

AJET

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JANUARY
2019

SPECIAL

END OF THE YEAR ISSUE



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

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A woman in a pink kimono is seated on a red mat, playing a large taiko drum. She is holding two wooden drumsticks and is in the middle of a stroke. The background is a warm, yellowish wall with a window. The drum is mounted on a wooden stand.

CONNECT



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HEAD OF DESIGN & LAYOUT

Ashley Hirasuna

ASSISTANT DESIGNERS

Philippa Lawrie
Rhema Baquero

COVER PHOTO

Colette English

TABLE OF CONTENTS PHOTO

Kirsty Broderick

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Colette English
Kirsty Broderick
Tina White
R. Doug Wicker
Yvette Marquez
Dicklyon
Rhema Baquero
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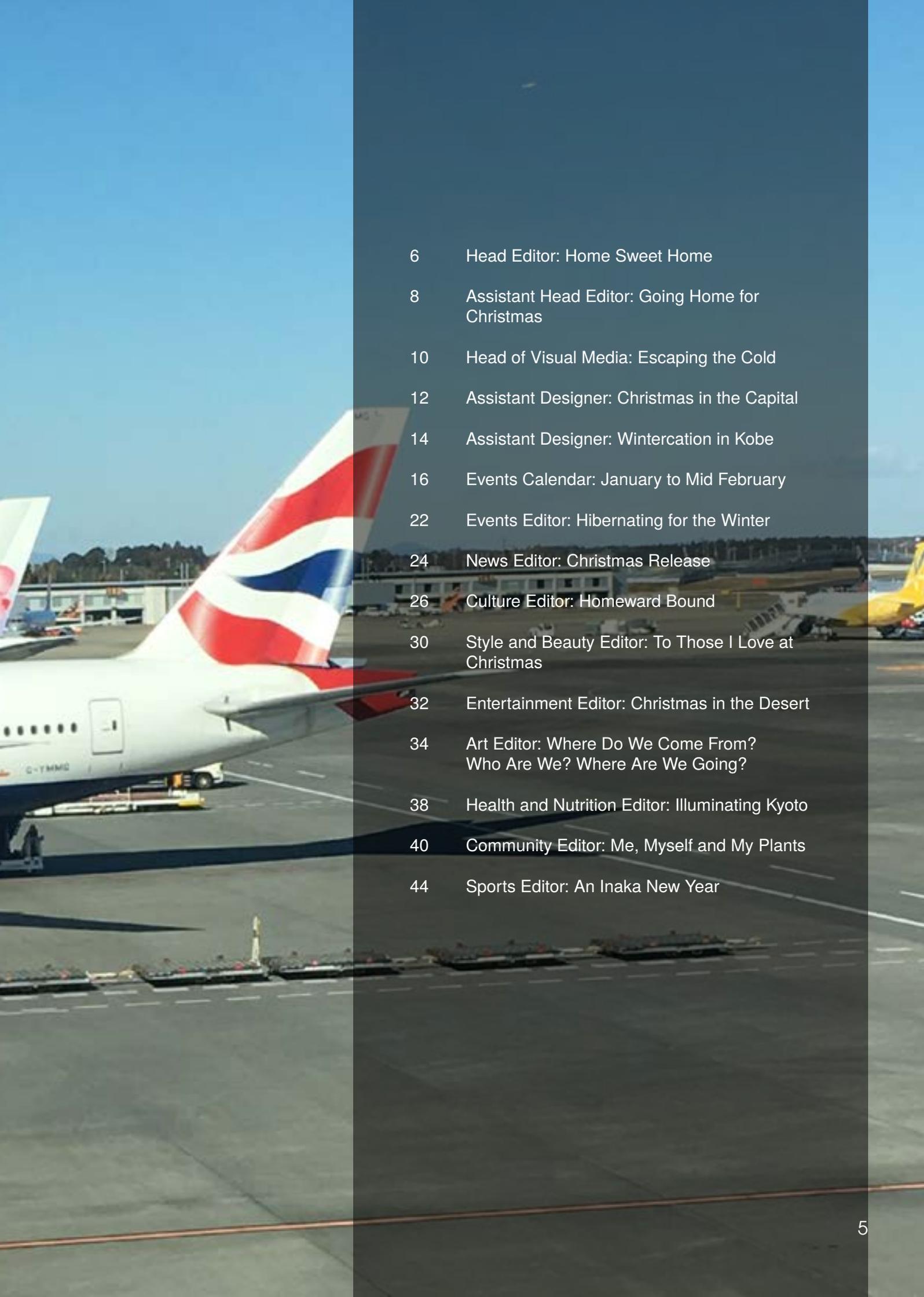
COPY EDITOR

Aziz Krich
Emily Riley

GENERAL SECTION EDITOR

Taylor Skultety
Gavin Au-Yeung

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HEAD EDITOR

*Home
Sweet
Home*

Christmas in the UK

Lauren Hill (Tokyo)

As a new JET, one of the things I was most excited about was the endless potential for exploration that comes with moving to a new country. Not only is your placement shiny and unfamiliar; the surrounding area and plenty of further flung destinations likely are, too!

This is my third year, and I'm still not tired of exploring Japan. I think I could live here a decade and still have a packed travel wishlist. The abandoned island of Gunkanjima, Nagasaki; Nagoro, a rural Shikoku village with more straw dolls than people; and the cat-shaped beach houses of Tashirojima are all pretty high up there right now. I've also never been to

Osaka or Nara, though both are on the cards for this year's spring break!

Another fun part of picking up and moving across the world is the way you experience home when you get round to visiting. The time crunch of a short trip gives you the chance to feel like a tourist in your hometown. Things are always changing — what's new since you were last here? This Christmas, I'll be visiting family and friends in the UK, starting off in Manchester, then heading up to Edinburgh to ring in the New Year with a fancy cocktail... or three.

Manchester Christmas Markets



New Year in Edinburgh

Growing up, the Christmas Markets were a seasonal staple. Who doesn't like to eat *bratwurst* till they burst, pay a whole £5 for a mug of mulled wine, and do heroic battle with the hordes *also* determined to have their Christmas and eat it?

It's good, chaotic fun, and definitely something I've missed the past few years. I spent last Christmas in Hiroshima, and the 2016 markets closed before I got home for the break. This year, the main hub at Albert Square will stay open for a day longer than other sites around the city, and that just so happens to be the day I land! Not going to lie, I definitely did look up the [list of vendors](#), and I'm so ready to stuff my face full of fudge, Dutch pancakes, gingerbread, and more. It's Christmas, after all!

I may even go all-out tourist and grab one of the souvenir Manchester Christmas Market [mugs](#). This year's turn the bottom half of your face into a reindeer, and that's precisely the kind of drinkware I need in my life.

Christmas Traditions Old and New!

Every family has their own set of Christmas traditions; without them, it just wouldn't be the holidays! For me, some of the best are picking out a new Christmas tree ornament with my fiance (hoping to snag something cute and handmade at the market), crackers and smoked cheese for Christmas morning breakfast (followed by intermittent snacking on marzipan fruits the rest of the day), jokey clues on each and every present, and a recent addition: a cheeky [Boxing Day Nando's](#) with my dad.

Little things like these are the real draw at this time of year. Spending last Christmas on Hiroshima's stunning Miyajima was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but so was the time my mother-in-law (to be!) joked that my dad wasn't welcome for Christmas dinner in his chavvy shoes. Of course, she let him in, and now it's one of my favourite Christmas memories!

After the madness of a family Christmas, my fiance and I are heading to Edinburgh for a bit of sightseeing (and a much-needed change of pace!). It's my first time visiting the city, so we have an endless and hopelessly-uncoordinated list of things to see, do, eat, and take photos with. At the top of our list are a stroll around the gorgeous Edinburgh Castle, a visit to Scotland's very first dog cafe, and a trippy few hours at Camera Obscura (an interactive trick art museum, and Edinburgh's oldest tourist attraction!).

The story of Hachiko, a faithful Akita dog, is beloved both in Japan and overseas. Fresh from a trip to Hachiko's birthplace this summer, I was thrilled to discover Edinburgh has its own tale of canine courage! Bobby was a skye terrier whose owner died from tuberculosis in 1858. After leading the funeral procession, Bobby couldn't be coaxed away from his owner's graveside. The people of Greyfriars decided to take care of the dog, feeding and sheltering him till his death in 1872. These days, there's a statue dedicated to Greyfriars Bobby, where people come to admire his bravery and pat his nose for luck!

All of this, plus the inevitable snow (because Scotland in December/January) and a few rounds of cocktails at quirky speakeasy [Panda and Sons](#), is sure to get 2019 off to a flying start! I can't think of a better way to wrap up the winter break!

See you on the other side!

By the time you're reading this, the holidays will be done and dusted, you'll be existing on leftover selection boxes, and we'll all be gearing up to start the final semester. I hope your winter break was the right balance of fun and relaxing, and you're feeling ready to *genki* your students' socks off for the last bit of the school year! Don't think of graduation yet; if you don't think of it, it doesn't exist. Here's to an awesome 2019 — *Happy New Year!*

ASSISTANT HEAD EDITOR

Going Home for Christmas

A Holiday in Lists

Angela Hinck (Fukui)

This will be my last winter vacation as an ALT. It will also be my 30th Christmas ever, my first one spent with my parents in two years, my last trip back to the USA before I make my big transcontinental move next summer, and my first time seeing my extended family since before my move to Japan four years ago. I'll be splitting the trip between my aunt and uncle's home in Georgia, my parents' home in Florida, and wherever all my layovers are. It's humble in terms of plans, huge in terms of miles traveled, and weighed down with a strange significance that I'm pretty sure is all in my head.

It's only a vacation. There's no grand design or detailed itinerary. But with so many things to do, so many people to see, and so many things to prepare for, it's hard not to see this trip has something both exciting and outright nerve-wracking.

So I'll do what I always do when things feel like they're getting too big to handle: list it out.



Important Things to Get Done (AKA “The Buzzkill List”)

- Renew driver’s license. I used to be intimidated by the DMV with its long waits and paperwork; but then I took the Japanese driving test. Twice. I screamed into the void, and the void eventually threw a Japanese driver’s license back out at me. You become a different person after that. Not too worried about this.
- Cleaning out my old closet. As I begin the early stages of planning my move back to the USA, I’m realizing that I’ve accumulated a lot of junk in Japan. But it’s important junk, like my collection of *gaacha* machine toys and my ice cream-shaped floor lamp. If I’m going to haul this all back with me, I’d better downsize on all the stuff I already have waiting for me back home.
- Dig up old resumes, transcripts, and other relevant documents so I can get the job search train rolling. By far the scariest thing on any of these lists. Will probably put it off until the very end of the trip. Thinking about this is already stressing me out, so moving on...

Actual Fun Things to Do

- See my friends. See my family. Meet all of the new babies that have been born since I’ve been away. Hug everyone a lot. Sit out on the back porch with Mom, watching birds and squirrels battle for the bird feeder while bobcats prowl in the brush. Paddleboard with Dad, revisiting the mangroves and keeping an eye out for both sharks and gators in the brackish water.
- Go to the cheap movie theater in town and have a superhero marathon. *Aquaman* and *Spiderman: Into the Spider-Verse* are both coming out in December, and I am ready to throw a whole day away on superhero films and movie theater snacks. Could I watch these in Japan later? Yes. But it would cost a lot more, and they don’t have Sour Patch Kids here.
- Go to every bookstore within driving distance and try not to get emotional over the fact that I can actually read everything. I walked into a Barnes & Noble when I visited home two years ago, and being in an English bookstore again felt like an almost religious experience.
- Go to the beach, livestream my friends who are spending their vacations in colder climates, and laugh. Ignore the people staring at the woman sitting alone on the sand and cackling maniacally into her phone camera.

Things To Eat So Much I Get Sick of Them

- Every single Christmas food my family provides. I love Christmas cake and fried chicken as much as the next expat, but I’m craving the *natsukashii* goodness of our traditional holiday dishes.
- Publix sub sandwiches. Those of you who have never been to Florida might not know the power these sandwiches have over the locals, but believe me when I say that there are Floridians who love these sandwiches more than they love life itself. They’ll fight you for one. They’ll fight your pet gator for one. (Unless you’re also Floridian and have your own pet gator to use in self-defense.)
- Cinnamon Toast Crunch. It’s basically a breakfast cereal that should just be classified as a dessert, which is how I justify munching on it at 9 p.m.
- Cuban food. Fried plantains. Yes.

By the time you read this, it’ll already be January 2019 and this will no longer be a list of potential actions. It’ll be a list of either things accomplished, things missed out on, or things in-progress. But for now, from the perspective of December 2018, I’m hoping I’ll be able to happily say that this is all coming to pass just as you’re reading it here.

HEAD OF DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Escaping the

Ashley Hirasuna (Ishikawa)

It's the most wonderful time of the year... for someone else. Normally I would like to think that I handle cold really well (especially for someone from dry and constantly warm southern California), but after the horror that was last year's winter, this New Year I opted to leave the country for a bit. This year I plan to go to the Philippines and Malaysia with my friend Celeste.

When it comes to traveling, I am *very* relaxed. As long as I know where I'm staying the night and how I'm getting there, everything else can happen on the spot in terms of things to see and do (as long as I have the internet available to me). Basically right now, my friend and I only have a basic timeline for where we're going and how we're getting there.



Dec 23rd

fly out of Osaka and land in Manila, Philippines (the capital city of the Philippines on the island of Luzon)



Dec 25th

fly out of Manila and land in Davao, Philippines (on the southernmost island of Mindanao)



Dec 28th

fly out of Davao and land in Cebu City, Philippines (on the island of Cebu, located in the middle of the Philippines)



Dec 30th

day trip to Bohol and then back to Cebu



Dec 31st

fly out of Cebu and land in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (the capital city of Malaysia), and immediately fly out of Kuala Lumpur and land on the island of Langkawi, Malaysia



Dec 31st

Langkawi



Dec 31st, Jan 2nd
Kuala Lumpur



Jan 2nd

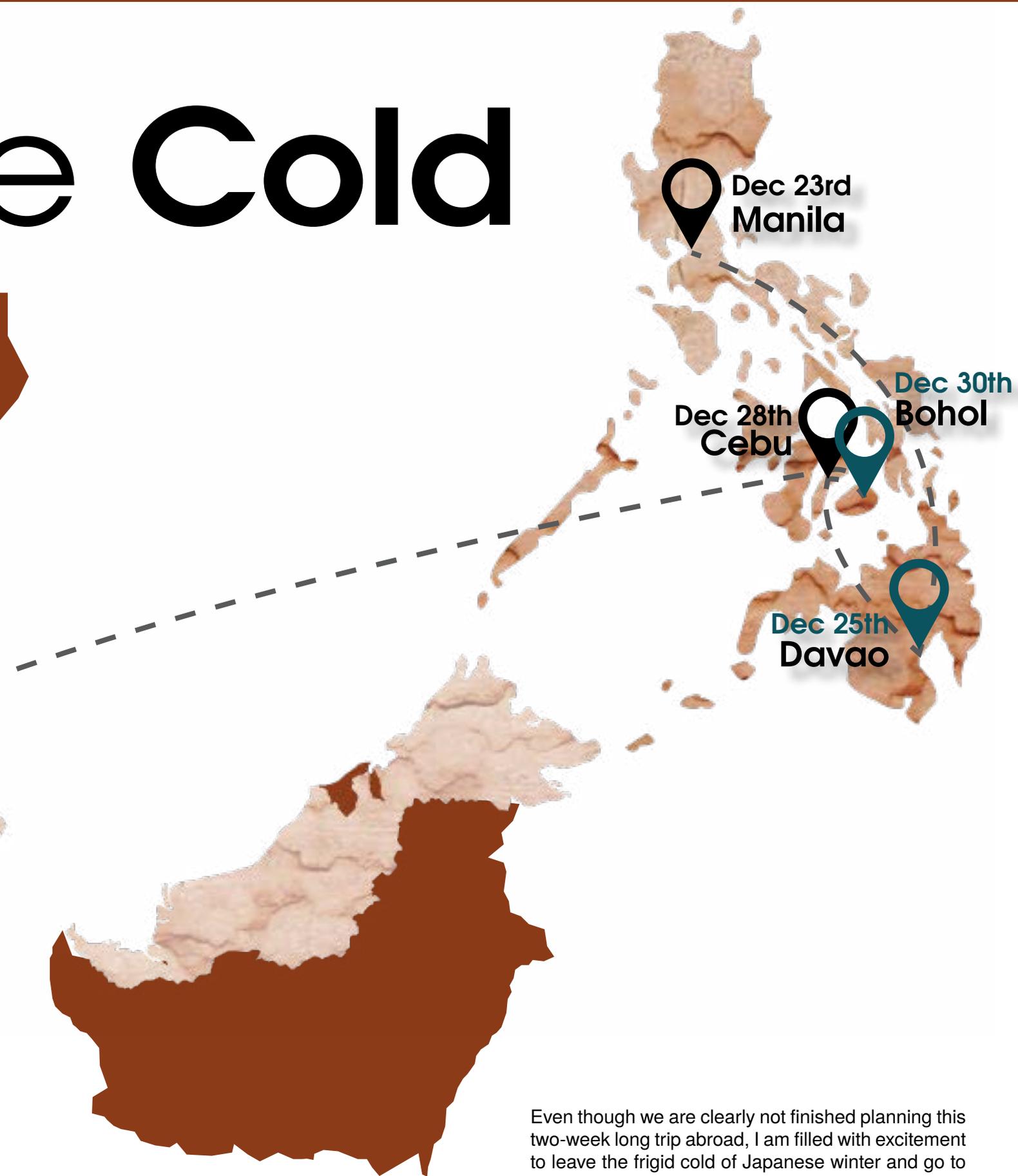
fly out of Langkawi and land back in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



Jan 4th

fly back to Osaka

e Cold



Even though we are clearly not finished planning this two-week long trip abroad, I am filled with excitement to leave the frigid cold of Japanese winter and go to countries where I can still go swimming! After all, the best way to celebrate winter is to ignore it altogether and pretend that it's summer again.

ASSISTANT DESIGNER

CHRISTMAS IN THE CAPITAL

Philippa Lawrie (Iwate)

This winter will be my first Christmas in the cold. I've gone from living in Australia, where it's unreasonably hot and awful, to Iwate Prefecture, which is buried under snow half the year. Whilst I'm excited to be living in this beautiful, frosty place, I will be fleeing south over the holiday period. My partner is coming to visit, and we're going to spend about nine days in Tokyo. I love my home here in Iwate, but there are many reasons I'm drawn towards the capital this December.

First of all, there's the museums. Initially, it was only the Tokyo Digital Art Museum that caught my attention. But my interest has expanded to include others such as the Studio Ghibli Museum, Tepia Advanced Technology Gallery, Miraikan Science Museum and the National Museum of Nature and Science. There's two technology museums in there, because I didn't come to Japan not to see some tiny robots.



Another perk of Tokyo is the plethora of vegan options. Up here in Tohoku, there ain't much. Even though I'm happy to cook for myself every day, going out to eat with friends or for work events becomes a distressing endeavour sometimes. I'm excited to go out and enjoy food without the stress. Places such as T's Tantan, Nagi Shokudo, Ain Soph (all of them) and Brown Rice Cafe are all on my list.

Whilst we're there, we're hoping to check out the December festivities. Considering Japanese people generally don't celebrate Christmas, there appears to be a bunch of festive events happening in Tokyo this December,

including the World Christmas Festival at Yoyogi Park, the Hibiya Park Christmas market, and the Roppongi illuminations.

There is much to be excited for this winter break. It will certainly make a change from last year's festive season, which for me was spent working in Christmas retail hell, cooking in the sweltering 40°C heat, and wishing it would end sooner. This year I get to escape from work for a little while and just enjoy what Tokyo has to offer, with good company and good food. I can't think of a better way to spend the holidays.

ASSISTANT DESIGNER

Wintercation in



Rhema Baquero (Kobe)

Since my husband and I landed in Kobe, we have paid respects at the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake Museum, bathed in the hot springs of Arima and Suzuran-no-yu *onsens*, and eaten all the food in Chinatown. We have hit up the video game arcades in Sannomiya, dropped serious cash on Kobe beef and raced to the last train after a *nomihodai*. But this winter break, we will attempt to make a dent in our mission to explore more of our port city.

Before we left Texas, my mother-in-law bought us a guidebook for the city of Kobe. "A book you say! How retro!" Yes, a book with an extensive listing of places to see, things to do and where to eat in this lovely city. When we received the guide, we decided to make it our mission to experience as many of the suggestions as we could. We have a small window of days when we are both off from work at the same time, so we want to make them count. These are our top seven activities we want to do this holiday season:

7. KOBE HARBORLAND

It is a shame we have not explored much of this part of town yet. The waterfront shopping and entertainment area is a scenic destination for couples and those looking for that iconic view of the Port Tower, the Ferris wheel, Oriental Hotel and the Maritime Museum.



6. MAYASAN TENJOJI TEMPLE AND IKUTA SHRINE

For New Years, we want to follow Japanese tradition and visit a shrine and a temple for *hatsumode*. We won't be making our own *mochi*, but we will definitely try it.



5. ROKKO SNOW PARK

With the exception of last year after Hurricane Harvey wrecked our region, we do not often get snow that sticks to the ground in Texas. This park offers skiing and sledding fit for beginners, but as a former skater, I cannot wait to give snowboarding a chance.

4. KOBE ANIMAL KINGDOM

My OTE gave me an English brochure from the Animal Kingdom about a month ago, and I've wanted to go see the animals ever since. Japan's winters are too cold for capybaras, so this season they will get to enjoy their own hot bath with colorful petals. I *must* see these little animals swim around in their flower onsen.



3. SAKE BREWERIES IN NADA

In Texas and America at large, craft beer breweries are the popular places to sample new drinks. We want to broaden our *sake* horizons by taking a tour of Kobe's local take on the spirit.

2. KOBE LUMINARIE

For the 24th year since the December 1995 earthquake memorial service for the more than 6,400 victims of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in January of that year, the Chuo-ward will host one of the biggest illumination festivals in Japan. We were warned that the trains will be very crowded, but as residents of Kobe, this event is something we cannot miss.



1. CHRISTMAS KARAOKE

We karaoke on the regular with our friends at the wonderful and cheap Karaoke Ban Ban by Kobe Station. But for Christmas, those of us still in town will sing our hearts out to any Christmas selection we can find. Christmas music is not my idea of fun, but I will make an exception this year.

BONUS! OSAKA

Osaka is a less than 30-minute train ride away on the special rapid, and for about a ¥500 train ticket we can skip over to the next city to hit up Universal Studios Japan and Den Den Town!

Image sources:

Be Kobe by ろごきっとと

Mosaic by Cesar I. Martins

Ikuta Shrine by Rhema Baquero

Kobe Kingdom

Luminarie by Rhema Baquero

Events Calendar:

January to Mid-February

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

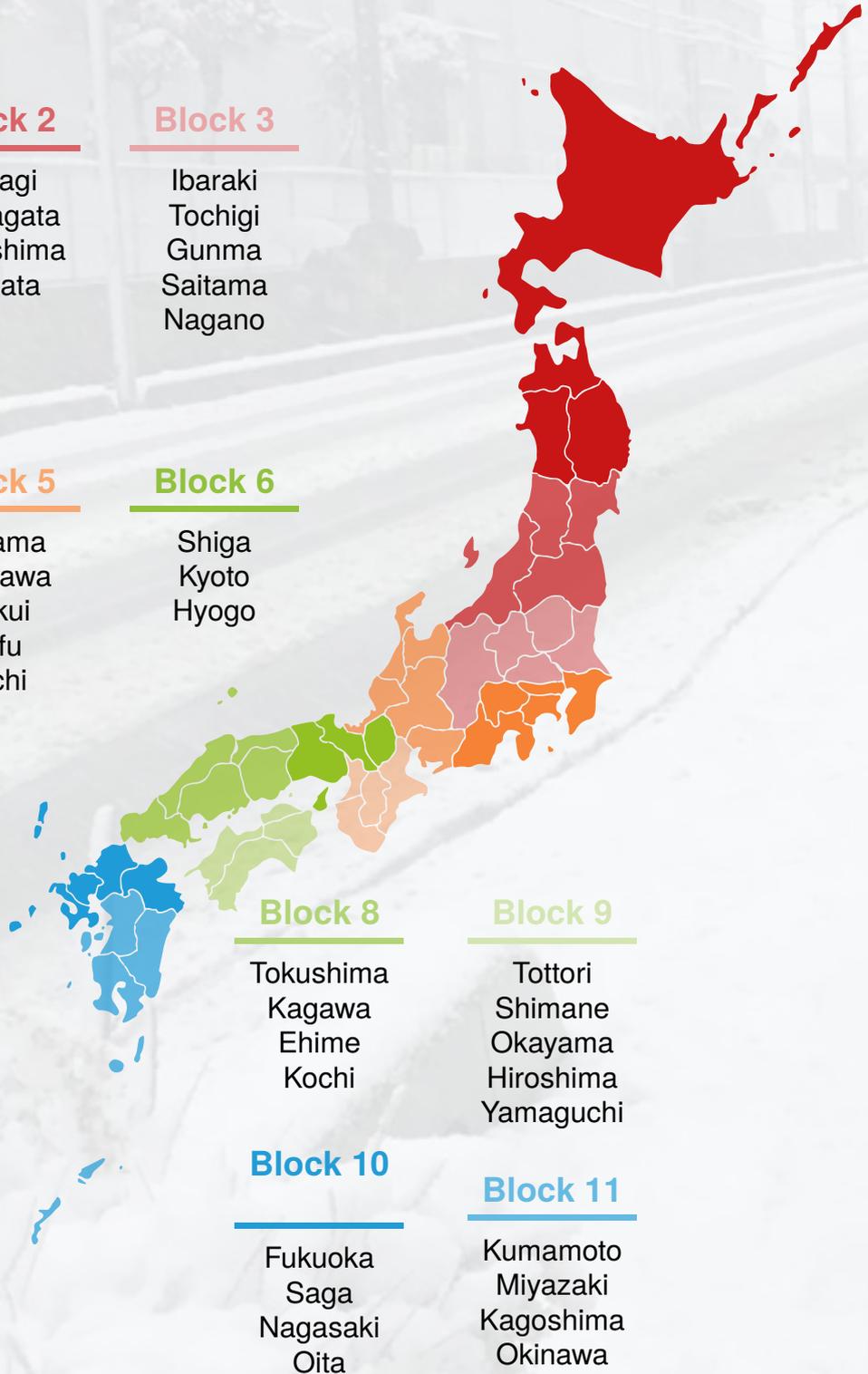
Tottori
Shimane
Okayama
Hiroshima
Yamaguchi

Block 10

Fukuoka
Saga
Nagasaki
Oita

Block 11

Kumamoto
Miyazaki
Kagoshima
Okinawa





Block 1

Misawa Christmas Festival

22 November - 14 January
Misawa City, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tsukinoki Light Fantasy

15 December – 13 January
Yokote City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Dainippo Bugaku

02 January
Kazuno City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Hasshoku Ramen Festival 2019

12 January – 14 January
Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Miyoshi Bonden Matsuri

17 January
Akita City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Otofuke Tokachigawa Shiratori Festival Sairinka 2019

26 January – 24 February
Otofuke-cho, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

The 28th Shintotsukawa Snow Festival 2019

27 January
Shintotsukawa-cho, Hokkaido
Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Obihiro Ice Festival 2019

01 February – 03 February
Obihiro City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Iwate Snow Festival 2019

02 February – 11 February
Mt. Iwate, Iwate Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

2019 Sapporo Snow Festival

04 February – 11 February
Sapporo City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Morioka Snow Light 2019

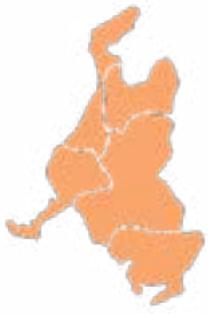
07 February – 09 February
Morioka City, Iwate Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Yuki-doro Festival (Snow Lantern Festival) 2019

08 February – 11 February
Hirosaki City, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)



Block 5

Winter of Gero hotspring Fireworks Event 2019

05 January – 30 March
Gero City, Gifu Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Echizen Coast Suisen (Flower) Festival 2018

12 January – 21 January
Echizen-cho, Fukui Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Underwater Tug of War 2019

20 January
Mihama-cho, Fukui Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Nihonkai Takaoka Nabe Matsuri 2019

12 January – 13 January
Takaoka City, Toyama Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Foodpia Kanazawa 2019

26 January – 28 February
Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Nagoya Ramen Matsuri 2019

01 February – 11 February
Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)



Block 6

Kobe Illuminage

03 November – 11 February
Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Katsube and Sumiyoshi Fire Festival

12 January
Moriyama City, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Yumitori no Shinji (Shinto Ritual of Bow-Twirling)

14 January
Hino-cho, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Makino Winter Festival 2019

26 January
Takashima City, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Nippon Nabe Grand Prix 2019

26 January – 27 January
Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Yasaka Shrine Setsubun

02 February – 03 February
Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Heian Jingu Setsubun

03 February
Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)



Block 7

Oni Hashiri – Ogres and Flaming Torches

14 January
Nara City, Nara Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tengu Festival

14 January
Yura-cho, Wakayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Tuna Festival

26 January
Nachikatsuura Town, Wakayama
Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Owase Ya-Ya Festival

01 February – 05 February
Owase City, Mie Prefecture

[Website in English and
Japanese](#)

Dojima Yakushido Setsubun Omizukumi Festival

03 February
Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shinto Ritual, Kitsune no Yomeiri (Fox's Wedding)

03 February
Yokkaichi City, Mie Prefecture

[Website in English and
Japanese](#)

Yoka Ebisu

07 February – 08 February
Nabari City, Mie Prefecture

[Website in English and
Japanese](#)



Block 8



Block 9

Takamatsu Telsa Finale Film Festival

05 January - 06 January
Takamatsu City, Kagawa Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Ebisu Festival

09 January - 11 January
Ozu City, Ehime Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Todo Okuri

14 January
Niihama City, Ehime Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Susaki Road Race

20 January
Susaki City, Kochi Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

The 15th Snow Battle Shikoku Tournament

26 January - 27 January
Miyoshi City, Tokushima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Winter Flower Illumination in Tottori Hanakairo

09 November - 14 January
Nanbu-cho, Tottori Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Faun Festival

14 January
Shimonoseki City, Yamaguchi Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shimane Prefecture Snowball Fight

26 January - 27 January
Hamada City, Shimane Prefecture
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Mihara Shingo-shi

08 February - 10 February
Mihara City, Hiroshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

The 35th Miyajima Oyster Festival

09 February - 10 February
Miyajima City, Hiroshima Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)

The 8th Higashi Awakura Snow Festival Snowball Competition

10 February
Mimasaka City, Okayama Prefecture
[Website in Japanese only](#)





Block 9



Block 10

Winter Flower Illumination in Tottori Hanakairo

09 November – 14 January
Nanbu-cho, Tottori Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Faun Festival

14 January
Shimonoseki City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Shimane Prefecture Snowball Fight

26 January – 27 January
Hamada City, Shimane Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Mihara Shingo-shi

08 February – 10 February
Mihara City, Hiroshima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

The 35th Miyajima Oyster Festival

09 February – 10 February
Miyajima City, Hiroshima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

The 8th Higashi Awakura Snow Festival Snowball Competition

10 February
Mimasaka City, Okayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Huis Ten Bosch “large Orchis graminifolia exhibition”

01 November - 18 February
Sasebo City, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Kokura Illumination

02 November – 14 January
Kokura City, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

“Batabata Ichi (Bazaar) ” in Amagi

04 January – 05 January
Asakura City, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Horan Enya

06 January
Bungo Takada City, Oita Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Daizenji Tamataregu Shrine’s “Oniyo” (Fire Festival)

07 January
Kurume City, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Heto Mato (Fisherman Festival)

20 January
Goto Town, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Yutoku Inari Shrine Hatsuuma Festival

02 February
Kashima City, Saga Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Crying Child Sumo

03 February
Hirado City, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Shinwa No Takachiho Kenkoku Festival

11 February
Takachiho Town, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Nagasaki Lantern Festival

05 February – 19 February
Nagasaki City, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)



Block 11

Minato Odori Park Illumination in Kagoshima 2018-2019

01 December – 31 January
Kagoshima City, Kagoshima Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Kirishima Kumendaiko (Nine-Sided Drum)

01 January
Kirishima City, Kagoshima Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Shurijo Castle Park New Year's Celebration

01 January – 03 January
Naha City, Okinawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Aoshima Shrine Naked Visit

08 January
Miyazaki City, Miyazaki Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Hayumi-sai (Matobakai)

20 January
Nagasu-cho, Kumamoto Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Nakijin Gusuku Cherry Blossom Festival

26 January – 11 February
Kunigami-gun, Okinawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Takahashi Inari Shrine Hatsuuma Festival

02 February
Kumamoto City, Kumamoto Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

Photos:
Kirsty Broderick
Rhema Baquero
Marc Baquero
Rhema Baquero

I'm planning a Vietnam trip in January with my family. As a result, I have decided to stay in Hita for winter break. That's not a bad thing though. I'm looking forward to it for many reasons:

Relaxation

I have had a busy schedule this semester: Connect, trumpet lessons, English hour with doctors, and marching band practice. I'm a go-go-go type of person, but sometimes I forget the importance of sitting down and letting my brain rest. I'm hoping to recharge so I'll be ready for a new year.

Scrapbook

During my time in Japan I have kept a journal of special moments from school, club activities, and hanging out with friends. However, due to my busy schedule I sometimes forget to write events on the day they happen. Thankfully I keep notes in my phone so I can write them down when I have time. My goal for this winter break is to not only catch up, but also add pictures to my journal entries. This will probably be my last year teaching, so I want to use this as an opportunity to reflect on my time in Japan.

Reading

When I was young I used to always have a book on me. So much so that my teacher would scold me for reading during class. The great part about this job is that it has allowed me to regain my love of reading. With a bunch of office days coming up, I will be checking off some things off my wishlist including, *Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, and *Princess Diaries*. The last one might seem strange but it's been on my list for a while. I first started reading the series when I was in middle school, but I never got past the second book because the next book was always gone.

Image source:
[Alice Hampson](#)



EVENTS EDITOR

Hibernating FOR THE winter

Peyton Goodman (Oita)



NEWS EDITOR

Christmas Release

Tresha Barrett (Kyoto)

When it comes to a heart-wrenching breakup, I believe there are several stages that need to be hurdled in order to come out on the other side a somewhat functionally sane human being. These stages are anger, sadness, back to anger, a mixture of both, bingeing, not so well thought out distractions, a combustible combination of all four, then finally, contemplation, and - hopefully - some form of acceptance.

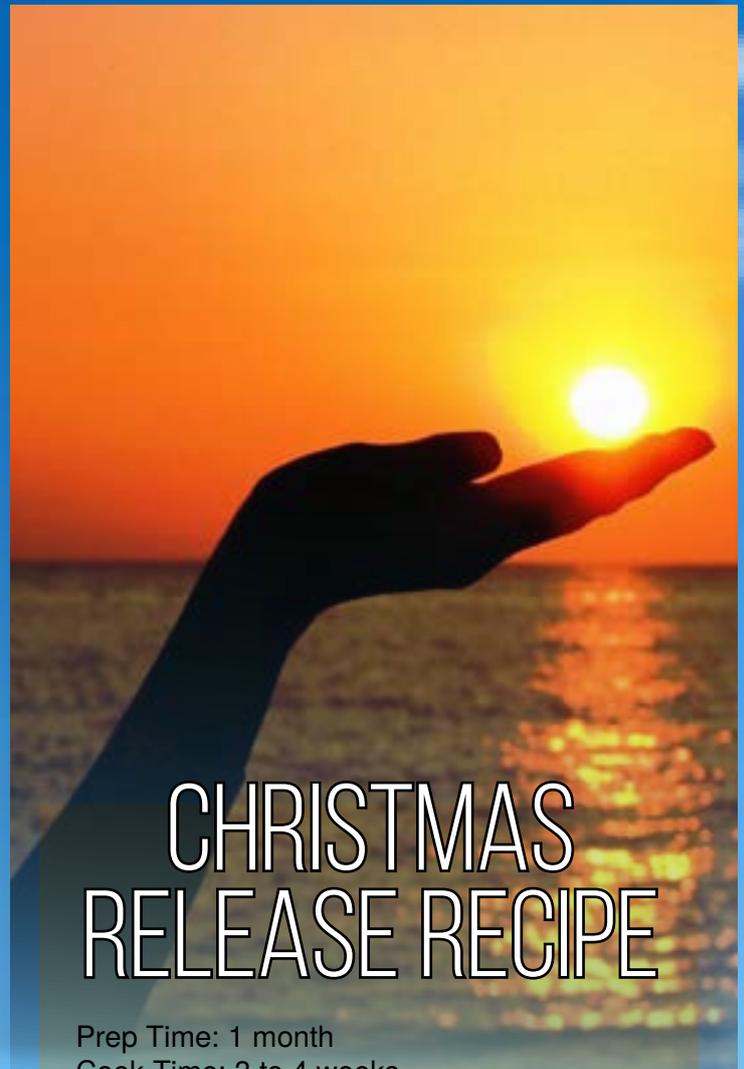
So, what are my plans for Christmas vacation? Diving headfirst into the latter stages of binges and distractions with some contemplation thrown in for good measure. The anger has passed; the sadness has settled. Now it's time to step through the dark tunnel of questionable decisions and quiet introspections. And what better way to do that than with sunshine, beaches, cocktails (et such), great friends, and some good ol' family time.

I will spend my Christmas vacation in Jamaica - the land of my birth and a place I haven't seen since 2016, which somehow feels like a small lifetime ago.

I will drink copious amounts of alcohol, partake in bounteous feasts, and spend way too much money on things that are either not necessary or will be forgotten after a short period of time. Is that healthy behavior? A small part of me has asked that question and will undoubtedly ask it again.

To that 'logical' voice, which I'm sure I'll excusably ignore whilst on my trip, I say - is anything really healthy behavior? (*Deep breath*) Isn't it healthier to burn through your emotions and deal with them as they come rather than try to stamp them down and pretend societal functionality in order to appear sane, only to wake up one day (likely years later) and realize that you've been holding on to some serious issues? Yep, believe it or not, what constitutes healthy behavior is completely subjective.

With that said, see you soon Jamaica!



CHRISTMAS RELEASE RECIPE

Prep Time: 1 month

Cook Time: 3 to 4 weeks

Yield: serves 1

Description:

A foolproof breakup recipe that's not so smooth but ultra-satisfying!

Ingredients:

5 tablespoons of mixed emotions

A pinch of insanity

1 ½ tablespoons of questionable decisions

1 ¼ teaspoons of introspection

Instruction:

Combine all ingredients in a relaxing space until a structured ball is formed. Take the ball and analyze it for a day or two, then release and move on.

Notes:

Keep close watch on emotions for up to 30 days after release.

Image source:

<https://bit.ly/2QypCGz>

[Homeward]

Nash Sibana

Over the holidays, I'm heading home. Not for long, just a few days over a week, which will likely be spent largely rushing here and there keeping up appearances with friends and family I haven't seen for a while since coming out to Japan. Christmas is usually a lowkey, comfortable affair in the Sibana household; we fill the fridge with food, throw on some Christmas jumpers and put the house on lockdown. Lots of people I know love to spend the holidays with huge tracts of extended family, and the appeal is clear; but trying to make time for the immediate family, especially since I and now my younger sister have left home, has become more and more of a priority. Maybe we're an antisocial family.

I'm lucky that I'm able to head home for Christmas whilst on JET, especially since I'm still in my first year. International travel is a huge expense, and very few of us live anywhere that a return ticket costs less than half a month's wages – most of us would need to spend much more just to get there and back, let alone all the other accompanying expenses. Living in Japan isn't especially cheap, and we've all got so many things we want to do (and student loans to repay), that setting aside large amounts of money just to go back home is prohibitive. My parents bought me my ticket home, and I wouldn't have been able to go if they hadn't. I'm fortunate to be able to benefit from that kind of generosity.

I'm having some trouble finding Christmas presents for people. I'm not sure what they'll be expecting, but I imagine it'd be considered pretty poor form not to bring something at least tangentially related to Japan and my time here. My budget is stretched thinly, across gifts, Secret Santa with other ALTs, *bonenkai* and travel expenses, and I don't want to cheap out too much. I need to get myself

and Bound]

da (Ibaraki)

out of Mito, a city that, for all its conveniences, doesn't run rich with the kind of knick-knack and curio purveyors that I'd probably need. That being said, I've already managed to pick up a few goodies from the AEON Mall – certainly not the height of “authentic Japanese culture” – so maybe I should just swallow my pride, get myself to Bic Camera and pick up some weird techno-oriented junk.

There's a carol concert that happens every year at the cathedral in Llandaff, the small village just outside of Cardiff in Wales that has for all intents and purposes long been swallowed by the city's modest urban sprawl. When I was in my last years of high school, we moved to Cardiff, and I attended a fancy school just down the road from the cathedral itself. As such, the school choir would hold an annual Christmas performance there, with the organs blaring and the teens singing their lungs out. I'm too old for it to be a childhood memory, but my roots in Cardiff have run long enough for me to fully think of it as home, and this concert is a fundamental part of that experience of Christmas. I haven't checked the dates for when it's being held this holiday season, but I hope I'll be home in time to see it.

I'm looking forward to all kinds of things. I'm curious to see what life in the UK

looks like to me now, after a few months away in a remarkably different place. I wonder if it'll be overwhelming to be surrounded by text, signage and speech that I can immediately, natively understand, as opposed to the kanji jungles of Japan. I wonder if my family and friends will notice anything different about me that I'm ignorant to, and whether those changes – if any – are positive ones. I wonder if being home will unearth some deep seated homesickness that I've suppressed to the point of unconsciousness, and the prospect of coming back out here after Christmas will be a terrible one.

Most of all I'm looking forward to seeing my partner, whom I've been thousands of miles and nine time zones away from since starting JET. I can't wait to see her again, to catch up and share all the stories that LINE chats and WhatsApp calls haven't been able to adequately convey. I can't wait to cook with her, to play video games with her, to spend hours just wasting time in her company. My only worries are my own doubts about my ability to get back on the plane after Christmas just to leave her behind again.

We'd thought that as time goes by, being apart would get easier,





as we adjusted to how things were. It's been something of the opposite. Our lives are ticking along, but the absence is ever present. She's been nothing but supportive of me and my disappearance off to Japan, but it still feels like an incredibly selfish thing to have done. It's frighteningly common for couples in relationships that become extremely long-distance (including many JETs over the years) to see those relationships wither under the strain. For what it's worth, I'm not worried about that in my own case – but I'm aware that that's what everyone thinks. All I know is that there's nothing I want more than to be near her again, and that leaving afterwards will be even harder now that we know what it actually feels like.

My favourite Christmas songs are the sad ones. *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* is the perfect example. Christmas is a time for joy, but it's also a time for reflection. We look back to where we were last year, to the successes and troubles of the last twelve months and take stock. Hopefully we can use the period to return to a place of comfort and familiarity, but in any given year many of us go through the kinds of changes that can't be returned from. Children are born, people are married, students are graduated; but we lose people and connections along the way. *Merry Little Christmas* has gone through numerous lyrical rewrites and reinterpretations since its 1943 debut in the suitably maudlin Judy Garland movie *Meet Me in St. Louis* (the story of the song's evolution

is well told [here](#), and is worth a read) but the original words are still the most evocative. The song's final verse is:

*Someday soon we all will be together
If the fates allow.
Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow.
So have yourself a merry little Christmas now.*

I think it captures in twenty-seven words what I've spent over a thousand on in this article. Coming home for Christmas this year is likely to be one of the most cathartic yuletide reunions that I've had in a very long time, but it's still going to primarily be "muddling through somehow". Being away from the ones you love is hard, and I think JETs can often feel like acknowledging how hard it is betrays some weakness. Whether you collapsed in an emotional heap of homesickness on your first night in your placement accommodation, or you've slowly built a small but insistent longing for home over months or years, I think we're all muddling through, at the end of the day. So until we ultimately go home, one year or five years later, dear reader please do have yourself a merry little Christmas now.

Nash Sibanda is a first year ALT in Mito, Ibaraki. He spends his days warming his SHS desks, making music, trying to learn Japanese and generally being a friendly reprobate.

her,
through somehow.
Christmas now.



*Me, second from left, and my festive family. My grandma
lack of a Christmas jumper pains me to this day.*



STYLE AND BEAUTY EDITOR

To Those
I Love,
At
Christmas

Laura Pollacco (Kanagawa)

Christmas means a lot of things to a lot of people. Though Japan doesn't officially celebrate Christmas, you can still hear 'Last Christmas' and 'All I Want For Christmas Is You' blaring out from all the shops here. For some in Japan, Christmas is a day for couples to get together and do something fun or romantic. In many other countries Christmas is a family holiday; certainly this is true in the UK. This year, however, will be my first Christmas with my family in 3 years.

I'm sure this is not uncommon among JETs, but for me, it is starting to bring into clearer focus how much I love and care for my family and friends back home and how much this Christmas means to me. Since I left for my university, on the other side of the country from my family, my life has always been a little detached from them. I don't mind this too much, and my parents have always encouraged me to do whatever I want to do, no matter how far away it takes me from them. Whilst I was at university though, I could at least go back home every year for Christmas or fly to Malta to be with my dad's side of the family. But the last couple of Christmases, jobs and distance have gotten in the way. I haven't had the classic family orange and prosecco on Christmas morning in 3 years. I haven't sat in the living room, all bundled up in my dressing gown, to open presents with my family in 3 years. I haven't had my dad's amazing Christmas starter dish, my mum's red cabbage or my gran's wonderfully alcoholic Christmas brandy pudding, slathered in brandy custard, in 3 years. Now that I am going back home for Christmas, full of anticipation for what is to come, I realise just how much I have missed it all.

As we grow up, leave school and head to university, then graduate and get jobs, life can seem less predictable. At least that is how it feels for me. In many ways it's great! It's exciting and adventurous and we learn and grow from it. On the flip side, it can also be stressful and tiring. Spending Christmas at home with the family is like the antidote for that. Don't get me wrong, Christmas with the family for many can be stressful and tiring in its own way, but it doesn't really seem to change. In my family we know what is going to happen. We know that we are gonna drink alcohol first thing in the morning and carry on for the rest of the day (it was a J2O when I was a kid!). My dad is going to have the table set straight away and start on the cooking. My mum and him are going to push around for oven space. My grandad is going to sit in his chair and constantly ask what is going on in the kitchen

whilst watching some sports. My sister and I may get into an argument at some point. After dinner we are going to watch Christmas TV and my mum is going to start snoring really loudly, causing us to try and wake her up, only to have her say, "I'm awake! I'm awake! I am watching it...wait, where are we in the film?" We will end the day playing a game of charades in which my grandad will completely fail to grasp the concept, leaving us in stitches with laughter. In a world that is changing very quickly, in both good ways and scary ways, Christmas with the family is still there.

For me, this time of the year is also my birthday! For a long time, I would have a party that luckily happened to coincide with the beginning of school vacation. I would invite roughly 20 students to my house and, for some, it became an annual pilgrimage. My friend Nick and his dad would drive to my house every year together, through rain and snow, creating a small tradition of their own. Nick and I created our own tradition where we took a photo almost every year in front of the same poster. It's great to look back and see how much we grew and changed over that short time. He is still one of my closest friends, and I am excited to see him again and eat take-away whilst we catch up. I am also meeting my friend Dot, an honestly amazing human being and a big part of why I am here in Japan. She got engaged this year and I will be her maid of honour next year! We have plans to do bridesmaid dress fittings and to celebrate her birthday as well! I will also meet up with the people who went out of their way to come visit me here in Japan, and whom I have created amazing memories with. Going back home means getting to see these people who are so important to me, to exchange gifts and spend time with one another. They have remained close to me regardless of the distance between us. They have supported me when times were difficult and celebrated with me when they were good. For me, this holiday is a chance for more celebration, for looking back at what we have all done together and for looking forward to what is still to come.

I am sure these scenarios I am talking about feel familiar to many of us on the JET Programme. The friends and family we are so far apart from are still there, still supporting us and encouraging us. No matter how you spend the holidays, I think this time of year is when we think about those who are important to us and how much we love them and appreciate them. This is for them.

To those I Love, at Christmas.



It doesn't snow in El Paso, not *really*. Any flurries that may fall from the sky are eaten by cold concrete and the cracked scales of desert sand. It's there when the sun rises, and it's gone by noon. We go to work in scarves and hats and come home in jackets made for autumn. Mine is the kind of town that shuts down when snow sticks, so rare it is. Pipes burst, water gets contaminated, and accidents abound.

But just like rain in the roaring heat of summer, snow is special. When it falls on the Franklin mountains, that scene never loses its novelty. Families still enjoy making snowmen, even if they are dirtied with dried grass. Students get their snow days, and hot cocoa becomes everyone's favorite drink. Winter in El Paso isn't the darkness you long to end so cherry blossoms can bloom. It's short, sobering, and there to be experienced, not hidden from.

After only a year and a half in Japan, I miss the desert cold. Which is one reason I am thankful to be going home this holiday season. Here are some others.

To my knowledge, there is not an ounce of hispanic heritage in my family tree. But no one would ever know it by the way I adore Mexican cuisine. Living about twelve miles from the border into Ciudad Juarez will do that.

ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

Christmas in the *Desert*

Sarah White (Fukui)

Christmas takes this adoration to a whole other level. In the parking lot of the local Walmart, we step out of our cars into the brisk afternoon air. Hands stuffed into pockets, we rush for the entrance. But it's not the interior of the supercenter that we care about. It's the kind, elderly woman standing outside and selling homemade tamales. She sells them for nearly a dollar a piece to compete with the bigger names in town even though the labor alone is worth twice that much. And when you bite into them, you can taste the care and love that was put into each corn husk--along with hot red chile and juicy, shredded pork, of course.

We all have our food-related traditions at Christmas. Turkey, ham--my family smokes a brisket. But in the Chihuahua desert, tamales find their way onto every table.

After dinner on Christmas night (or any night because the feast goes from Christmas Eve right into New Year, let's be honest), some of us want to walk it off--get outside and regain energy for Round Two. There is no better way to do that than to look at Christmas lights. They run rampant, and without the snow to make the outdoors untraversable, we can enjoy them the whole season long. Eastridge is a neighborhood entirely dedicated to illumination during this time of year. It's house after house of over-the-top decorations that had to have been passed down from previous owners because surely they'd be bankrupt

otherwise. Or maybe we go see the Fred Loya house instead, drinking hot cocoa sold by the enterprising neighbor of a local celebrity at a dollar a cup while we watch a light show timed to music.

More often than not though, all we have to do is go outside to see some amazing lights. Unlike places with snow all year coming from constant cloud cover, we can see the stars almost every night in El Paso. It's brilliant from our front lawns but even more breathtaking after a short drive into the desert expanse. There is something spiritual about the winter sky around the solstice. Somehow, staring up into space reminds us how small we really are and how everyone needs to come together and be kind in order to really impact the world in a positive way. And isn't that what Christmas is all about?

So do I romanticize Christmas in the desert? Yeah, I think so. My family lives there. I grew up there. It's home, and the small things will always mean something so much bigger to me for it. But I find that with all my traveling and with all the grand holiday plans that this job allows us to enjoy, I have never been more excited for a vacation than I am for this one. Because for me, Christmas is about the small joys and the way that those add up into something greater. Something magic.

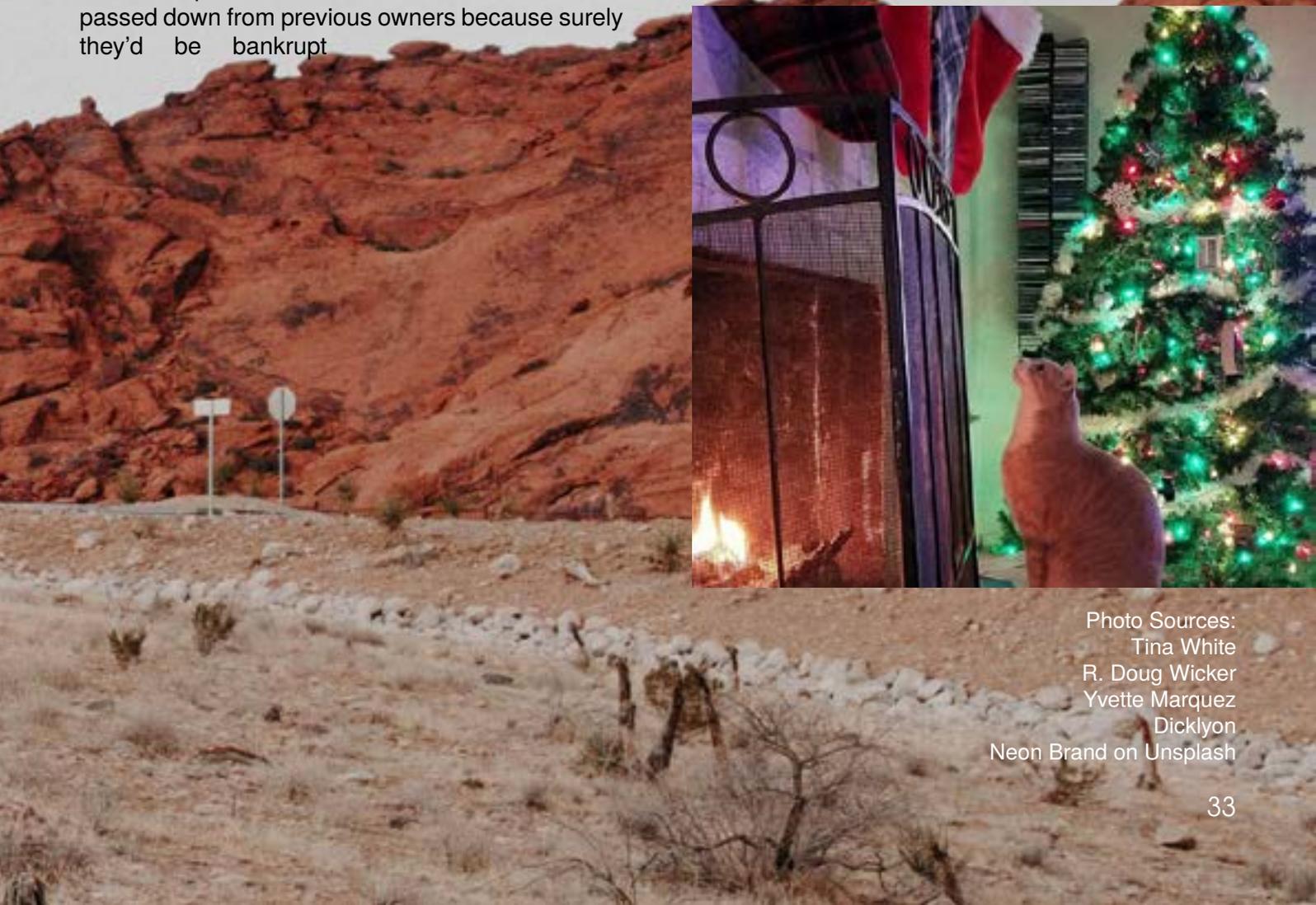


Photo Sources:
Tina White
R. Doug Wicker
Yvette Marquez
Dicklyon
Neon Brand on Unsplash

ART EDITOR

WHERE
Where Do We Come From?

WHAT
What Are We?

WHERE
Where Are We Going?

Tayla-Paige van Sittert (Kumamoto)

I am embarking on my first travel experience with a partner! There will be snow, Christmas lights, cozy cuddles, aaaaaaand a ton of travel stress.

Everyone's heard that one of the best ways to see just how compatible you and your partner are is to take a trip together, right? Sooooo, will we make it or break it?

This is the Art Section so it's only fair that I mention a long-gone famous artist somewhere, isn't it... I will therefore adapt Paul Gauguin's painting "*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*" as a loose frame to talk about my lover and I going on a trip through Japan. It won't be quite as heavy as Gauguin's deep existential questions, but we will be going on a journey, from some sort of start to some sort of finish.

Where Do We Come From?

We are both from South Africa, with next to no Japanese language ability and possibly very opposing travel personalities. He likes to take it slow (not like me), is not maddened by high-key curiosity (like me), doesn't think of himself as a foodie in any way, shape or form (I want only good food thanks) and is mostly comfortable remaining in his comfort zone (Ah, nope, make me uncomfortable please).

Although, in our defense, we have been together for 4 years and have a very deep understanding and acceptance of whom we are, to each other and ourselves. In his defense, some parts of these characteristics are shifting and I think we are both hoping, that when the time requires it, he will rip his shirt open and let his South African adaptability* beam from his being. If not, mine will shine for us both.

*Coming from a land of 11 languages, we are used to language/cultural barriers and strange interpersonal phenomena. Ha Japan, you piece of cake, you! (Worried face)

What are we?

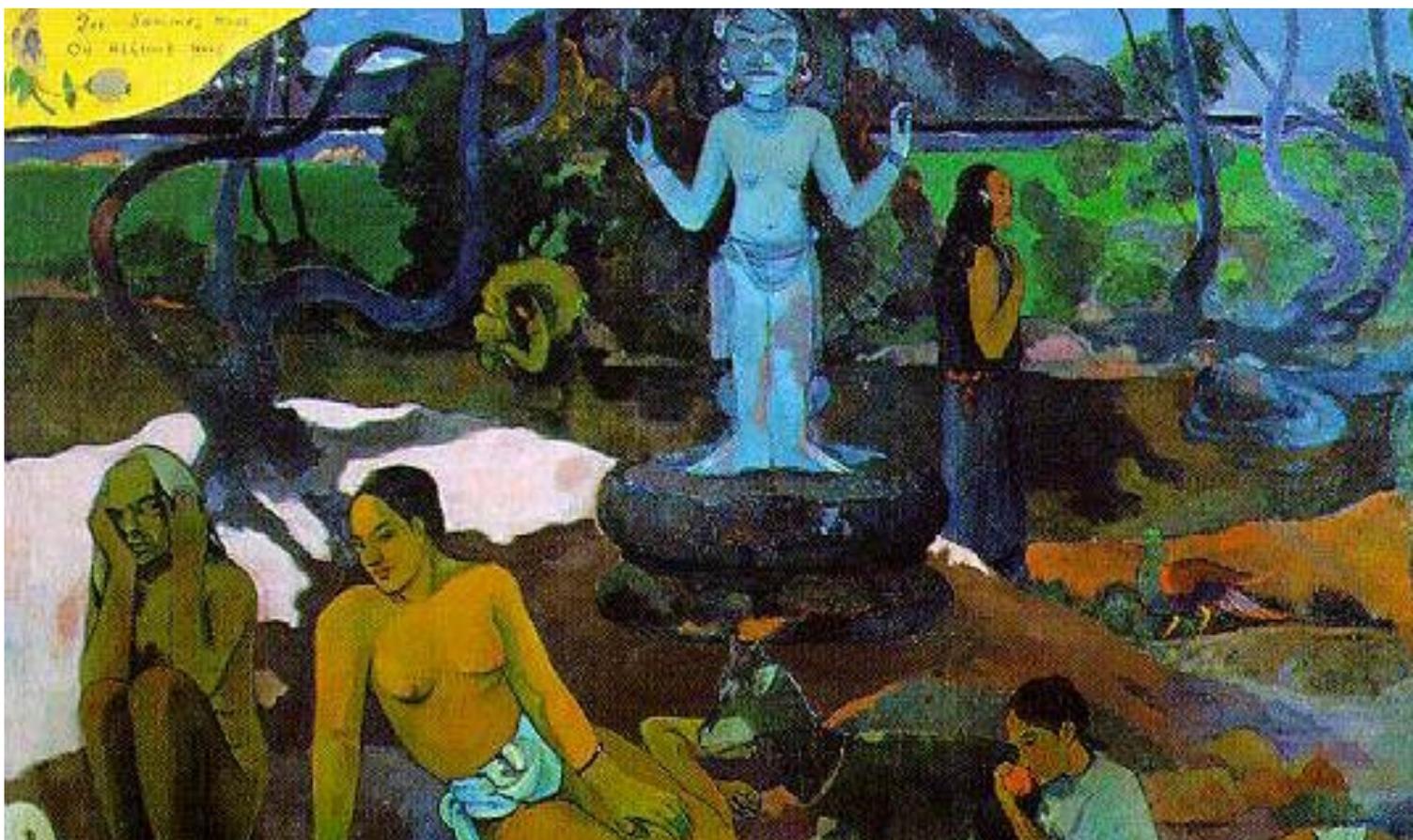
Ok Gauguin (past) and readers (present), the life part, it is time!

We will be stopping off in three major cities, Kyoto for a Japanese couples Christmas, Tokyo for a new kind of New Years and Hokkaido (Biei and Sapporo) for the holiday honeymoon. I've booked the whole trip myself and to be honest I have no idea what I am doing. As a result, a whack of anxiety looms at all times; do the airlines exist? Do they know we are coming? Will the trains work on the public holidays? Will we find the accommodation? What if I get hungry and he's overtired? Do I have enough money? What if we don't see that one really big-deal thing? What if ...we break up? Yikes.

These questions have real emotional weight, but I do believe that no matter what, we will manage. I am always up for a challenge anyway, and I think he is ready for that too.

For any traveling couples out there try these hot tips from someone who doesn't really know but is applying a Google search to any expectations:





1.

Plan. I know being spontaneous sounds fun but it tends to lead to dead ends and closed doors too. Especially in Japan where opening and closing times don't follow a familiar pattern; rather plan and book and check ahead of time.

2.

Be kind and honest. If the way your partner is eating bothers you, or if they are god-awful at directions, kindly ask them to not, kindly.

3.

It's totally OK to do separate things every now and then if you need some alone time/ space. My partner and I like very different things so we have agreed that we are occasionally allowed to go to our own things and then reconvene later.

4.

See every challenge as a way to get closer. If the shit hits the fan, it's a great opportunity to work as a team to clean it up. Show each other what you're made of!



5.

Honor your sleep and tummy growls. Seriously, if not, those hormones will create anarchy. Take snacks and many rests, wherever, whenever.

It doesn't have to be completely P-E-R-F-E-C-T. One bad moment doesn't have to ruin the whole trip. Carry a pinch of salt around with you.

6.

Where Are We Going?

Is this the part where death doth come? Probably not, it will just be the end of the trip, and we will all emerge somehow, at least intact anyway.

If anything, you can try and remember what an English t-shirt once told me: "At One's Fingertips. Big Shot. Busy as a Bee. Moments. Black and White. DO IT DO IT!"

Follow me on Instagram to see if we break up or fall more in love: @teepee_in_japan

HEALTH & NUTRITION EDITOR

ILLUMINATING

KYOTO

Amanda Muller (Kyoto)

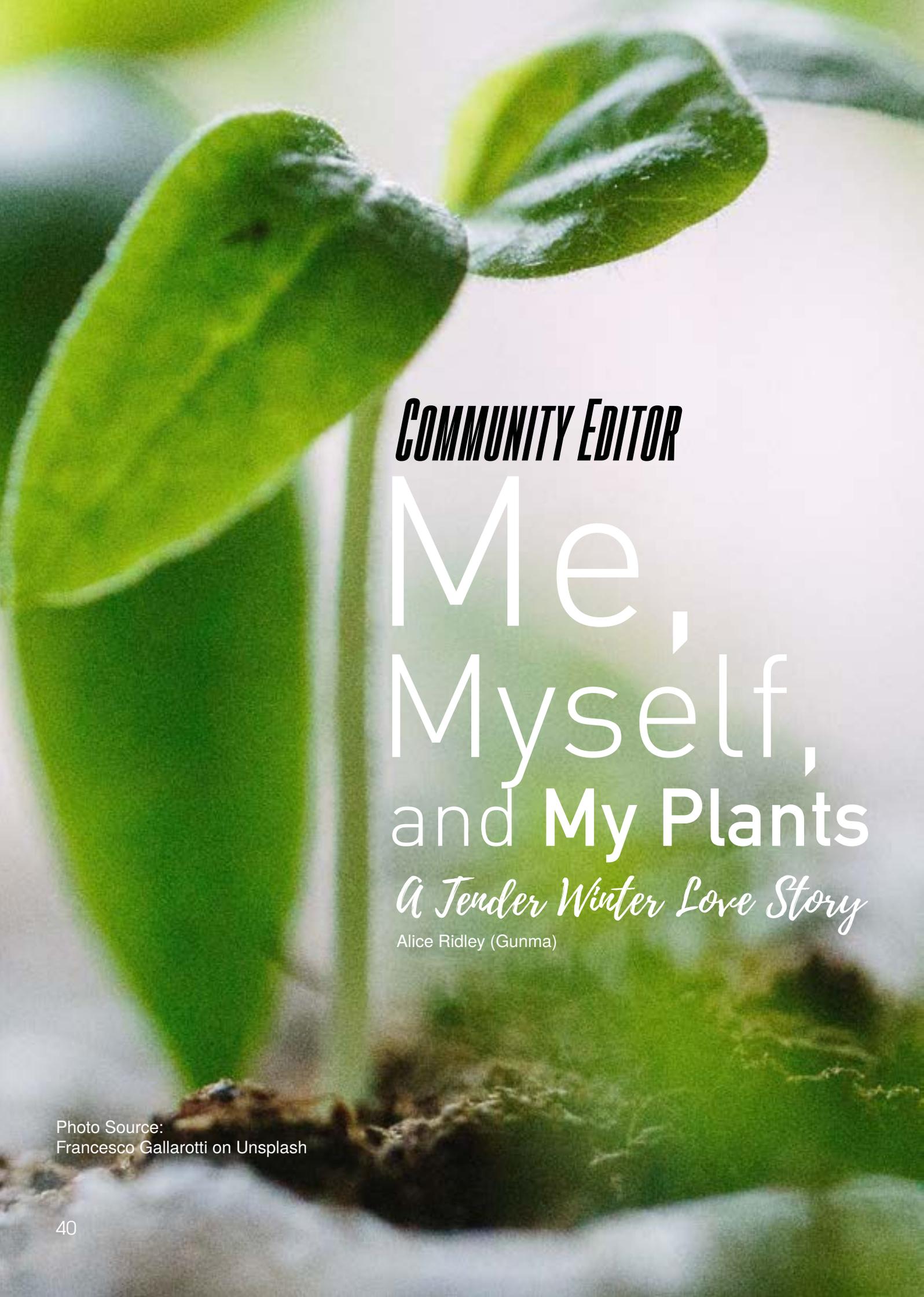
I love Christmas, but I'm not a particularly festive person. I have a strict "no Christmas before Thanksgiving" policy, and the kind of person who would break that policy is not the sort of person I want to associate with, if I'm being honest. If I see Christmas lights or hear Christmas music before December, I feel a visceral rage from deep within that I wouldn't otherwise have known I was capable of. Christmas music grates on my nerves if I hear it anytime before the week leading up to Christmas, and even then I think the 24-hour Christmas music on the radio is overkill.

Despite all this, after staying in Japan last year and not having a "real" Christmas, I'm feeling extremely Christmas-y this year. I'm going home for the first time in a year and a half, and I'm ready for all my family's usual Christmas traditions — baking cookies, drinking too much on Christmas Eve at my aunt's house (usually featuring a bottle of Fireball we pass around, but this year it will be some *sake* I'm bringing home), and laying around in pajamas all day watching Christmas movies on Christmas Day. In November, I'm already pumping the Christmas jams and watching all the terrible, cheesy, Hallmark-esque Christmas movies Netflix has put out this year (I recommend *The Christmas Switch* with Vanessa Hudgens). Who even am I?

In order to further fuel my newfound Christmas addiction, I'll be checking out the various winter illuminations my prefecture has to offer before I go home for the holidays. Kyoto has a ton of nighttime illuminations, so the only question is whether I'll have time to catch them all!

- 1** ROHM Illumination: near ROHM Corporation's headquarters, the company puts on Kyoto's largest display with nearly 800,000 light bulbs.
- 2** Kyoto Station Illumination: Kyoto Station's illuminated stairway set to Christmas music, as well as their giant Christmas tree, is always fun to see while you walk through the station.
- 3** Kyoto Botanical Gardens: The botanical gardens in Kyoto are always beautiful, and this time of year they're lit up with Christmas lights, making it fun and festive as well.
- 4** Arashiyama Bamboo Grove: Arashiyama is one of my favorite places in Kyoto for all of its scenic views, and while not necessarily Christmas-y, seeing the bamboo lit up in the dark is awesome.
- 5** Joyo Comprehensive Athletic Park: The illuminations at this park are all donated, which makes for a unique experience. The park also hosts a festival as part of the illumination!
- 6** Kyocera Headquarters: Near the headquarters of Kyocera Corporation, the company hosts an illumination featuring a giant Christmas tree illuminated on the side of their building.
- 7** Doshisha University: Doshisha International School hosts an illumination every year, featuring the tallest Christmas tree in Japan!





COMMUNITY EDITOR

Me,
Myself,
and My Plants

A Tender Winter Love Story

Alice Ridley (Gunma)

Photo Source:
Francesco Gallarotti on Unsplash

For some, this winter break brings a time where people head back home to see loved ones. Or others have their own mini Christmas celebrations here in Japan. Myself, I am neither heading back home or having any Christmas celebrations of my own. But I will be surrounded by loved ones.

Green, thriving and emitting plenty of good vibes. No, I don't mean I am going to run off into a forest and Bear Grylls it for a couple of days. I can do so in the comfort of my own home. It all began with me buying one humble monstera houseplant... and after four months, one swiftly multiplied into fourteen houseplants scattered throughout my house. These modest houseplants were a gateway into a second obsession: edible plants.

But before I talk about my winter break schemes for my small balcony garden, I want to list off some benefits of gardening (indoor or edible) for the dreaded SAD, or any other mental challenges that come with living in a foreign country now, or anytime of the year! These three points are just scraping the surface of the benefits of connecting to nature in your own home! If you are interested, there is tonnes of information on the internet. Regardless of if you have interest in gardening or not, if you are feeling down during this season then utilise the resources available for ALTs and please remember self care!

The Benefits of Gardening

1. It gives us something to be responsible for

It may seem like an odd comparison, but my connection I feel with my plants feels similar to that of a cat I used to flat with. It is a very instinctive paternal feeling. The plant requires us to remember to water it, re-pot and nurture it to remain alive. They quite literally are counting on us to live (though in saying this, during the peak of my plant obsession I have been hanging out with friends and thinking about getting home to water them. It's fine.. so normal...)

2. Connecting to nature has been proven to assist with mental health, *tangata whaiora*

As early as 2003, research had concluded that gardening is beneficial to mental health. Simply put, gardening serves "as a gentle reminder to us that we are not the centre of the universe. Self-absorption can contribute to depression, and focusing on the great outdoors – even in the pared-down form of a patio – can encourage us to be less insular." (1) Essentially, giving a damn about something other than yourself (not so) surprisingly helps you see the bigger picture of life itself.

3. Being present with your plants reduces anxiety

Even if just for a little bit each day. Tending to your plants gives you a routine time slot where your mind switches off. Getting into this present zone allows your mind to relax and be aware of the growth in front of you. Simply put, "When we let go of ruminating on the past or worrying about the future and instead focus on the here and now, anxiety lessens." (2)



Wall particle I have chosen for my vertical garden. Wow, much space for activities!



Daiso truly has everything you ever wanted!



My project for winter break is tackling a longtime challenge of making a vertical edible garden on the particle wall of my apartment balcony. As you can see from the photo, it is nothing special; but vertical gardening provides some prime property for some serious growing potential. So let's get into this amateur's gardening guide!

1. Sourcing the vertical planters

These can either be made of plastic or a felt fabric. If getting plastic, avoid black plastic as it may cause your plants to overheat as it retains heat from the sun. I personally found some fantastic felt planters on Amazon, as I was unable to find them in my local gardening stores. Find a spot with morning sun to place your vertical garden, especially for the colder months.

2. Choosing your plants

You have a choice of buying seedlings (good if you are shorter on time) or growing your own from seed. Good tip with growing from seed is soaking them overnight before planting, as they will have a kickstart from being activated by being super quenched prior! You can buy seedlings and seeds from home shops such as Cainz or Sekichu. You can even purchase seeds from our trusty Daiso. The selection can be a bit limited but they are cheap and cheerful! Even as I was writing this, I popped into my local Diaso and found a PET bottle attachment to instantly make a watering can. Excellent for your precious seedlings for a gentle watering.

3. Getting soil for happy plants

You will want to get a nutrient rich soil for your veggies! If you haven't already seen, Daiso has an extensive range of gardening products available. Bonus: everything is in English! Downside is that these only come in small bags. So if you are lucky enough to own a car, buying larger bags of veggie soil is more cost-effective from a home shop. This soil is made of organic matter such as peat moss, compost and bark chips. I personally bought extra compost for a 70:30 ratio that I very casually eyeball. When replanting for a new season, adding extra compost ramps up the nutrition content.

4. The planting itself is self-explanatory

But a tip for before planting is to give your seedlings a good soaking so they are in their optimum comfort zone before being transported to their future homes. We are being nurturing after all, right?

Then you are finished!

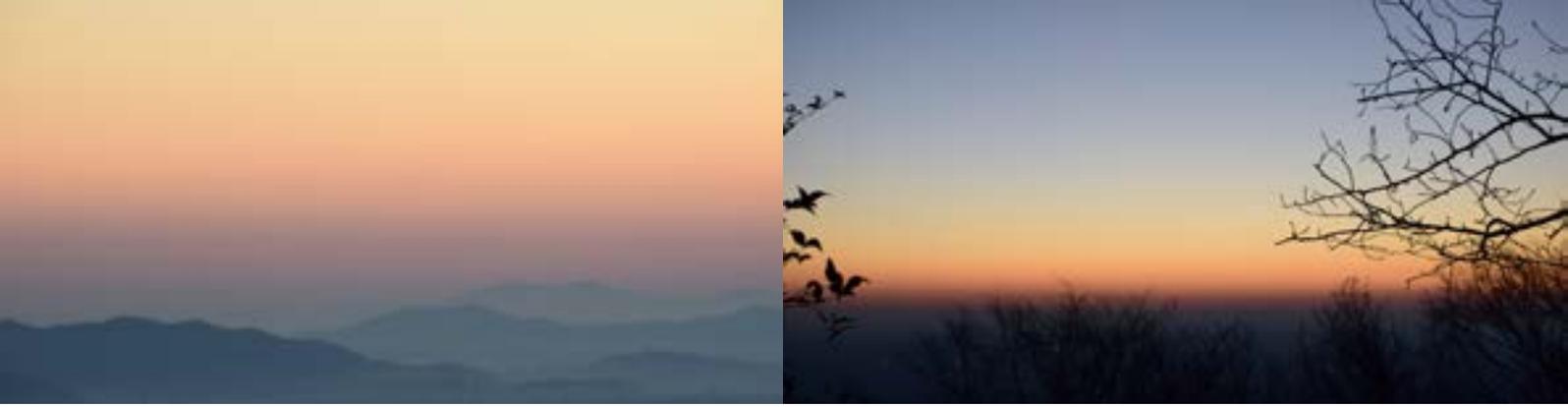


What edibles can you include for your vertical garden? Easy go-tos for these types of gardens are your essential herbs: coriander, sage, mint, cloves and so on, as they have shallow root systems and they aren't going to get panicked in the small space. Other easy go-tos are leafy lettuces and strawberries. It's totally up to you but use your imagination a bit, especially when using the quirky and small places that our Japanese homes come with! As the soil area for your plants is quite small, remember to water daily or every second day in order to keep them happy and moist! Nurture nurture nurture! Same goes for your indoor plants. But be careful not to overwater them. If you water them and there's a puddle in the drip tray, empty it out as plants get unhappy with soggy roots (just as any human doesn't like soggy socks!)



To conclude, go buy a plant or two, whether because of the scientifically-proven methods to improve your wellbeing or simply because you think they look pretty sick and show your sensitive side. You still will be indirectly improving your wellbeing. Lastly you can do this (mostly) without a car! I have managed to do most of my transporting of soil/plants/pots via my bicycle with some use of my imagination. I probably have ridden the whole "imagination" bandwagon a bit much, but it really is so vital when you are using small spaces! If you have any questions or you decide to make your own vertical garden yourself, please email me at alice444@gmail.com so we can be crazy plant people together!

Sources:
<https://tinyurl.com/ydgl58df>



SPORTS EDITOR

AN INAKA NEW YEAR

Hatsuhinode and Hatsumode

Nikkita Kent (Gunma)

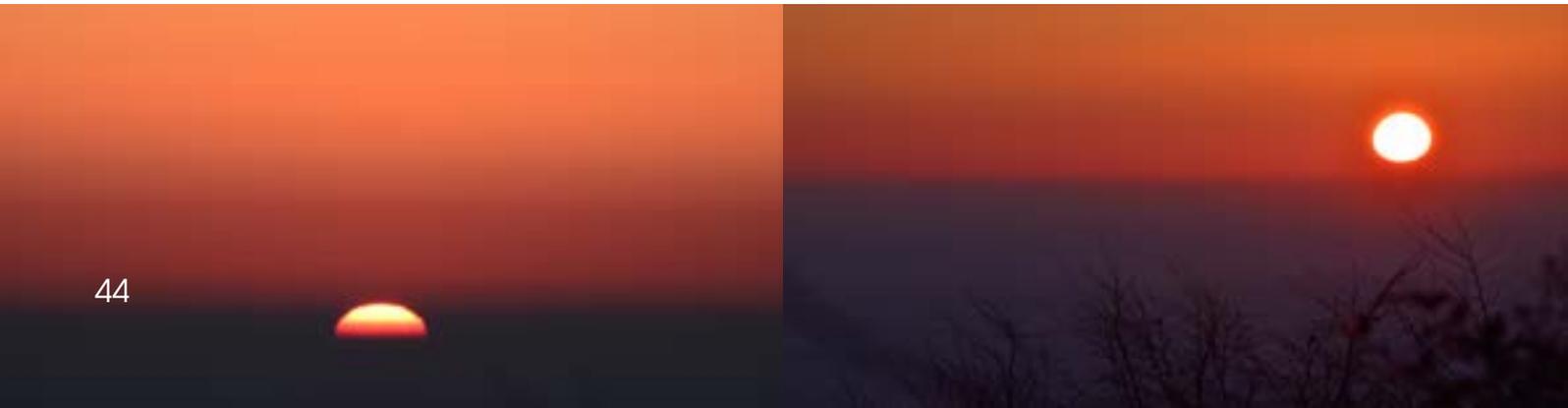
We've all been there, right? Living in a foreign country whose traditions and holidays are vastly different from our own. Even worse, sometimes we're stuck celebrating it alone. But while it could be a depressing season of let-downs and I-wish-this-were-more-like-homes, there is another option.

Discover a new tradition.

Last winter marked the beginning of a new tradition for me — *hatsuhinode* (初日の出). It's one that I plan on taking back to my home country. It was also my first *hatsumode* (初詣), though this may be more difficult to do in my hometown. But here, let me start at the beginning.

December 2017 was the first time I had been unable to visit my family for the holidays. You know the schtick — all the holidays from Thanksgiving to Christmas and New Year's are considerably smaller affairs, if you celebrate them at all. It seemed so gloomy, even with the sparkling illuminations everywhere you turn.

Then I got an offer I couldn't refuse. Why not spend the New Year with my JTE and her daughter? Naturally, I agreed without hesitation. That's when I found out how they planned on celebrating the New Year.



Hatsuhinode

Back home, we celebrate the New Year by staying up to witness the death of the old year. Kind of gruesome, when you think about it like that. Don't get me wrong, I love staying up until midnight, champagne in hand, watching as the clock ticks down and the fireworks kick off. It's brilliant and colorful and loud. It's also the exact opposite of New Year's in Japan.

Here, they celebrate the birth of the New Year. Instead of waiting up for midnight, the Japanese go to bed and get up before dawn, heading out to witness the first sunrise of the New Year in a tradition called hatsuhinode.

My JTE picked me up at about 5 a.m., the weather frigid and the darkness impenetrable. Her daughter oscillated between being half-asleep and stoked that we were headed to see the sunrise. A short drive away stood Mount Kanayama, the small mountain just north of Ota City. We would be hiking up the mountain in the dark to witness the sunrise from the summit. Carrying our backpacks, headlamps on, we started our trek through the dark winter's night.

Small pockets of hikers could be seen only by their bobbing lights above us, already well on their way to finding the perfect viewing spot. We carefully

followed along, gaining altitude as our breath came out in icy puffs. I may have still been nervous about the narrow, unlit paths, but at least I was no longer cold.

By the time we reached the Kanayama Castle ruins, scads of people were walking up from the parking lot close to the summit. People of all ages, from the 85-year-old grandmothers to newborn babies in carriers, were winding their way through the ruins to the temple.

We finally found a spot to sit on a raised dais, the trellis above empty except for dormant, woody vines hibernating until spring. People all around were setting up cameras on tripods or picnics on blankets. Steaming mugs of tea, coffee, and cocoa were passed around as the sky lightened from the grey or pre-dawn to the first hints of orange.

My JTE had made *onigiri* and handed one to me, still warm from earlier that morning. We ate and sipped our coffee as the sun continued to rise, bathing us all in brilliant oranges, reds, and pinks. When the sun finally peeked over the horizon, cheers broke out all over the mountain. Friends, families, and strangers celebrated the birth of the New Year together, sunrise reflected in their eyes.

Hatsumode

The moment the glowing orb was successfully hanging in the sky, the celebrations moved from the summit to one of the shrines or temples that dot the mountain. While waiting for the crowd to die down, we met Kocho-sensei and a few other teachers to sing the school song in hopes of a good year to follow.

Eventually, we meandered our way over to Nitta Shrine. We each tossed a 5-yen coin into the glistening box and rang the shrine's bell twice to announce our presence to the gods enshrined there. Clapping twice, we paid our respects and asked for a happy new year before bowing and allowing the next group to petition the gods for the same.

The descent back down the mountain was considerably less treacherous than the ascent now that the sun was out in full-force. We no longer had to worry about stepping off the path and sliding to our death or dismemberment, but it was still exhilarating to hike in the bright winter morning.

At the base of the mountain near Daikoin Temple, a small festival was being held— complete with chocolate covered bananas, *oden*, *yakisoba*, and our breakfast of choice: cotton candy. Betcha can't guess who picked our vittles.

Traditions

Last year culminated in some new traditions I plan on taking back to my hometown. I think instead of climbing up a mountain, I'll drive out to the beach and enjoy the uninterrupted sunrise while the rest of the world slumbers after a late night of partying. It's a simpler way to celebrate, perhaps, but one that soothes the soul and reminds us that even in the darkest of nights, there's always a sunrise to chase away the shadows.

This year, I've been invited back for the whole day of festivities. Now that I've experienced *hatsumode* and *hatsuhinode*, I can't wait to learn about other traditions with her family. Maybe we'll eat *o-sechi ryori* or make *mochi*. Maybe we'll listen to the pealing of the bells for *joya no kane*. Maybe I'll get to try my hand at *karuta* again and not be beaten by a 6-year-old.

No matter what is in store, I'm grateful that I can experience the New Year in such a grand way. Being on JET isn't just about teaching English. It's about making friends and exchanging cultures. It's about trying new things and merging parts of each culture until you find what suits you.

My challenge to you this holiday season is to try something new. Get so caught up in the uniqueness of Japanese culture that you don't have time to be sad you missed your family's traditional Christmas morning cinnamon rolls. JET doesn't last forever, but memories do. Go out and make some and have the happiest of new years!





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

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