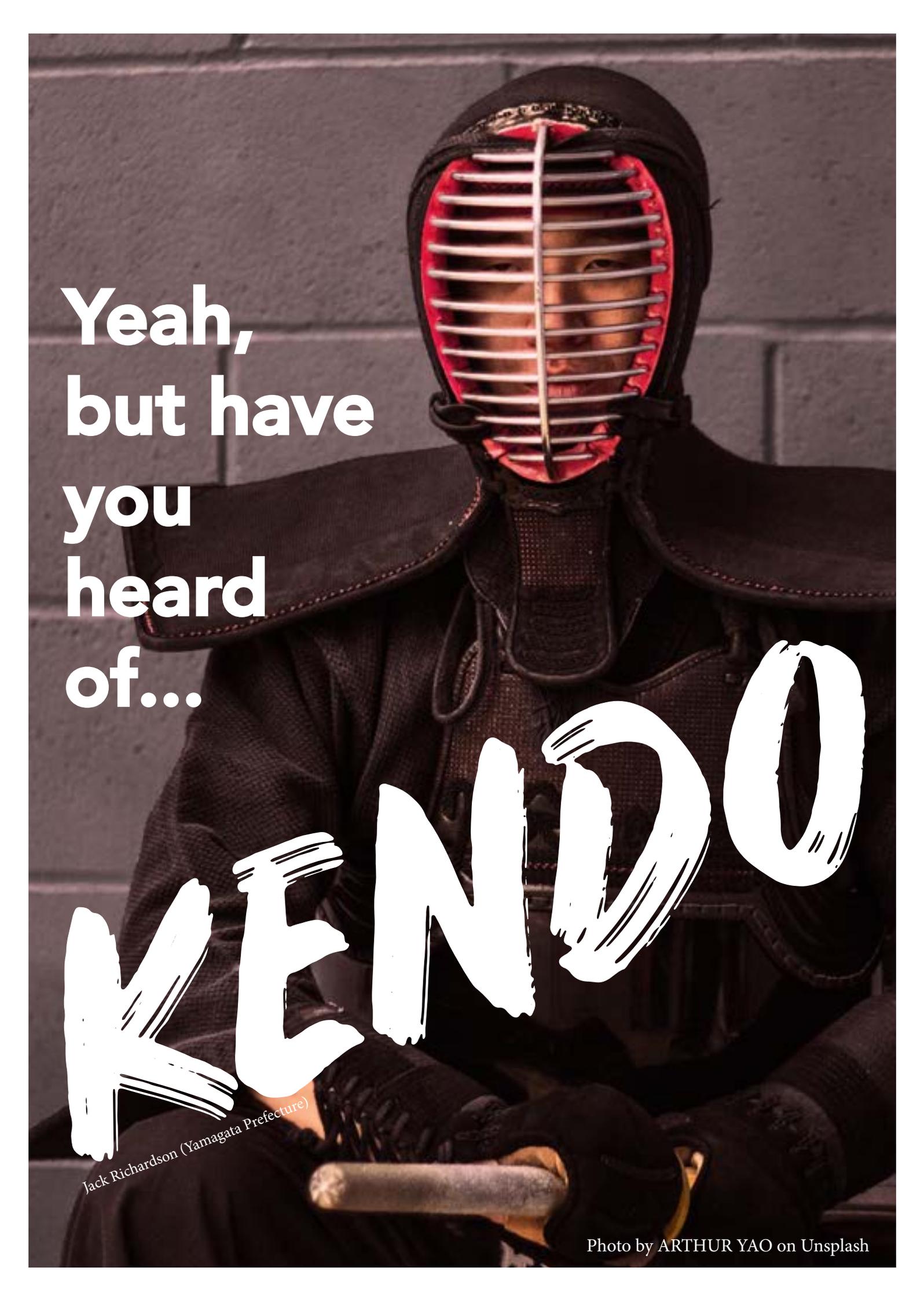
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Abby Ryder-Huth

We're each of us alone, to be sure. What can you do but hold your hand out in the dark? - Ursula Le Guin

Photo: Illaura Rossiter





Yeah,
but have
you
heard
of...

KENDO

Jack Richardson (Yamagata Prefecture)

Photo by ARTHUR YAO on Unsplash

OK, so you probably *have* heard of it. Or, at least, you've probably heard it. Kendo is not renowned for being the quietest or calmest of pursuits. But deep down below all that screaming and hitting and stamping lies a practice that is meditative, disciplined and suited to just about everyone.

It isn't too difficult to work out where kendo has its roots. Swords have been used in Japan since the fourth century, and the training with them is known as *kenjutsu*. That's 'sword art' or 'sword technique' rather than kendo's 'way of the sword,' but kendo isn't on the scene just yet. The first kenjutsu schools still in existence were founded in the Muromachi Period, from 1336-1773. These are the ancestors of kendo, and focus specifically on using swords in war and combat.

Kendo, on the other hand, is, and has always been, a sport that's strongly influenced by its martial art heritage. It's similar to Western fencing in that regard — it has similar techniques, vocabulary and history, but no-one practices fencing so they can learn to skewer opposing noblemen with rapiers. As such, kendo adds formality and rules on top of already very formalised samurai duelling, as well as armour and swords that won't slice you in half.

There are two sides to kendo as it's practiced today. One is *kata* ('forms'). Kata are common in many martial arts, and in kendo are practiced without full armour using solid wooden swords called *bokken*, which are meant to imitate katana. It's based on *kenjutsu* techniques, and as such has a wider range of movements and techniques that simply aren't used in regular kendo. Kata are always practiced in pairs, with a person each taking the student and teacher roles. Plot twist: the teacher always loses, but this is so the student can learn. As with other martial arts, the 12 kata are strictly defined, and are graded on how well they follow the form. It's something to be practiced over and over again until it enters muscle memory.

'Regular' kendo — in my club we called it *shiai* ('match') practice — is still practiced in pairs, but using the armour that you can probably picture even if you don't know it as kendo *bōgu*. It's the stuff that makes you look like a terrifying samurai Darth

Vader until you trip and then you turn into an adorable robot thing in a dress and mittens.

Instead of solid wooden *bokken*, which can and do break ribs, kendoka use *shinai* — straight swords made of four bamboo slats that are designed to absorb the impact, and leave only bruises if your opponent misses their target. Both of these are attributed to Naganuma Shirōzaemon Kunisato who developed them in the early 18th Century, but the last three hundred years have seen a great deal of development in both. For example, after about 20 years someone decided it might be a good idea to have a grille covering the person's face, rather than just a piece of stiffened cloth for a helmet.

Where does all this practice come out, then? Well, in the absence of early-modern warfare in which to participate, kendo as a sport is played in matches between two people in a square arena, judged by three referees. The first to two points (or with the most points when time runs out) is the winner, and matches tend to last up to five minutes. You can score points in four areas: *men* (head), *kote* (wrists), *dō* (body) and *tsuki* (throat). There's a whole shopping list of things that must be done to actually score a point, but the important ones are stamping with the cut, shouting where you're hitting as you hit, and running past the opponent to create space after your cut. This last one, called *zanshin*, comes from the idea that, if your cut failed to kill your opponent, it's far safer to be ten feet away from them when they try to counterattack than standing right in front of them with a blank look on your face.

Kendo is a sport that's both dynamic and repetitive at the same time. You train for hours and hours, slowly making your movements more and more efficient just so you can shave an extra millisecond off your strike when the moment comes. Adapting to this mindset and realising that you're here to perfect a few simple techniques rather than build a vast repertoire of ways to hurt people can be tough. It forces you to stay (relatively) humble, especially when you're being demolished by a tiny old lady in her 70s. But you can come for the shouting, too, I suppose.

Back and there

Christmas and New Year have come and gone, while many JETs have done the opposite. Here, five such people share their experience of returning to Japan after a well-deserved break back home, and what they thought of the culture the second (or more) time around.

Going home for a holiday is wonderful. You can fill your days with all the things you can't find in Japan — pints of cider (alcoholic obviously), pubs, edible bread, actual cheese and the non-pixelated real-life versions of family and friends. Yet it is also disorientating. I found that my life in Japan seemed very far away, like I had just returned from a long holiday and now I was home for good. In some ways I found leaving a second time more difficult than the first. So, on that note, here are some words of wisdom from an (in)experienced JET.

First, plan some things to look forward to in Japan on your return. Going from a busy holiday where I was almost never alone, to a rather chilly one-person apartment, was a culture shock in and of itself. You may need to remind yourself that the future in Japan is as bright as the places you left behind. Second, as efficient as it might seem to arrive back in Japan the day before work starts, take heed. If you are anything like me, next morning you will spend a good half an hour frantically attacking two weeks' worth of snow on your car, wearing the (unironed) suit you think you could possibly need for an opening ceremony and racing into the staffroom 1 minute before morning meeting. There will be no food in the house so you will spend the rest of the day in a half-starved, bleary-eyed daze as you desperately try to concentrate on all the lesson planning that you haven't done for that week and avoid eating the *omiyage* you bought. Which brings us me to my final message. Omiyage is a great tradition and your teachers will love you for it but my God is it heavy. Pack light on the way out or be prepared to woo some airline attendants on your way back.

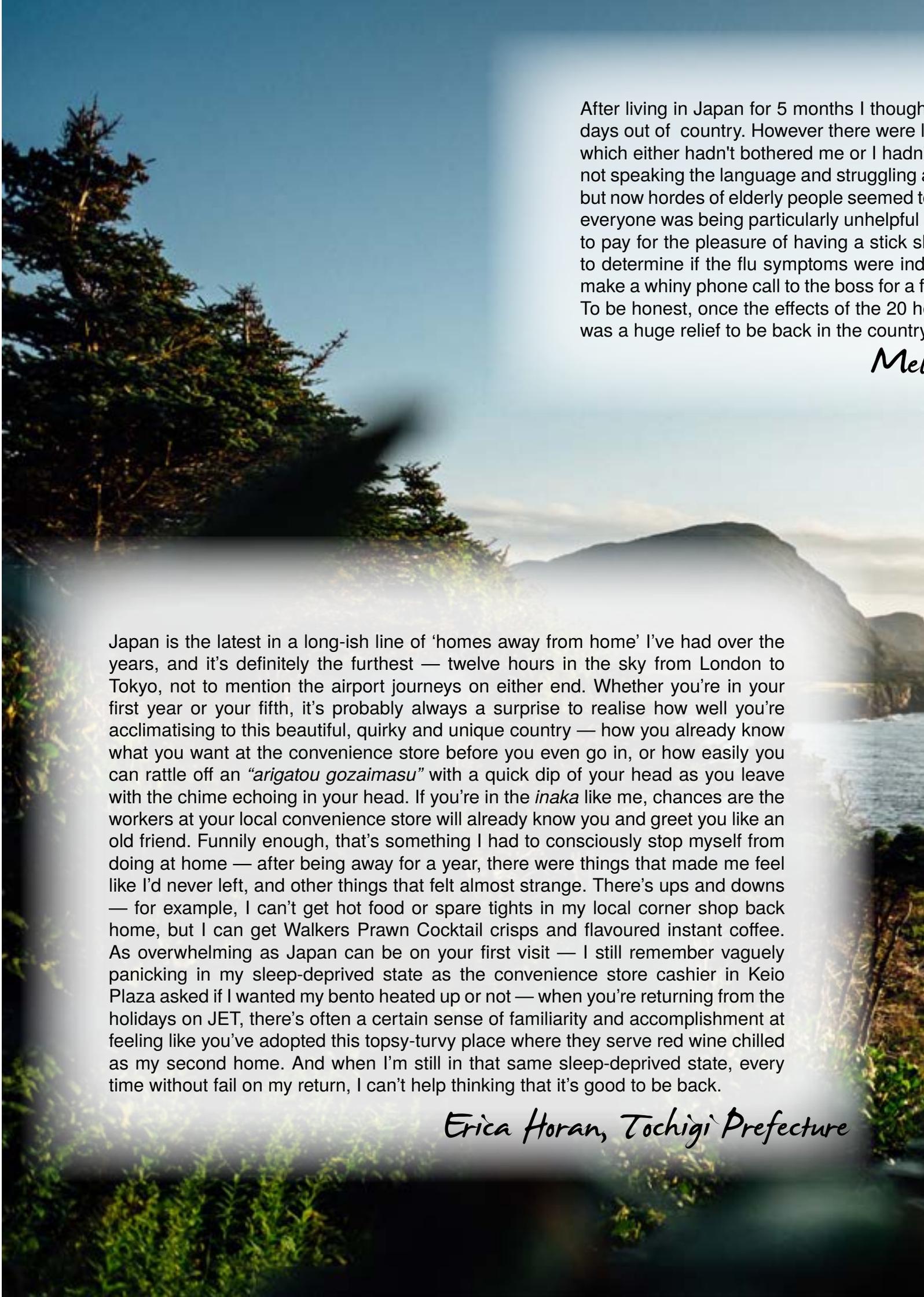
Georgia Latham, Yamagata Prefecture

e again

Returning to Japan after 10 days of fish and chips, sausage sarnies with lashings of HP sauce and real, sour-sweet, cloudy cider in a beamy Essex country pub, my hungers and thirsts for British grub were well and truly satisfied. They say you are what you eat. It's true. I landed in Narita airport, a crispy roast potato dripping in beef gravy.

It felt like an odyssey of a journey from London, and with an extra bag of Christmas goodies from family in hand, I was fearful that I was going to have to sell a kidney to afford the additional luggage I hadn't declared when booking my domestic plane ticket. I've heard horror stories about the same predicament with EasyJet and Ryanair at home. You can imagine the gobsmacked look on my face when the kind human being behind the counter checked it in without me having to pay a penny to get it back to my home from home in Hokkaido. I was greeted back to Japan by grinning staff and overwhelmingly helpful people, something the British customer service industry isn't exactly world renowned for.

Max Turner, Hokkaido Prefecture

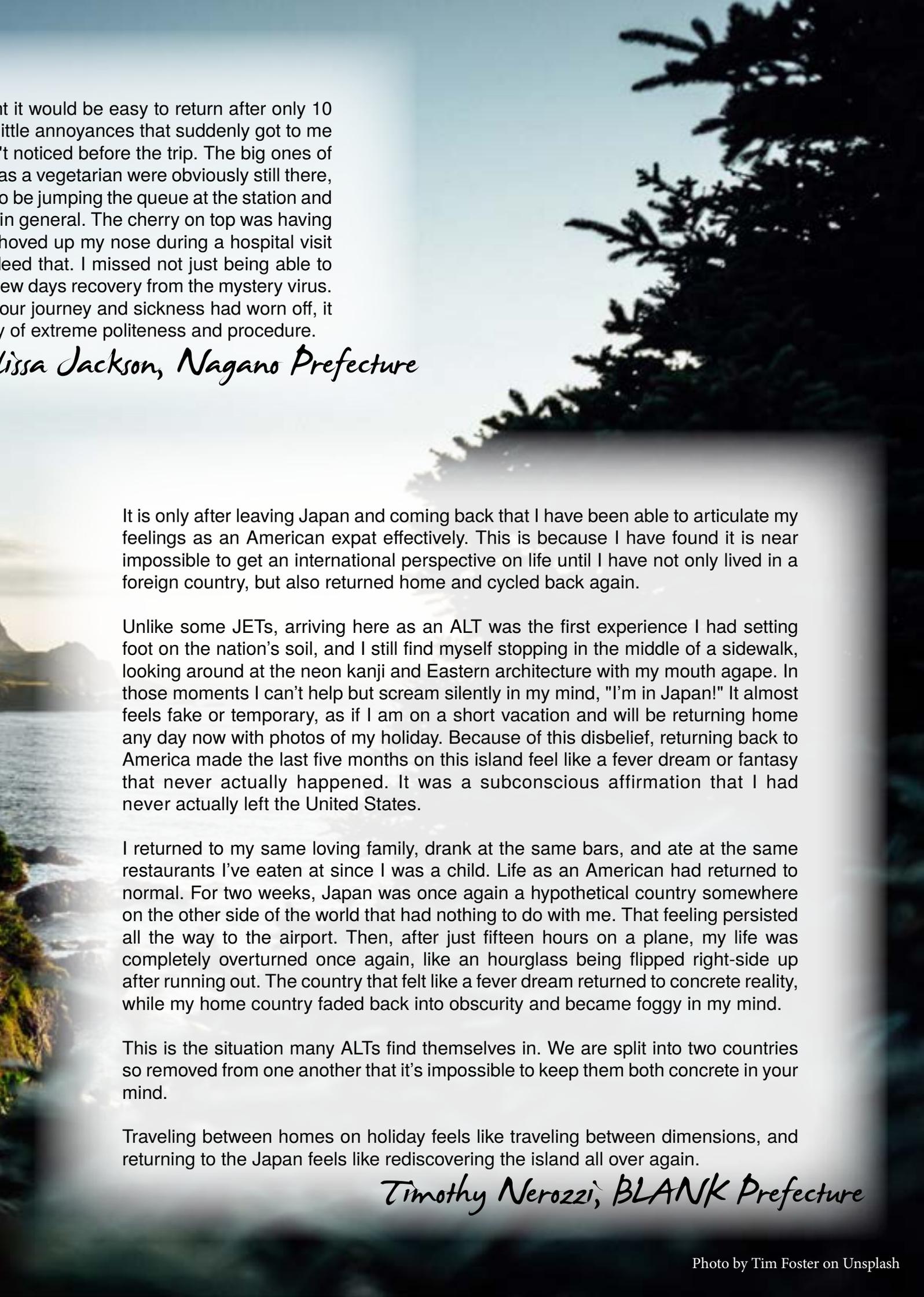


After living in Japan for 5 months I thought I was missing days out of country. However there were things I missed which either hadn't bothered me or I hadn't noticed, but now hordes of elderly people seemed to be missing and everyone was being particularly unhelpful. I had to pay for the pleasure of having a stick sniff test to determine if the flu symptoms were indeed the flu. To be honest, once the effects of the 20 h... was a huge relief to be back in the country.

Me

Japan is the latest in a long-ish line of 'homes away from home' I've had over the years, and it's definitely the furthest — twelve hours in the sky from London to Tokyo, not to mention the airport journeys on either end. Whether you're in your first year or your fifth, it's probably always a surprise to realise how well you're acclimatising to this beautiful, quirky and unique country — how you already know what you want at the convenience store before you even go in, or how easily you can rattle off an "*arigatou gozaimasu*" with a quick dip of your head as you leave with the chime echoing in your head. If you're in the *inaka* like me, chances are the workers at your local convenience store will already know you and greet you like an old friend. Funnily enough, that's something I had to consciously stop myself from doing at home — after being away for a year, there were things that made me feel like I'd never left, and other things that felt almost strange. There's ups and downs — for example, I can't get hot food or spare tights in my local corner shop back home, but I can get Walkers Prawn Cocktail crisps and flavoured instant coffee. As overwhelming as Japan can be on your first visit — I still remember vaguely panicking in my sleep-deprived state as the convenience store cashier in Keio Plaza asked if I wanted my bento heated up or not — when you're returning from the holidays on JET, there's often a certain sense of familiarity and accomplishment at feeling like you've adopted this topsy-turvy place where they serve red wine chilled as my second home. And when I'm still in that same sleep-deprived state, every time without fail on my return, I can't help thinking that it's good to be back.

Erica Horan, Tochigi Prefecture



at it would be easy to return after only 10
little annoyances that suddenly got to me
't noticed before the trip. The big ones of
as a vegetarian were obviously still there,
to be jumping the queue at the station and
in general. The cherry on top was having
hoved up my nose during a hospital visit
eed that. I missed not just being able to
ew days recovery from the mystery virus.
our journey and sickness had worn off, it
y of extreme politeness and procedure.

Lissa Jackson, Nagano Prefecture

It is only after leaving Japan and coming back that I have been able to articulate my feelings as an American expat effectively. This is because I have found it is near impossible to get an international perspective on life until I have not only lived in a foreign country, but also returned home and cycled back again.

Unlike some JETs, arriving here as an ALT was the first experience I had setting foot on the nation's soil, and I still find myself stopping in the middle of a sidewalk, looking around at the neon kanji and Eastern architecture with my mouth agape. In those moments I can't help but scream silently in my mind, "I'm in Japan!" It almost feels fake or temporary, as if I am on a short vacation and will be returning home any day now with photos of my holiday. Because of this disbelief, returning back to America made the last five months on this island feel like a fever dream or fantasy that never actually happened. It was a subconscious affirmation that I had never actually left the United States.

I returned to my same loving family, drank at the same bars, and ate at the same restaurants I've eaten at since I was a child. Life as an American had returned to normal. For two weeks, Japan was once again a hypothetical country somewhere on the other side of the world that had nothing to do with me. That feeling persisted all the way to the airport. Then, after just fifteen hours on a plane, my life was completely overturned once again, like an hourglass being flipped right-side up after running out. The country that felt like a fever dream returned to concrete reality, while my home country faded back into obscurity and became foggy in my mind.

This is the situation many ALTs find themselves in. We are split into two countries so removed from one another that it's impossible to keep them both concrete in your mind.

Traveling between homes on holiday feels like traveling between dimensions, and returning to the Japan feels like rediscovering the island all over again.

Timothy Nerozzi, BLANK Prefecture

Indigo Dyeing Studio Kosoen: JAPANESE TEXTILES JUST OUTSIDE OF TOKYO

Jessica Craven (Saitama)



Dried indigo leaves after fermentation, but before being made into dye. Rolls of dyed indigo fabric. You can really see how thin the lines are, which Mr. Murata says is characteristic of Japanese design.

Some of Japan's oldest surviving textiles, dating from the 8th century Nara period, are contained at Tokyo National Museum's Gallery of Horyuji Treasures. The collection primarily contains *ban*, or Buddhist ritual banners, from this era. Even though these early designs are rather simple, if you look closely, you can already discern the intricate attention to detail and craftsmanship that is characteristic of other Japanese products, such as its renowned stationary. While the designs consist of only one color, very delicate and complex textural patterns are skillfully weaved into the fabric.

Until now, I had admittedly never really thought much about Japanese textiles. Like most foreigners (and perhaps even some Japanese

people), I only ever really thought of kimonos when I thought of traditional Japanese textiles. And while many pieces of kimono-inspired contemporary clothing are made today, they are scarcely designed with the same level of craftsmanship and elegance that the traditional kimono are. For the most part, even clothing inspired by traditional Japanese fashion are made in a factory. This led me to wonder... aside from kimono, are there any traditional textile techniques that are being preserved in Japan today, and are they being modernized to suit contemporary taste and practical wear?

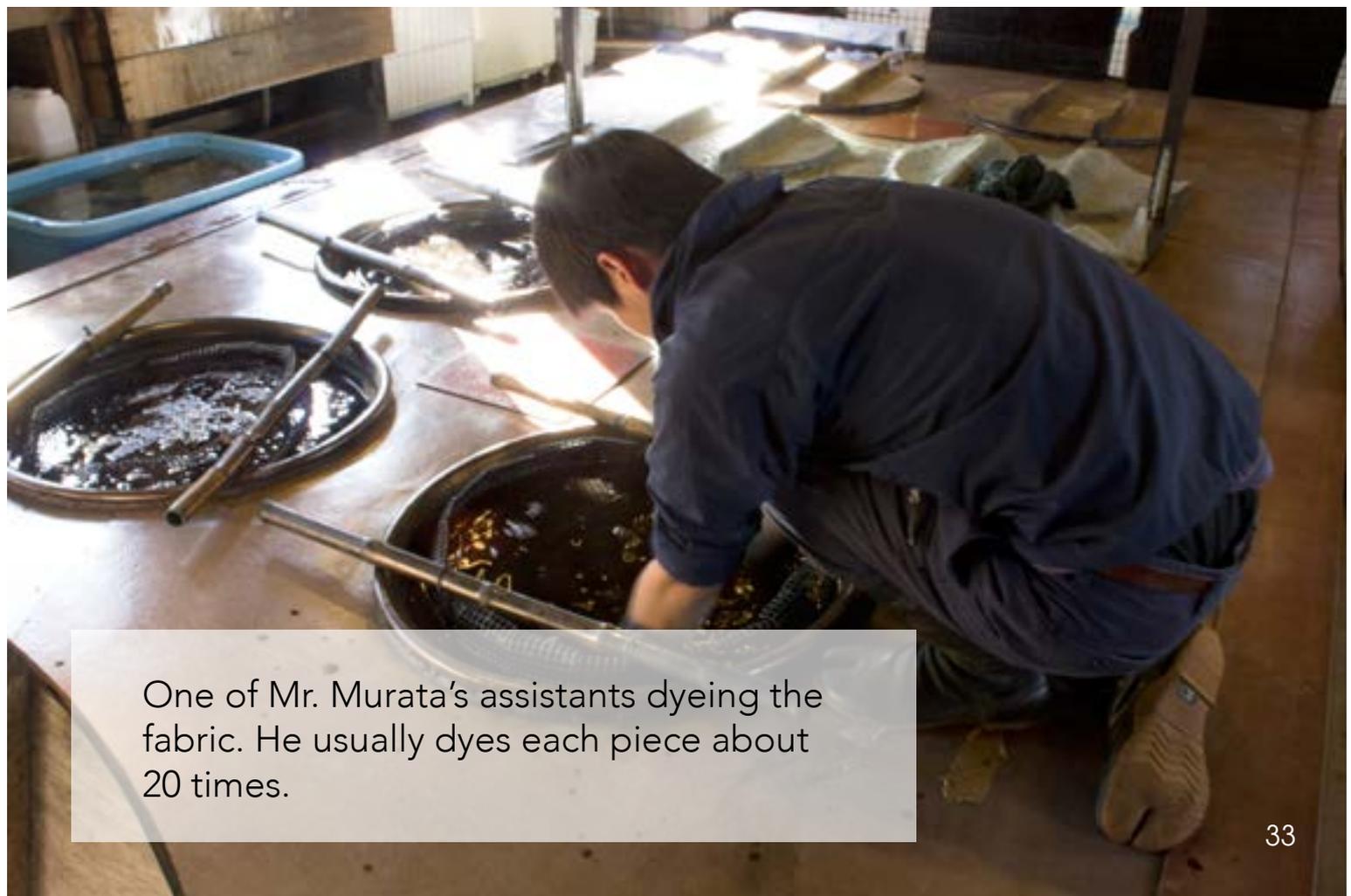
Although some unique weaving practices are still thriving in Japan, what really continues to flourish and evolve in the textile industry

is a variety of dyeing techniques with long histories. One of the most significant of these is indigo dyeing. Indigo dyeing is something that is literally everywhere and we almost never think about it—even in blue jeans (although these are practically all chemically and mechanically dyed now). One of the most accomplished traditional indigo dyeing studios still in existence today is Hiroshi Murata's Indigo Dyeing Studio Kosoen.

Mr. Murata was kind enough to let me interview him and take a tour of his studio in Ome City, a beautiful place, with dedicated craftsmen at work and the sunlight dappling in. I was able to ask him many questions about the history of indigo dyeing or *aozome*, its process, and its future.



Recently dyed clothing drying just outside of Studio Kosoen.



One of Mr. Murata's assistants dyeing the fabric. He usually dyes each piece about 20 times.

A photograph of an elderly man with glasses, Mr. Murata, standing in a clothing store. He is wearing a dark blue jacket over a grey shirt. Behind him are racks of clothing, including several dark blue shirts. The store has wooden paneling and bright lighting from windows in the background.

Mr. Murata's thoughtfulness about his craft is always present in his demeanor. He is obviously very passionate about what he does.

Jessica Craven: *What is Ome City's history with aozome?*

Hiroshi Murata: Textile production has prospered in this area since the 13th century, including the introduction of traditional indigo dyeing during the Edo period (when the process first began in Japan). Demand for textiles, such as beddings, skyrocketed in the post-war period, and Ome City provided close to 50% of the national demand. This studio, which was established in 1919, greatly contributed to that. I inherited the family business in its third generation, and still continue the tradition of indigo dying today. Since inexpensive textile imports have increased dramatically, hundreds of companies have abandoned this practice, so Kosoen is one of the only studios of its kind today, and the only one left in Ome that still uses a completely traditional process. Kosoen uses indigo leaves that are grown and fermented traditionally in Kochi prefecture.

JC: *So indigo dyeing began in India and spread to many other countries, right? What sets Japanese indigo dyeing apart?*

HM: My studio utilizes more thin lines and delicate patterns. Also the exact fermentation process has evolved differently in Japan, and this results in a unique shade of blue. It involves two different and separate fermentation processes. The first is the process of making indigo leaves into *sukumo*, which is the raw material that is made into dye. The second fermentation transforms *sukumo* into indigo dye. Then the actual fabrics are dyed using many techniques similar to the ones in *ukiyo-e*. The process from start to finish takes several years, but the dyeing itself takes much less time, although with careful attention to detail.

JC: *What inspired you to continue the indigo dyeing tradition?*

HM: As I said, I inherited my family business, but actually I changed it dramatically in 1989. I was

convinced that only a return to the quality of Edo-period indigo dyeing would allow our business to continue to prosper under fierce competition from cheap imports. So, we went to Tokushima prefecture to learn traditional indigo dyeing techniques. I wanted to revive these refined techniques and make them known to the rest of the world.

JC: *What are you doing to modernize indigo dyeing and make it appealing to people today?*

HM: One appeal is our use of only natural techniques. Our products are completely devoid of harmful chemicals, so they are good for the environment and the people who wear them. There has also been renewed interest in the revival of traditional craftsmanship in Japan. When we first revitalized our business in 1989, our sales were small, so we only made small things like table centers, coasters, and other interior household items. However, about ten years ago we gained more popularity and begun dyeing and designing clothing, so that gives us ample opportunity to both continue traditional designs and modernize them by dyeing more contemporary style clothing.

Mr. Murata's indigo dyeing studio Kosoen has certainly gained commercial success, receiving a significant number of overseas orders and more foreign visitors than ever before. He has even received invitations to exhibit in Germany and Canada, as well as to sell products at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In spite of this, his studio was featured in "The Wonder 500," a list of certified products selected to be "local products that are the pride and joy of Japan but not yet known outside of Japan." Let's change that! Mr. Murata's passion for his craft allows him to create astonishingly beautiful works of art, so please check them out online at <http://kosoen.com>, if only to gain a deeper appreciation for the art of indigo dyeing!

Jessica Craven is an ALT in Saitama prefecture. She has degrees in both visual art and Japanese, so she enjoys exploring the contemporary art scene in Japan.

Come on over to CC

The second ever Tokyo Comic-Con took place from December 1st-3rd, 2017, at Chiba's Makuhari Messe convention center.

Japanese fans and expats alike from across the country arrived in droves to celebrate their love of Western comics, science-fiction, and fantasy series.



Special guest appearances included the legendary Stan Lee, creator of Marvel Comics' *X-Men* and *Spider-Man*, who is largely credited for his role in helping bring Comic-Con to Japan in the first place.

Not one to be outdone, DC Comics also arrived in full force to promote their newest film *Justice League*, released in Japan on November 20th



last year. Both studios brought incredible exhibits for fans to gawk at as well (including the real Batman suit from *The Dark Knight*). The event was a rousing success, with staff proclaiming that the attendee list exceeded 50,000 people over the span of three days. While this is certainly an

impressive turnout, the hall never felt overcrowded and navigation was a breeze, which was a significant benefit.

To generate excitement for the latest *Star Wars* film, *The Last Jedi*, which opened worldwide on December 15th, 2017, much of the show's programming during the exhibition was dedicated to *Star Wars* memorabilia (including a life-size replica of the famous Millennium Falcon). A wide variety of hobby shops and retailers also had booths offering goods and merchandise unavailable elsewhere. *Star Wars* has been a cultural phenomenon since its inception in 1977 and has always made up a significant chunk of the pop culture fandom. Creator George Lucas admitted he was heavily inspired by Akira Kurosawa's samurai films when he first penned the script, helping the film evoke familiar themes and characters that a Japanese audience could easily relate to. Attendees were also encouraged to dress up as their favorite characters for the *Star Wars* Cosplay Show, which took place on the second day of the event.

Cosplay remained the central focus of the event throughout the weekend. While Japan has several major fan conventions such as Comiket and Anime Game Show typically feature costumed characters, Tokyo Comic-Con was almost entirely dominated by cosplay from Western properties. In addition, the event gave the event more of an international feel. Attendees were also treated to a cosplay show and group photo sessions, where they could witness the best and brightest costumes the fans had to offer.

In addition to cosplay events, several guests of honor from overseas were invited to partake in the show's programming on the main



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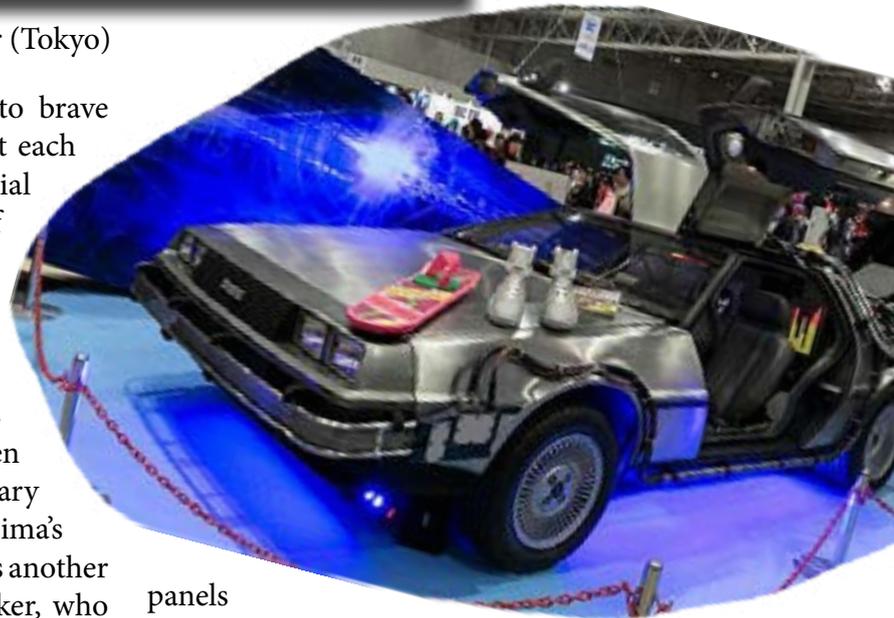
Chad Grover (Tokyo)

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stage. Those who were patient enough to brave the long line also had the chance to meet each celebrity and receive their autograph. Special guests included actors Karl Urban, of *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek* fame, and Nathan Fillion from the cult-classic television series *Firefly*. Mads Mikkelsen, who garnered critical acclaim for his role as Dr. Hannibal Lecter in television's *Hannibal*, was also present. Mikkelsen recently landed a lead role in legendary Japanese video game designer Hideo Kojima's upcoming title *Death Stranding*, giving fans another reason to be excited. Actor Michael Rooker, who played Yondu in Marvel Studios' *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise, was greeted by a number of fans in attendance cosplaying as the colorful outlaw.

One slight drawback, most of the event's programming was conducted in Japanese. In other words, if you weren't proficient in the language, understanding what presenters were saying might have posed a challenge, dampening accessibility for foreigners somewhat. Also, compared to its Western counterparts, Tokyo Comic-Con is not as eventful a convention as the others. Most people who attend Comic-Con in San Diego, California have a variety of options for how to spend their time. Whether you enjoy a particular niche show or are looking forward to the next big summer blockbuster, you can attend a panel of your favorite celebrities to ask them funny questions, hear embarrassing stories and so on; however, this is not yet the case for Tokyo Comic-Con. A great way for the convention to address this next year would be to fly more special guests out to create



panels filled with people who share a common thread, beyond autograph sessions and main stage programming.

Despite this, Tokyo Comic-Con enjoyed considerable success for a convention still in its infancy. The number of attendees increased by sixty percent over its inaugural year in 2016, and its celebrities list was similarly bolstered. Is it worth making a trip across the country to attend? Not yet — but given the show's rapid growth in one year, there may come a time when it's worth every penny. Tokyo Comic-Con 2018 is currently scheduled for November 30th through December 2nd. If you are a diehard fan of comics and science fiction (or just really enjoy cosplay), and are within the Greater Tokyo Area, you owe it to yourself to check out Tokyo Comic-Con when it returns at the end of the year.

Chad Grover is a 4th Year JET rockin' the suburbs in Tokyo. He thought Star Wars: The Last Jedi was one of the best movies released in 2017. You can argue with him over this claim on his [Twitter](#).

Photos by Chad Grover



COOL WONDER

WHAT'S NEW AT UNIVERSAL

It's that time of year again: the moment that puts the "Japan" in Universal's well-known, in 2015 the theme park decided to launch an event to fill with extravaganzas, one with a decidedly regional spin. Every year since, Universal's initial January-March run was expanded to January-June, yet the crowd has seen four key pieces of Japanese pop culture every year in the form of rides, as exciting as the previous three years. In fact, USJ has some special surprises

Promotional image for Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon: The Miracle 4D



Promotional image for Monster Hunter: The Real



JAPAN ERLAND

STUDIOS' COOL JAPAN 2018

Sabrina Zirakzadeh (Osaka)

iversal Studios Japan. While USJ's limited-time event attractions are l the awkward time between its holiday illuminations and the summer niversal Cool Japan has been a major attraction, one so successful that owsds are still overwhelming. Universal Cool Japan puts the spotlight on 4D attractions, escape games, and more, and 2018 looks to be just as orises in store!

The History of Universal Cool Japan

In 2015, the first Universal Cool Japan event focused on four major pieces of Japanese popular culture: the *Monster Hunter* and *Biohazard* (*Resident Evil* in the West) video game franchises, the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and the then-new media juggernaut of *Attack on Titan*. Each had a single unique attraction with some themed merchandise available, with the *Attack on Titan* area even having a themed food truck. *Monster Hunter* used a 4D adventure ride format, *Evangelion* received a 4D movie experience, *Biohazard* debuted its first puzzle-themed escape game, and *Attack on Titan* had — well, a let-down. While the first three attractions were popular and enjoyed by many, the walk-through, big-screen recap of key scenes from the anime coupled with a few live action set pieces, and a chance for photos with life-sized statues of some of the lead characters were generally seen to be far from worth the average three hour wait time just to get tickets for the *Attack on Titan* area. Luckily, the free photos that fans could take with the giant Titans set up around the Cool Japan area had much shorter waits, and were a big enough hit that they were brought back in 2016 as well.

The second year was much the same as the first, but with the addition of a fifth attraction, the Kyary Pamyu-Pamyu XD Ride. In addition, the *Attack on Titan* experience was upgraded to a virtual adventure ride, which was still less popular than the other three attractions but got much better reviews. 2017 saw a major overhaul with: *Attack on Titan* finally giving fans a chance to fight (and get eaten by) Titans in a virtual 4D adventure ride, new photo spots and statues going up; *Monster Hunter* getting an upgrade to build hype for the new Nintendo Switch games; Kyary Pamyu-Pamyu being replaced with a 4D rollercoaster for *Godzilla*; and *Biohazard* bowing out to debut an incredibly successful *Detective Conan* escape room, complete with minor interaction with cast members in the mystery and a new themed food truck.

However, in 2017 the numbers for Cool Japan dropped a bit compared with previous years. This may have been due to the opening of the new Minions park at USJ, but this year, Cool Japan is taking no chances and is ready to strike a chord with all new fans of Japanese pop culture!

Photo by Jeremy Thomas on Unsplash



COOL WONDI

WHAT'S NEW AT UNIVERSAL

The 2018 Attractions

While numbers may have declined overall in 2017, the attendance for the *Detective Conan* experience surpassed that of the *Biohazard* escape. Perhaps it was due to being more family-friendly, or maybe being a detective lends itself to more immersive puzzles than Raccoon City Studios. Whatever the reason, the *Detective Conan* escape will be back with new puzzles, new story, expanded challenges, and a full themed restaurant this year. Whether you know the story or not, this is a must-see for mystery fans and adrenaline junkies alike.

For video game fans, *Monster Hunter: The Real* will continue to run, but with new graphics and layouts related to the *Monster Hunter World* game and a streamlined waiting system to combat increasing crowd congestion. In addition, this year will see Cool Japan's first-ever *Final Fantasy* event, using USJ's popular XR virtual roller coaster to immerse fans in the world of Midgar and *Final Fantasy VII*. This is probably the main attraction for this year's Cool Japan event, so be sure to get advance timed tickets or be prepared for long lines to get in.

The biggest change will be the fourth focus. All previous Cool Japan events catered heavily toward *shounen* fandoms. This year, however, Cool Japan is debuting its first *shoujo* attraction — and halfway through the event! Beginning on March 16th, the *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon: The Miracle* 4D attraction will open, giving magical girl fans of all ages the chance to join the Sailor Senshi in their battles against evil. Having an event themed around a “girl” series, especially one premiering partway through Cool Japan, may seem risky, but USJ cut back on additional attractions to make sure this 4D event (and the other Cool Japan features) get all of the focus and skill of the park's designers and performers to give guests the best experience possible.

So, what are you waiting for? If you've never been to Universal Studios Japan, now is the perfect time to go, and even if you've been before, this limited, revamped event is still worth checking out. Get your geek on, join other Japanophiles from around the world, and head over to Universal Cool Japan while you can!

Universal Cool Japan is held in Osaka from January 19th-June 24th, 2018.

JAPAN ERLAND

STUDIOS' COOL JAPAN 2018

Promotional Image for Detective Conan: The World



Promotional image for Final Fantasy XR Ride





MOVIES

1 Feb. *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (Crime Drama): Starring Frances McDormand, Woody Harrelson, and Sam Rockwell

16 Feb. *The Greatest Showman* (Musical Biography): Starring Hugh Jackman, Michelle Williams, and Zac Efron

23 Feb. *The Big Sick* (Romantic Comedy): Written by Kumail Nanjiani, starring Kumail Nanjiani, Zoe Kazan, and Holly Hunter

MUSIC

7 Feb. *Candy Pop*, TWICE (K-Pop)

10 Feb. The 69th Sapporo Snow Festival 10th K-POP FESTIVAL — Sapporo City, Hokkaido (K-Pop)

13-14, 27 Feb. UVERworld Live— Sapporo City, Hokkaido, and Tokyo (Pop/Rock)

21 Feb. *Find The Answer*, Arashi (Idol Pop)

26-27 Feb. Mogwai Japan National Tour — Tokyo and Osaka City, Osaka (Indie Rock)

FEBRUARY RELEASES

Sabrina Zirakzadeh (Osaka)

In need of entertainment? Each month, *CONNECT* brings you the latest information on upcoming releases and events in Japan. Here is the most anticipated entertainment for February!

GAMES

1 Feb. *Dragon Ball Fighter Z* on Playstation 4, Xbox One, and PC (Fighting)

8 Feb. *Dynasty Warriors 9* on Playstation 4 (Fighting Platformer)

21 Feb. *Metal Gear Survive* on Playstation 4, Xbox One, and PC (Action-Adventure Survival)

OTHER

7 Feb.-April 8. Cirque du Soleil Presents *Kurios* — Tokyo (Circus)

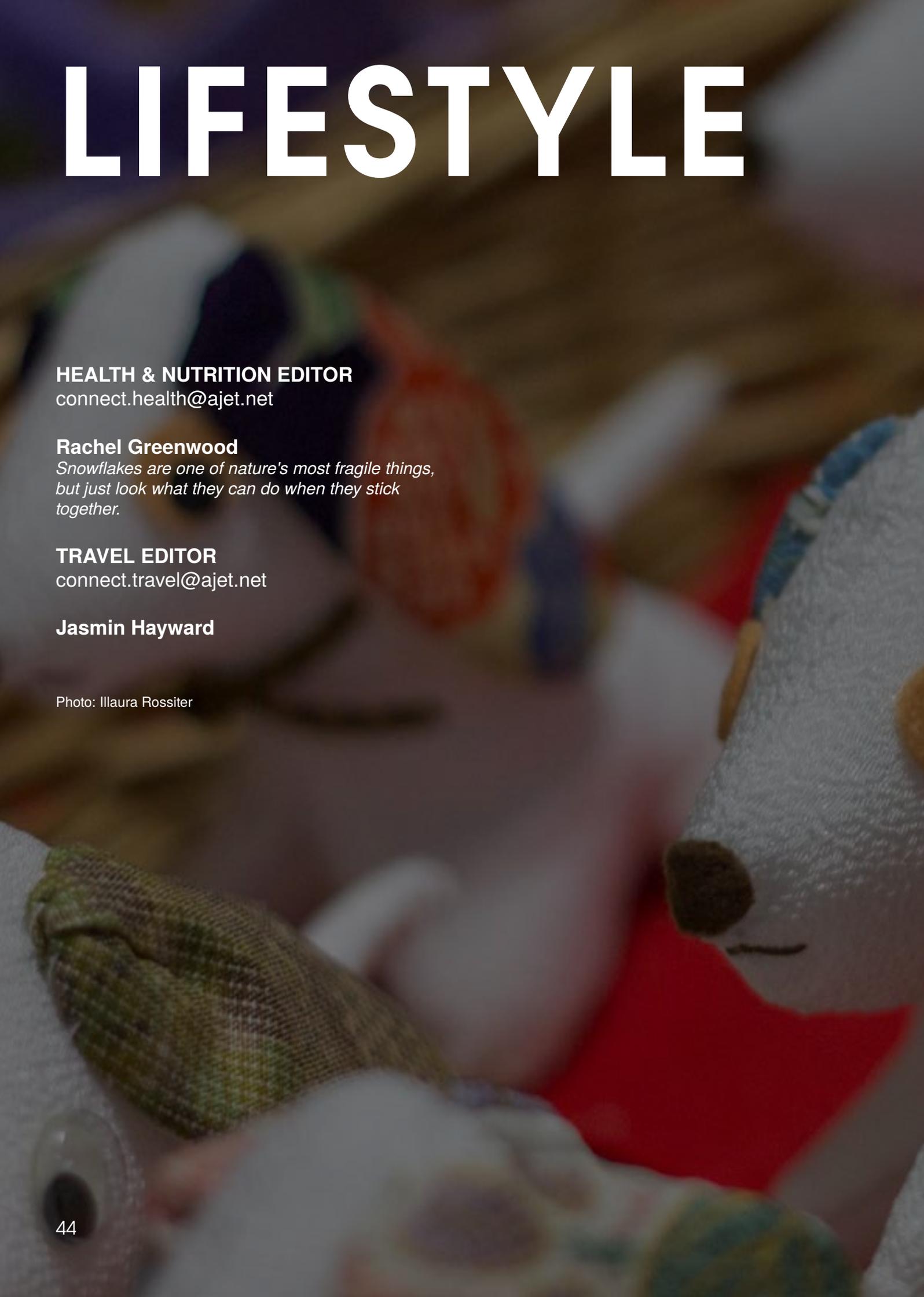
10 Feb. Fuji Xerox Super Cup 2018 — Saitama City, Saitama (Soccer Tournament Cup)

16 Feb.-25 March *The Poe Clan* — Tokyo (Gothic Musical)

Sources:

1. <http://imdb.to/1DZWXgA>
2. <http://bit.ly/MxVjLD>
3. <http://bit.ly/2aVRGOE>

LIFESTYLE



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Rachel Greenwood

Snowflakes are one of nature's most fragile things, but just look what they can do when they stick together.

TRAVEL EDITOR

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Jasmin Hayward

Photo: Illaura Rossiter



Coconut Curry

Montana Malarkey-Kessler (Kyoto)



Vegetables

Onions, carrots, bell peppers, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, broccoli, broccolini, celery, mushrooms, squash, pumpkin, snow peas, cauliflower, spinach, kale, chickpeas, green peas, green beans, lentils, eggplant, etc.
Anything you've got!

Spices/Seasonings

Curry powder, turmeric, coriander, cardamom, salt, pepper, chilli/sriracha, alcohol (white wine or mirin) for basic curry; garlic, ginger, lemon/lime, tamarind, fish sauce, red/yellow/green curry paste for fancier versions.

Base

Coconut milk, veggie broth/stock, water.

Protein

Chicken, tofu, fish/shellfish.

Method

1. Sauté onions, carrots, peppers, garlic (all your aromatics!) and let sweat.
2. Deglaze with alcohol, and add tomatoes and spices once water is released. Mix.
3. Add coconut milk and chilli/sriracha. Season to taste and add other veggies (if using leafy greens, do not add yet).
4. Bring to a boil.
5. Reduce to simmer once veggies are cooked. Add a splash of alcohol and season to taste (if using leafy greens add now, serve when they have wilted to your liking).

- * For a lighter curry, cut coconut milk with broth or water (1 to 1)
- * If using protein, fry in the same pan, remove, and deglaze before Step 1, and re-add in Step 5
- * For hot & sour, use chilli & tamarind paste
- * For fancy serving, garnish with lemon or lime wedge and cilantro

Photos: Rachel Greenwood, Wikicommons



Gynecology in Japan - J

Anonymous

The Chair: Take a seat – the chair spins 45 degrees to face the doctor hiding behind a curtain. As it moves, it also rises to put you at the right height for comfortable viewing. The stirrup legs part, and on the left, the bottom part of the seat drops away.



“Just take a deep breath and relax for me, please.”

I complied; I inhaled and fixed my gaze firmly on the featureless slate of plastered ceiling above my head. My first thought was they should post a picture or something up there as a form of distraction. My second was that my left ankle was very itchy, but there wasn't much to do about it now that my feet were firmly hoisted up above my head in stirrups, legs splayed apart and completely at the mercy of the doctor peering at my vagina. At least, I was fairly certain she was peering at it, a bit hard to tell from that angle.

Like most sexually active women in their mid-twenties, I'm no stranger to trips to the gynecologist. I'd done visits before in my home country, Australia, though as someone who gets anxious over the most basic of tasks on a good day, the concept of going through the whole shebang in a foreign country, in a foreign language, on my own and for the first time seemed about as pleasant as drinking laundry detergent.

I wish from the bottom of my heart that my visit had been just a regular check up, though I would have gladly sat through ten pap smears, complete with someone giving a running commentary on them to an audience, over my actual circumstances.

But before I go into that, let's wind back up to my first visit to the gynecologist in Japan, around 18 months earlier.

I'll be honest, I wasn't expecting much from my first visit.

I'd done all the online reading I could before my first visit, and seen all the horror stories and pieces. You know, the ones about how Japanese sex education is sadly decades behind the rest of modern civilization. That the doctors tend to be cold, critical, and not very forthcoming with information. And, of course, the common belief that contraceptive methods more extravagant than condoms either come with a lot of social stigma or just aren't widely available.

So my first visit to a ladies' clinic recommended to me by my neighboring prefecture's JET Guide was, therefore, an incredibly pleasant surprise.

The clinic was clean, warmly lit, and one entire wall of the waiting room was dedicated to a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf of texts on a variety of



A little towel helps preserve some modesty as you spin up and around.

ust Do It!

of topics, from sex education, women's health, and childcare, to manga. The female staff at the reception desk took my name and health insurance information, and gave me a questionnaire about my medical history and the reason for my visit (the form was available in multiple languages). I was asked if I needed assistance with filling it out. Once it was submitted, I was guided to a second waiting room outside the head doctor's office. The walls were covered in posters and handmade sheets, providing information on everything from screenings for cancer, STDs and STIs, HIV and AIDS, menopause, the Pill and even a friendly note saying condoms were available for purchase at the reception ('Feel free to ask our staff for more info!'). Another poster, prominently displayed, advertised an online LGBTIQ+ awareness group.

So far, so good.

I was guided in for my consultation. The head doctor, a middle-aged woman with lightly accented but otherwise very good English, was delighted to discover I'm now living in the town in which her father was born and raised.

On my first visit, I was there to get a regular checkup and screening for cancer (pap smear), and to start a new prescription for the Pill here in Japan. I was sure the latter would cause at least a raised eyebrow, but was instead given a quick nod and a reassurance that the clinic stocks a wide range of birth control medications. The doctor even pulled out a large folder of Pill packet covers and rifled through it, asking what type I used back home. She quickly found the same brand in her folder and wrote up a prescription, mentioning that the clinic would record my blood pressure and weight so as to monitor for any changes after usage that might need to be addressed in future.

I was lucky to have found such a great clinic on my first go, thanks to the advice listed in an AJET-published handbook. But what I didn't realize was just how lucky I would consider myself to have found this place, and to know a trusted gynecologist, in the future.

OK, back to me in the stirrups again — ten months later. It's not that I didn't think I'd be back there again. It's just that my reason for being there was a little unexpected.

Reasons I did think I'd be there: for a renewal of my Pill prescription, to get my annual pap smear,

maybe to discuss switching to an alternative contraceptive now that my boyfriend and I had been together for a year.

Reasons I *didn't* think I'd be there: my boyfriend, so sweet and loving, had turned out to be cheating scum who had contracted an STD from his other partner and had confessed to possibly passing it on to me in turn. Safe to say, I most definitely didn't see that one coming.

I was hurt, scared, and my health had been put at risk by the person I trusted most. I was also approximately 7,000km from my family, friends, and regular physician.

But when I asked the head doctor at the Ladies' Clinic to conduct a thorough check for STD/STIs, she once again didn't bat an eyelid. She gave me that same brisk nod, reassured me that she was able to conduct the same range of tests as is available at general hospitals, and that I would be contacted with the results in as little as a week. One vaginal inspection and swipe, and a blood test later and the whole thing was over. I had been treated professionally, promptly, and in confidentiality. But I had also been treated with kindness and understanding, by familiar faces.

I sincerely hope this doesn't happen to you or one of your loved ones. You could wind up at an OB/GYN for any number of reasons- maybe you're expecting a baby with your partner. You might want to terminate an unwanted or untimely pregnancy. Maybe you're not even sexually active but are there for a menstruation-related concern. Your visit could be the most basic of reasons, like a pap smear. Or it could be for something you never considered would happen to you. But regardless of the circumstances, having a clinic that you trust and can turn to for help can make a world of difference.

Taking the time to source a good clinic that suits your location, expectations, and sense of comfort is something that every woman should find the time to do, especially when in Japan. Of course, just getting checkups when you're back in your home country is another possibility, but that's obviously not very practical if you're not frequently (i.e. at least once a year) returning home. And, in the event of an emergency or time-sensitive issue, it's in your best interests to have a tried and tested place ready to visit.

What to take on your visit:

- ◇ Health Insurance Card
- ◇ Other form of ID
- ◇ Your own contact details and those of a trusted friend or colleague (in case you are asked to list an emergency contact)
- ◇ A list of the prescription medication you currently or have previously taken, if any
- ◇ A list of your allergies, if any
- ◇ Translating app for any language issues
- ◇ If you want a new Pill prescription, it can be useful to take along the packet (or a photo) of the brand you are currently or have previously used for reference

Abortion

Legal in Japan, and available at a cost. Only surgical abortions are legally available but medical (i.e. oral medicine) abortion pills can be ordered online. However, the second option should only be used with a trusted provider and the risks involved should be well understood (be on alert and in close proximity of a hospital in case you have a reaction or failed abortion that would result in the need for immediate medical attention).

The Pill

Available more widely than most internet sources would have you believe, but if you want a full range of choices or the exact brand that you're used to back home, you might have to do some legwork and shop around. Offerings and availability may vary depending on your location. The Pill is not covered by health insurance in Japan and some clinics may only offer up to a month's worth of medication at a time, meaning you may have to visit regularly to get refills.

IUDs and Implanon

Not as widely available as the Pill (Implanon even less so than IUDs) but still available at some clinics throughout Japan. Insertion and removal is also relatively expensive when compared to overseas.

Japan Health Info

While not free, this service offers everything from sourcing English speaking medical professionals in your area, to online Pill consultation, and mail-order STD kits. They can even arrange for a translator to attend your medical consultations with you, or assist with medical document translation.

STDs, STIs, HIV, AIDS, and Privacy Concerns

Checks are available at any hospital and OB/GYN (consultation or referral may be required depending on your location).

There are any number of reasons why you might want to get checked. First up, no one has any right to judge you. However, particularly in rural locations or in nosy workplaces, something as simple as getting tested for an STD or STI can become a hot topic of gossip. While testing services are widespread and encouraged in Japan, there is still something of a stigma around openly talking about sexual health issues that may leave you feeling like your usual support systems (supervisor, coworkers, Japanese friends) might just not be the best of help. If you also then don't feel comfortable seeking help from a JET friend or PA, this can leave you feeling very isolated and out of options. The worst possible outcome of a situation like that is if it results in a delay for a checkup or treatment.

In these cases, I would honestly recommend going to a clinic that is a reasonable distance from your workplace. No, seriously. Even with the strict legalities of doctor/patient confidentiality, you simply don't know who you might bump into in the waiting room or the parking lot. Also consider online testing kits from trusted, professional sources if you're really concerned about privacy.

Useful vocabulary

OB/GYN 産婦人科医 (さんぶじんかい)	Cervical Cancer 子宮頸癌 (しきゅうけいがん)
Pregnancy 妊娠 (にんしん)	Cervical cancer screening/pap smear 子宮癌検査 (しきゅうがんけんさ)
Birth control method/ device 避妊具 (ひにんぐ)	Antibiotics 抗生物質 (こうせいぶっしつ)
The Pill ピル	STD/STI 性的感染症 (せいてきかんせんしょう)
Abortion 中絶 (ちゅうぜつ)	Uterus 子宮 (しきゅう)

Influenza

Melanie Marino (Osaka)

It may be February, but don't be fooled – influenza is still rife throughout the land. Continue to take care to avoid it, and keep these tips in mind for next season as well!

Winter: a time of snowball fights, Christmas cheer, holiday shopping, the *kotatsu*, and unfortunately, the flu. This widespread infectious disease can take quite a toll on daily life, so along with effective treatment, developing a good flu-fighting daily routine is well worth it. Living in Japan may make flu prevention more confusing.

What is the flu?

The flu, or influenza, is a respiratory illness that is caused by the influenza virus. The flu is a contagious disease, spread when an infected person coughs and sneezes.

How do I know I have the flu?

Symptoms include a high fever and chills, muscle aches, soreness, fatigue, headaches, and cold-like symptoms.

Who can get the flu?

Everyone is at risk of getting the flu. However, groups such as children under 5, adults over 65, pregnant women, health care workers, and those with certain pre-existing medical conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, and a weakened immune system due to HIV/AIDS are at greater risk of complications.

Several other illnesses can arise as complications of the flu including, pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections, and increased risk from other pre-existing conditions.

Prevention

Because of the underlying risks associated, prevention is key. The most effective prevention method is the flu shot. In Japan, many hospitals and clinics offer flu shots from October to January. Contact your local health care provider to check availability. The flu vaccine isn't covered by national health insurance, so the price will vary. Depending on the place of vaccination, prices range from 3000-5000 yen. The vaccine may come in one or two doses. It is recommended to get the shot by mid-December, to avoid hard-hit January and February.

Besides getting the flu shot, there are a variety of other ways to prevent the flu. Practicing good daily

hygiene habits such as frequent hand washing, especially before eating and after using the bathroom, brushing your teeth after every meal as well as gargling, wearing a mask, and keeping surfaces and areas you frequent clean can help stop the spread of the virus.

While balanced nutrition and exercise have benefits year round, there are extra benefits to eating a well-rounded diet during flu season. Regular exercise can help prevent the flu by increasing the recirculation of immune cells, meaning that your immune system will be cleaned and rejuvenated. Experts recommend at least 30 min of moderate exercise five times a week, but if that sounds like a lot, three times a week can also have benefits.

Before and during flu season, be sure to drink plenty of fluids. Green tea is an especially good choice. The antioxidants in green tea boost the immune system, helping fight the flu virus. Avoid caffeine and alcohol as much as possible, as they cause dehydration.

Foods known to effectively fight the flu virus include ginger, garlic, onions, and persimmons (*kaki*). Ginger has been known for centuries to fight viruses, reduce inflammation, and may even have mild pain relieving properties. A great source of ginger is ginger tea, known in Japan as *shouga yu* (しょうがゆ), tea made with boiled ginger root, honey, and a squeeze of yuzu to add vitamin C. Stir-fry dishes are another good way to add ginger to your diet. Allicin, a chemical compound that fights bacteria, is found in garlic, making it an ideal food to eat when sick. When eating garlic as a remedy for the flu, try to eat at least one clove at a time to get the full benefits. While no specific nutrient seems to be the reason, onions have long been known to ease cold and flu symptoms. Try putting an extra helping in many daily recipes: miso soup, fried rice, scrambled eggs, udon, ramen, etc. Persimmons have high levels of vitamin C, which strengthen the immune system and increase white blood cell production. You can find them at your local grocery store, starting in around October, when the season begins.

Good luck out there, may your winter be flu-free!

Sources: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#)

Photo: Rachel Greenwood

New Year in Japan

Three current JETs tell *CONNECT* what it was like experiencing their first New Year in Japan: the customs, the food, the unexpected advertising, and of course, the obligatory shrine and temple visits.



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Jessica Scott, Akita Prefecture

I'm a first year JET living in Akita prefecture. If you're not sure where that is, don't worry – I didn't know either when I was first given my placement. Akita is in the Tohoku region on the Sea of Japan side, so we receive a decent amount of snow this end of the world. As a Tropics born and bred girl from the Land Down Under (Australia) where we celebrate Christmas and New Year's outdoors lapping up the sun; swimming at the beach or in our backyard pools; and melting ice-cubes on our necks to escape the sweltering heat of summer (think 34°C plus), this whole winter experience is entirely new.

I know some of you are probably over the cold dampness of winter by now, but I'm still struck in awe by the fluffy, white magical wonderland that's around me.

It was at this time, looking around at the completely foreign landscape before me while the year sprinted its last leg to the finish line, and everyone had jetted back home (shameless pun intended), that could I really take a moment to appreciate all the amazing opportunities 2017 brought me. And, in the spirit of welcoming new experiences and deepening my understanding of this culturally rich country, I decided to celebrate New Year's the Japanese way: doing *hatsumoude* – the first shrine visit of the year...with a twist.

About a one-hour train ride north of Akita city, is a small town called Oga, home of the Namahage in Akita. Here, you can find a beautiful Zen Buddhist temple called Dairyuji (literally: Big Dragon Temple). The welcoming family of the temple opened their doors to the public on New Year's Eve to literally ring in the New Year with 108 rings of the giant bell – a symbolic act to rid us of the 108 human passions –, followed by a Buddhist chant at the Dragon Altar at the stroke of midnight, and kicking the year off with a night of social merriment Japanese style, with plenty of beer, *nihonshuu* (Japanese sake) and snacks to go around.

As the train services had stopped running by that point and with no way of getting home, I was kindly allowed to stay over at the temple, which is an experience in itself. In the morning, I assisted with cleaning up to get the temple ready for a busy day of *hatsumoude* goers, before enjoying a soothing cup of green tea in a traditional tatami room, overlooking the spectacular snow scenery of the water garden (known as *rakusuitei*). Needless to say, the start of my 2018 felt very Zen indeed.

Jess is a first year ALT in Akita City. She frequents Starbucks on the regular and is a language learning enthusiast. She's also partial to cute (and unnecessary) Japanese stationery.



祈福平安
功德無量
每張 100 元

祈福平安
功德無量
每張 100 元



Laura Pollacco, Kanagawa Prefecture

I spent New Years Eve here in Japan, and seeing as I live roughly an hour out from Tokyo I figured it would be a good place to ring in 2018. That and I had no other idea of what to do. A JET from Fukuoka flew up to spend New year in Tokyo with me as well, so myself and my friend made our way to Shibuya Crossing to see the famous countdown.

In some ways, I knew I would hate it, big crowds full of people pushing and shoving isn't really my thing, but I really wanted to experience the grandness of it all. All those people chanting down to midnight, celebrating and cheering. It was busy when we arrived at roughly 10:20 pm and after going to buy a hot drink we tried to find some other friends to all meet together. This, however, proved to be impossible, the crowds were so thick that moving around was difficult and police had set up pedestrian areas which essentially barricaded people to certain zones of the crossing.

What really surprised me is that there were more tourists and foreigners in that crowd than I had imagined. It was full of them. Most were just there like I was but many were loud and boisterous, shouting and chanting and making full use of drinking outdoors. Generally making idiots out of themselves in their high spirits. My friend and I found a spot and dug in, we had full view of the screen and were well located to feel in the centre of the action. Videos played on the screens surrounding us, I couldn't really make out what they were about but they helped me pass the time waiting for the countdown. There wasn't really much else to do.

The one thing that really bugged me though was the marketing of Coca-cola throughout the entire evening. It was insane, everyone was wearing huge red top hats with the logo, the people on the stage were all pushing forward coca-cola bottles like some cheesy advertisement. There were adverts all around for it. It made the whole affair feel like coca-cola had bought the rights

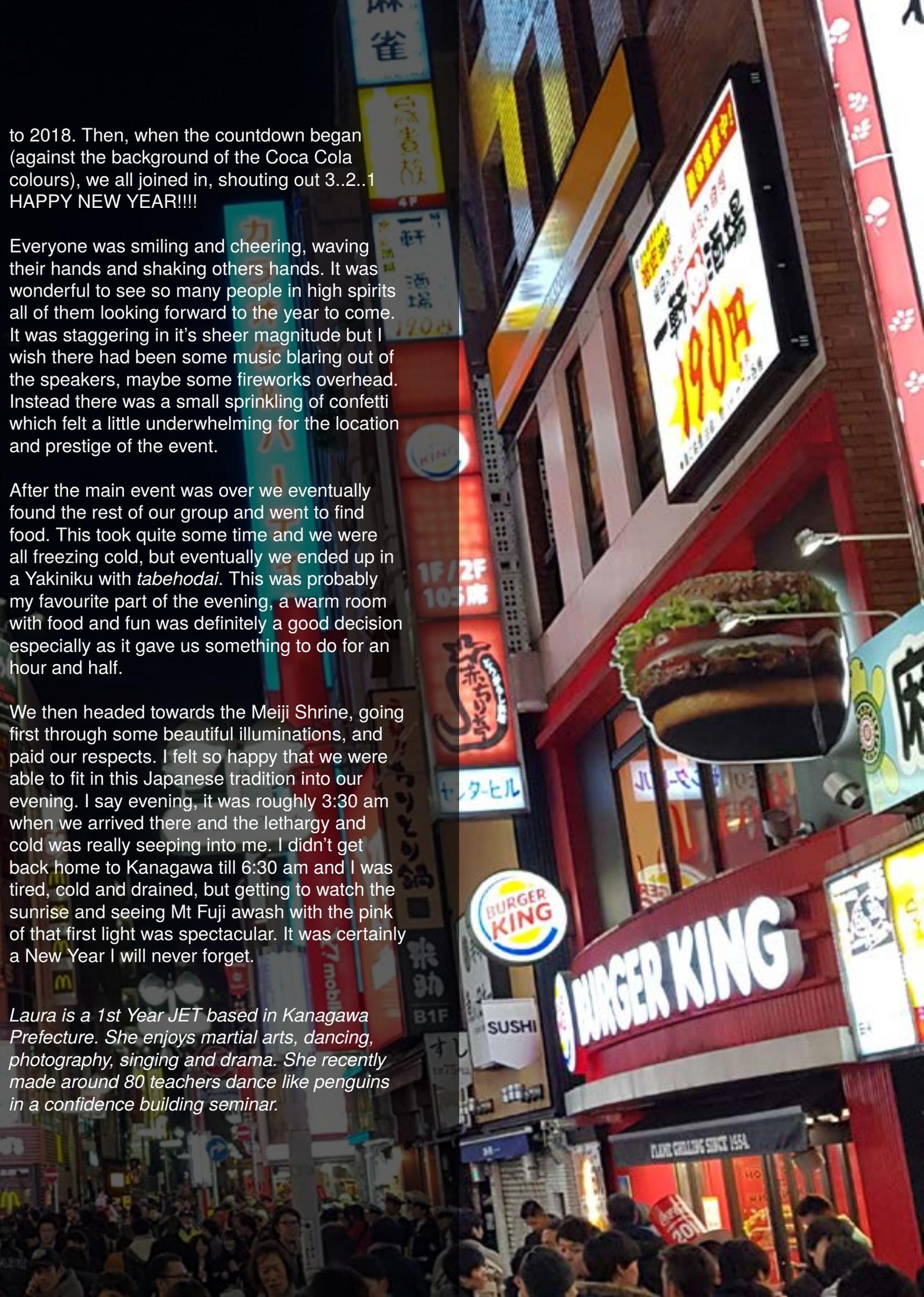
to 2018. Then, when the countdown began (against the background of the Coca Cola colours), we all joined in, shouting out 3..2..1 HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!!

Everyone was smiling and cheering, waving their hands and shaking others hands. It was wonderful to see so many people in high spirits all of them looking forward to the year to come. It was staggering in it's sheer magnitude but I wish there had been some music blaring out of the speakers, maybe some fireworks overhead. Instead there was a small sprinkling of confetti which felt a little underwhelming for the location and prestige of the event.

After the main event was over we eventually found the rest of our group and went to find food. This took quite some time and we were all freezing cold, but eventually we ended up in a Yakiniku with *tabehodai*. This was probably my favourite part of the evening, a warm room with food and fun was definitely a good decision especially as it gave us something to do for an hour and half.

We then headed towards the Meiji Shrine, going first through some beautiful illuminations, and paid our respects. I felt so happy that we were able to fit in this Japanese tradition into our evening. I say evening, it was roughly 3:30 am when we arrived there and the lethargy and cold was really seeping into me. I didn't get back home to Kanagawa till 6:30 am and I was tired, cold and drained, but getting to watch the sunrise and seeing Mt Fuji awash with the pink of that first light was spectacular. It was certainly a New Year I will never forget.

Laura is a 1st Year JET based in Kanagawa Prefecture. She enjoys martial arts, dancing, photography, singing and drama. She recently made around 80 teachers dance like penguins in a confidence building seminar.





Edward Portillo, Gunma Prefecture

Before coming to Japan on the JET program, I was a big fan of a show called *Journeys in Japan*. For one particular episode, the show focused on a New Year's celebration at a place I'd never heard of before, Koyasan, or Mount Koya. After seeing the show, I decided that I was going to follow in those footsteps and spend the last night of 2017 and the first day of 2018 at that ancient and venerable power spot.

I had spent Christmas at home in America, and returned to Japan with just a day to spare. Most of my December 31st was spent traveling from Kanto to Kansai, riding the Shinkansen to Tokyo, and then to Osaka. Then onwards, south towards Wakayama and the mountain. However, after a storm earlier this fall, part of the railway was damaged, and so I had to take a free taxi from the last stop up to the temple where I'd be spending the night.

After an epic journey, tired, hungry, and cold, I arrived at the temple lodgings, or *Shukubo*, a bit after 9 p.m. where I found the kindly monks waiting for me. I was taken up to my accommodations, a traditional tatami room, where a delicious *Shojin Ryori* dinner had been prepared and laid out for me. After tucking into dinner and settling in, I headed down for the temple's celebration. I was one of several foreigners staying there, but the majority of the visitors were Japanese, and only one of the monks spoke English. However, everyone was very warm and welcoming, including me in all the ceremony that was to follow.

As midnight drew closer, we waited on TV, as people trickled in. Eventually all gathered, and as midnight came, where the monks said prayers, and we send our prayers as well. I can't say on, but the atmosphere was serene parties, fireworks, and illuminations. Afterwards, we returned to the side rituals, such as receiving the first rice touching our heads to the *kagami mochi*. All of this was done in turns, one on person present, which left me a lot of feeling that, for at least one night, I was of an outsider.

After all this, the formality fell away, and mochi was distributed along with delicious gift, everyone received small oranges. watching everyone head out, I prepared offered me more oranges, and told me a kind laugh. As I happily munched on the locals who had come to visit with sit and eat with new friends.



in a side room, watching the NHK
ally, our group of about a dozen was
we proceeded to the main hall,
then invited us to place incense and
I understood all of what was going
and unique, far from the huge
going on in the rest of the world.
room, where we went on with more
e of the year from the head priest,
ochi, and drinking special sake.
one with the head priest, by every
of time for reflection, and gave me a
was an equal with everyone, instead

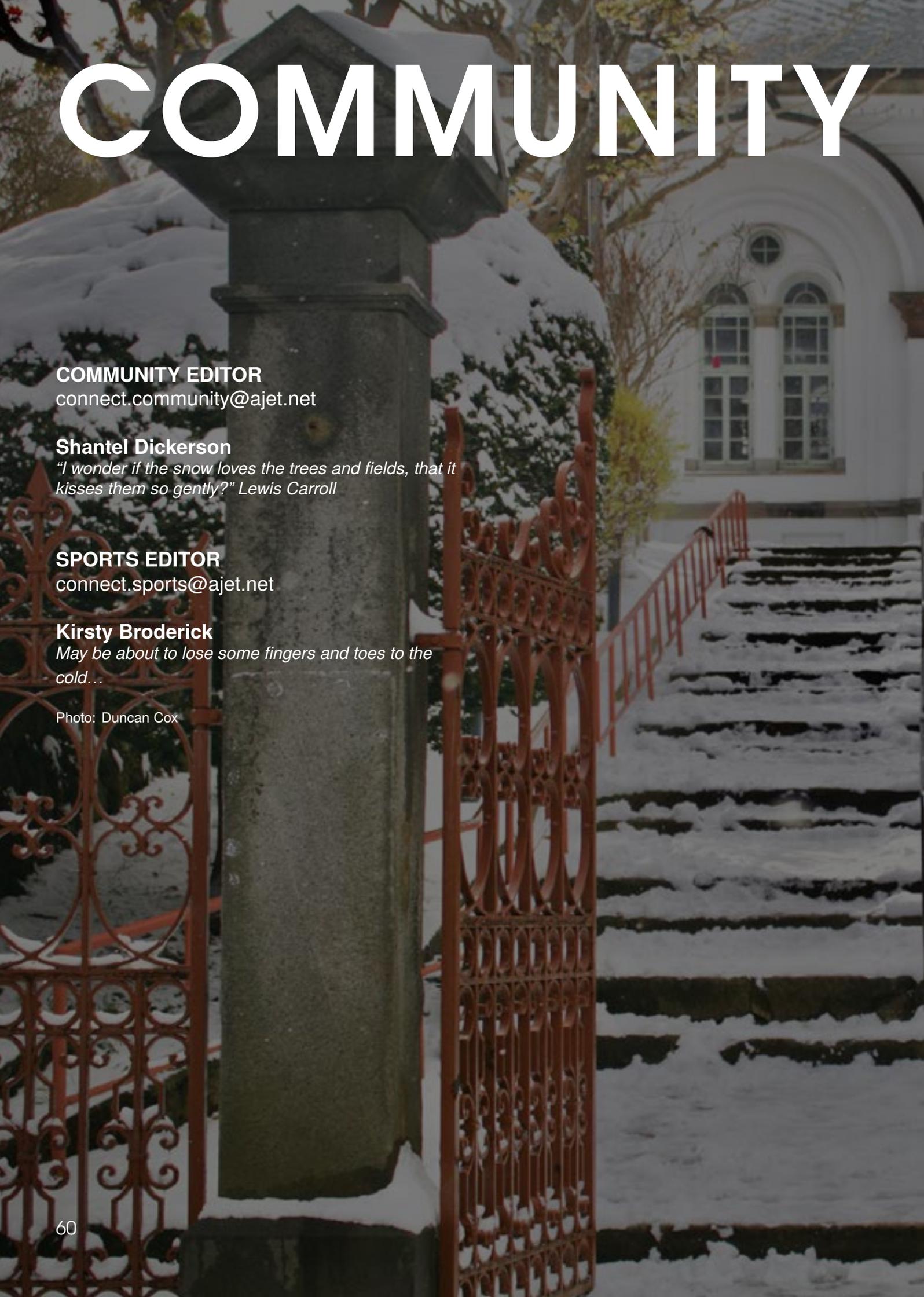
and colorful, *anko* filled, new year's
delicious *amazake*. Then, as a parting
es, which were quite delicious. After
ared to leave when the head priest
me to stuff them in my pocket, with a
n the fruit, I also got to talk to one of
n his grandmother. It's always fun to

Eventually, I went to bed at the early hour of 5 a.m. only to wake 4
hours later and head to breakfast, which was specially prepared *Osechi*
Ryori, a traditional meal full of auspicious foods to start the new year
right. From black soybeans, *kuro-mame*, to *tazukuri*, dried sardines
cooked in soy sauce, every part of breakfast was meant to have a
special meaning such as good health, or abundant harvest.

Full of delicious food, I then set out to spend the first day of 2018
exploring the small town of Koyasan, which can be easily walked from
one end to the other in a few hours. First, I visited the Okunoin, where
the founder of the temples here, the monk Kobo Daishi, also known as
Kukai, is said to be in eternal meditation. After more than 1,200 years,
he is still venerated here by the faithful, and surrounded by a cemetery
which memorializes great figures such as Uesugi Kenshin and Takeda
Shingen, alongside company memorials for Yakult and Nissan. Next I
went to the gate at the entrance to the town, a massive structure for this
small place, and the Danjogaran, home to the famous Konpon Daito
pagoda. After a long day walking through the town in the crisp mountain
air, I said farewell to Koyasan, but it is a place that will stay with me, and
a place I will return to one day. For now at least, I am glad I started my
year on this sacred mountain.

*Edward is a first year ALT. He lives in Gunma Prefecture. He enjoys
traveling, video games, and procrastination. You can find his blog at
<http://thisweekinjapan.tumblr.com/>*

COMMUNITY



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Shantel Dickerson

"I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields, that it kisses them so gently?" Lewis Carroll

SPORTS EDITOR

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Kirsty Broderick

May be about to lose some fingers and toes to the cold...

Photo: Duncan Cox

函館ハリストス正教会

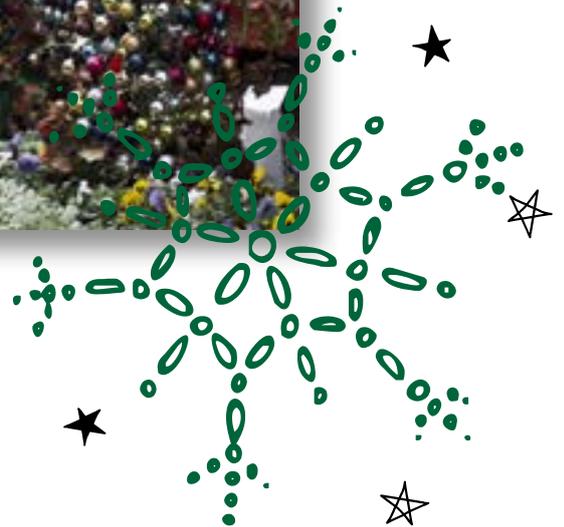
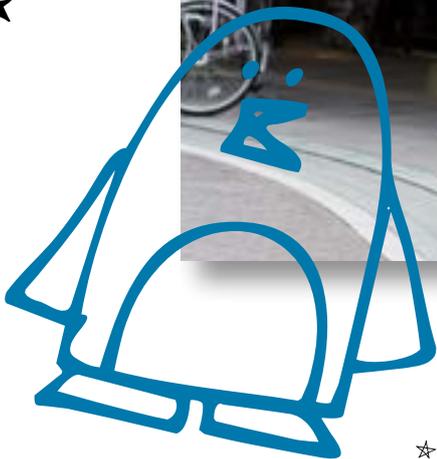
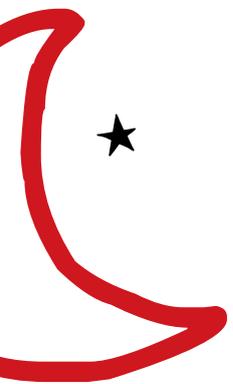


Winter Holiday Fun!



*JET Couples
and Families
Share their
Winter
Holiday
Adventures*

Shantel Dickerson (Oita)



This month's Family Spotlight features winter holiday highlights from four JET families. Take a peek to see what they were up to!

The Denton Family



My family went on a two-week road trip from Fukuoka to Tokyo and back! In Tokyo, we ice skated next to the Gundam statue; Chiba for Tokyo Disneyland Resort; Nagano for sledding; Kyoto; Nara; Fukuoka; and Beppu. We were able to experience and see so many things along our road trip!

Heather Denton (Fukuoka Prefecture)

The White Family



I'm a Kyoto prefectural JET and my husband, Dan, works at an *eikaiwa* in our ward (Fushimi-ku). You can hardly throw a rock in Kyoto without hitting a historic site! We went to *Seimei Shrine* with many other people to celebrate *hatsumode* (初詣), or the first shrine visit of the new year. I also started a new *Goshuincho* (御朱印帳)! A *Goshuincho* is a special book for collecting stamps at temples. I'm on my second one already, and still in my first year. New year, new book!

Chelanna White (Kyoto Prefecture)

The Sevigny Family



It was a magical time for us, the Sevigny family, to be together in Beppu again — the first time since 2014. Our three college kids returned home, joining Julia, our 13-year-old, who still lives with us. Highlights included doing a farmstay near Usa, hiking with our Japanese family in Kitakyushu, buying pottery from a local artist in Yufuin, experiencing the *jigoku* and *onsen* of Beppu, steaming vegetables for our holiday dinner in Kannawa, and decorating our palm tree with homemade *origami* ornaments. Our home overflowed with joy and music! Before leaving, the kids all deemed it "the best Christmas ever!"

Kim Sevigny (Oita Prefecture)

Graun



After welcoming in 2018 with *nabe*, friends, and *hatsumode* at Oita's, *Yuzuhara-jinja*, I was excited for the new year to begin. What seemed like minutes later, I flew, groggily, to Tokyo to meet my cousin, who I haven't seen in YEARS. We went around for her first trip to Japan. Joined by a friend in Tokyo, we visited Kamakura. We lit incense at the *Daibutsu* (giant Buddha) — wowza it's big — then we popped into Hokai-ji, which I recommend for temple lovers. My cousin enjoyed the idea of *fukobukuro*, thought *yakiimo* were delicious and in the end, had a Happy New Year in Tokyo!

Adrea Graun (Oita)

From well-educated to functionally illiterate in 14 hours



*(in the time it takes
to fly from Atlanta to
Tokyo)*

Sabrina Hassanali (Tokyo)

While I know that moving to a new country can be intimidating, I felt pretty confident before arriving in Japan. I have traveled a great deal and speak a couple of languages. I was sure Japan would be no more difficult than say, Morocco, for example. I didn't know any Japanese and I requested to be placed in a small town. I hoped to be immersed in the Japanese language by force. This would suit me; I like chatting with locals in remote, off-the-beaten-track types of places. When I learned of my JET placement in Tokyo, I imagined an even smoother transition. Tokyo is, after all, an international city. It hosted the Summer Olympics in 1964 and plans to hold an even larger affair in 2020. Little did I know, Japan's biggest town would set me straight. Two months into my Japanese adventure, I had revised my plan for learning Japanese.

I was not prepared for the surprises of this metropolis. I read somewhere that about 10% of Japan's population is from abroad. This made me falsely comfortable in my lack of language ability. I imagined an international city cloaked with signs in the world's international language: English. I hoped to hear or

see the names of the train stations as I approached them. Alas, I was too ambitious. From dining to basic logistics, the challenges of illiteracy abound.

Without knowing a single other JET participant, I jumped into the JET experience hoping to have immersion head on. I found myself incapable of even that. I reflect, now, on how I studied Spanish. It was pretty easy for me as the script is the same as English. Simply add a couple of accents and a few letters, and you've got a good basic start. For now, I've relegated learning the three Japanese scripts to an in-depth cram course in the unforeseen future. In the meantime, I find joy in the adventures of the unknown.

For the last two months, I have rarely known the specifics of exactly that which I am eating. Often, the English menu has fewer options than the Japanese menu. Other times, the combination or preparation seems suspect. I have put off my desire to eat less meat. I usually point and choose something unusual. Fortunately, though I am a foodie, my dining demands are easy to meet. Of course this leads to its own problem. I often find that I cannot effectively explain what I have eaten before, nor order it again! The logistical challenges are the toughest for a new-illiterate. In late September, I found myself unable to comprehend the choices at the ATM. I certainly wanted to pay my rent, and there was sufficient yen in my account. However, I agonized over the choices of letters several times over the course of a week. Fortunately, my Japanese supervisor at school is perfect. She escorted me to the closest JP Post ATM and we sorted my rent out in the nick of time. She has also helped me sort through the barge of mail slipped through the slot in my door. We joke now that she is my Japanese mother and I am her fourth daughter. The utility bills with barcodes are easy enough. They usually have a logo in English and this way, my Japanese supervisor does not have to have every intimate detail of my Japanese life!

Though some of my language issues were easy to resolve, I had a really difficult time securing a phone plan. Although I sought the advice of my fellow JETs, I was deeply disappointed with the customer service at BIC Camera. Though I can never know for sure, I suspect that in addition to the language barrier, the agent at BIC Camera did not like the

fact that a brown-faced American needed a phone plan. My subcontinental tan did not get me any tech advantages. In this particular case, I actually felt that my race was a disadvantage. Reflecting now, I have lived the majority of my life in the racially charged South without perceiving slights based on race. Though BIC Camera won't be my preferred electronics outlet, the JET community pages were a lifeline. My incident at BIC Camera has helped me to grow more sympathetic toward American immigrants. In my American life, I worked as an immigration attorney. Though I saw how nationality impacted immigration issues, I never sensed the pain of just looking different. Here, again, the language barrier helped me gain respect for my fellow JETs. I was able to make sense of my purchase and eventually able to operate my smartphone here in Japan.

Ultimately, the two most important things I have needed in Japan, no one told me to pack. Without my healthy sense of humor, I would have been crying tears instead of reeling in laughter. My sometimes untimely and awkward smile is a universal 'hello'. I still believe it is good to speak the language of where you travel: in most instances the effort of just trying is rewarded with human kindness. With the help of a phrase book and a few beers, I am finding the izakaya to be my language school. I am content with this style of intercultural exchange. As a result of my misadventures, I have connected with many people despite the language barrier. Hiragana, katakana and kanji, I'll catch you in another world.

Sabrina Hassanali loves traveling. She has had a passport since infancy. She studied abroad in college, law school and on her own. Sabrina decided to take a long leave of absence from America after Trump won the election. When she is not planning her next trip, she likes to hike, camp and swim. Sabrina is also writing a blogpost for [Verge Magazine](#).



Image source:
Micah Briguera



Are You A Dancer?

Emily Bisset (Tokyo)

I have had an on-off love affair with dance my whole life. After renouncing ballet at the age of four when asked to wear a pink tutu, I did a bit of jazz and Irish dancing as a kid. My family lived overseas while I was young, and I continued to dance in musical theatre and school shows. However, through those awkward growing years overseas where it felt like my body was trying to become a giraffe, I lacked the confidence to pursue dance in its own right.

When I returned to New Zealand I took up dance again and realised that those five years away had set me behind. I found myself in tap class with kids half my age and ballroom, contemporary, musical theatre, and urban dance classes where I was the oldest but the least skilled. In some ways, this was hugely beneficial. I will never forget

preparing for a contemporary dance exam with a class full of people who had been doing ballet since they were six years old. Nothing had fired me up so much, and I found myself practicing every night till 11 the week before, and twitching through the dance moves as I tried to sleep. It taught me what impossible things I could achieve if I put the work in.

I couldn't comprehend what was happening at the time. I had never worked very hard at school or in my pursuit of singing or acting. Everything that I had pursued before came naturally to me. Dancing was something else entirely. I knew I could 'feel' the music and show it on my face, but for some reason that never connected with my body. Although I compensated for my lack of technique with practice and the

performance skills I had gained from musical theatre, it was hard always feeling behind. I loved the performances but watching them afterwards was difficult as I was that kid who was always just a little behind and off balance, never as flexible or sharp as the others.

When I got to university I truly felt too far behind compared to my peers and dropped dance altogether, proclaiming myself more of a dance appreciator than a participator. If anybody asked me whether I danced my standard answer was: "Yes, I love dance, but I'm not a dancer."

After an unsuccessful year pursuing a classical singing degree I questioned myself. Why had I never felt inspired to stay up all night practicing singing as I had dance? I ended up pursuing directing in media rather than singing, which certainly excited me in the same way as directing and dance had previously, but dance was still on the back burner.

Heading into my final year at university something monumental happened. On a fateful afternoon as my best friend and I sat watching random YouTube videos, something new popped up. It was *Mirotic* by TVXQ. I didn't know what was happening but suddenly very attractive men were dancing beautifully on my screen and I was hooked. It was K-pop! Dancing is a requirement in K-pop, and is linked to the music, videos, and culture in a way I had never seen before.

Directing music videos in the Asian market became my dream, and as I'd had a fascination with Japanese media since seeing the works of Hayao Miyazaki at a young age, naturally I decided to apply for JET!

of my opportunities in Japan and continue to develop as a dancer. The first thing I searched for was a rock'n'roll dance club. It was like a breath of fresh air and a smack in the face. I loved it! I got to dance with other expats in Japan as well as Japanese people. Communication was never an issue: dance is a universal language!

A little later I found a dance studio closer to my home. Although the process was entirely in Japanese, through the wonders of google translate I managed to get there and get signed up for unlimited beginner classes.

I started going to as many classes as I could and immediately noticed something. These classes were different to the ones I had experienced at high school. Now that I was an 'adult', people of all ages were in the classes. People aged 18 to 60, all beginners. I felt like an idiot. To think that I had never given dance a fighting chance, just because I felt embarrassed by how low my level was compared to those around me. If I enjoy dance, that is enough. I noticed a change in myself too. Whenever I had dance class I would be on full energy at work all day looking forward to it, and I left every class feeling happy, carefree, and inspired to keep working hard.

Dance is such an excellent form of exercise that is stimulating both physically and mentally. It is undoubtedly one of the most challenging sports out there as it brings together physical and creative fields. If you are one of those people who really cannot just go to the gym and tell yourself what to do, or if you find yourself bored when exercising, then dance could be perfect. It comes in so many varieties too! From dance-aerobics classes like Zumba to all the different styles of dance out

there to try.

Realising a passion for dance at age 21 is not ideal, as that is pretty old in dance terms, and my body has definitely been letting me know that over the past few weeks. However, ice works wonders and as they say, no pain, no gain! I have nicknamed my apartment "Shoe Box Studio" due to its tiny size and the challenges that brings to dance practice. Despite space issues and a more than likely future noise complaint as to why there is so much stomping going on at midnight (don't worry, I am 99% sure no one lives below me), dance has undoubtedly found a place to stay in my home. I like to challenge myself by uploading dance covers or pieces of choreography from home. This also helps me get out of that 'not good enough' mindset that I've had with dance for so long.

Every new skill you try to learn in life is a new ladder to climb. Sometimes pride can get in your way if you want to start at the bottom of a ladder when everybody else seems to be halfway up. But for goodness sake, if you find something that truly fires you up, never be afraid or too proud to start climbing.

Emily Bisset is a 22 year old media studies graduate. This is her first year on JET and her first time in Japan. She is a Kiwi who loves K-pop, cameras, and creating. Although she misses New Zealand she is loving life in Japan and all it has to offer. Her work can be seen at <http://bit.ly/2FthuyC> and <http://bit.ly/2EBD1UT>

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