

AJET

# CONNECT

News & Events, Arts & Culture, Lifestyle, Community

MARCH  
2019

Navigating the World of Japanese Beauty Products – Tips and Essential Vocab

**Rap in Japan – Navigating a Genre**

Accessibility in Video Games – The Challenges and Innovations So Far

**Female Artists in Japan – Five Names You Should Know**

Demons Out, Good Luck In! – Setsubun in Asakusa



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

# Calling all artists!

*Want to get your artwork an audience in Japan?*

**2019**



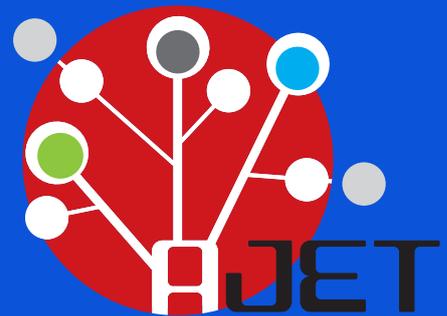
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# CREDITS

## HEAD EDITOR

Lauren Hill

## ASSITANT EDITOR

Angela Hinck

## SECTION EDITORS

Peyton Goodman  
Tresha Barrett  
Sarah White  
Laura Pollacco  
Tayla-Paige van Sittert  
Amanda Muller  
Alice Ridley  
Nikkita Kent  
Amy Lee

## CONTRIBUTORS

Nathan Abel  
Charlotte Akin  
Mike Clapis  
Stephan Cowart  
Fiona Duell  
Osasha Fertal  
Joe Galligan  
Angela Hinck  
Jessica Ing  
Joanna Kay  
Jayelon Lasseigne  
Sarah Oeste  
Lauren Porter  
Alice Ridley  
Tayla-Paige van Sittert  
Charrisa Traverse  
Peter Underwood  
Rana Wael

## HEAD OF DESIGN & LAYOUT

Ashley Hirasuna

## ASSISTANT DESIGNERS

Philippa Lawrie  
Rhema Baquero

## COVER PHOTO

Colette English

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### PHOTO

Nick Moulds

### ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Colette English  
Rhema Baquero  
Nick Moulds  
Ashley Hirasuna  
Marc Baquero  
Karina Zic

## HEAD WEB EDITOR

Dylan Brain

## ASSITANT WEB EDITOR

Alex Furukawa

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Celine Bennett

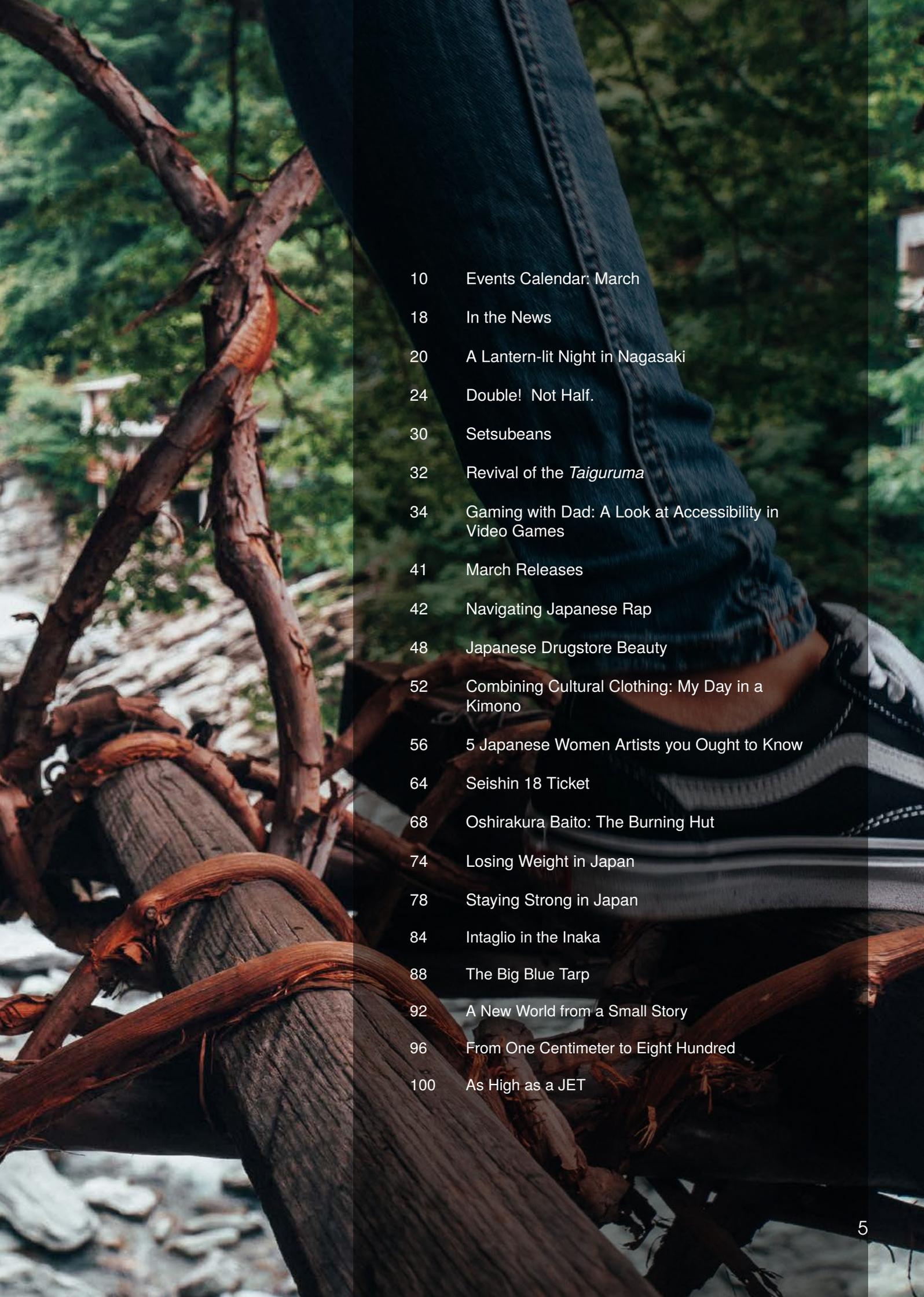
## COPY EDITOR

Emily Riley

## GENERAL SECTION EDITOR

Taylor Skultety  
Gavin Au-Yeung

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Spring has sprung!

March can be a bit of an emotional rollercoaster - mountains of pastel-coloured *hina matsuri* sweets wherever you look, and the accompanying traditional song (you know the one!) playing on an endless loop in your head; blooming cherry trees and sakura-flavoured everything (actually, there's no downside here); that fuzzy warm feeling as you wave off your graduating seniors, and the month of desk warming that follows.

Luckily, Connect is here to keep you (seemingly) busy! If you find yourself with extra time on your hands, why not invest it in a new hobby or personal project? This month, we follow JETs getting to grips with local activities, from weight lifting, through traditional fish lantern crafting, to belting out classics with a multilingual gospel choir. If you fancy getting stuck into some reading, check out our longer pieces on accessible gaming technology and cultural identity in children's literature.

Feeling like you want to fill up all that free time with something arty, but lacking inspiration? You won't want to miss our Art editor's rundown of five female Japanese artists you need to know! Last but not least - spring break! Whether you get a few free days off or you're rationing that precious *nenkyuu*, we're here to help you get the most out of your travels. This month, we weigh up the pros and cons of the Seishun 18 Ticket, so you don't have to!

Wherever your spring break takes you — enjoy, and *see you in the new school year!*

Lauren Hill  
Head Editor  
3rd Year Tokyo ALT



Photo: Nick Moulds



# NEWS AND EVENTS



**NEWS EDITOR**

[connect.news@ajet.net](mailto:connect.news@ajet.net)

**Tresha Barrett**

**EVENTS EDITOR**

[connect.events@ajet.net](mailto:connect.events@ajet.net)

**Peyton Goodman**

Photo: Rhema Baquero



# Events Calendar:

March 2019

## 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

### **Yubari International Fantastic Film Festival 2019**

07 March - 10 March

Yubari City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **New Concept Fireworks Collection in Omagari 2019**

23 March

Daisen City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Nagasaka Inari Shrine Bonten Matsuri 2019**

10 March

Yurihonjo City, Akita Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **The 2nd Annual Hachinohe Rakugo Association**

23 March - 24 March

Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **The 17th Wine in Sapporo Festival**

13 March

Sapporo City, Hokkaido Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Odekake LIVE in Morioka 212**

24 March

Morioka City, Iwate Prefecture

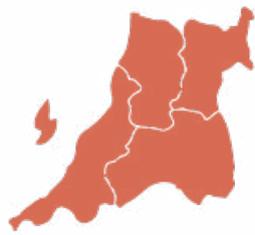
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Hakkoda "Snowy Corridor and Hot Springs" Walk**

30 March - 31 March

Aomori City, Aomori Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



## Block 2

### Atsumi Onsen Mount Maya Sake Festival

02 March  
Tsuruoka City, Yamagata Prefecture  
[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Nagaya SAKURA Fes

03 March  
Kaminoyama City, Yamagata Prefecture  
[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Snowy Mountain Trek in Spring

03 March  
Asahi Town, Yamagata Prefecture  
[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Lantern Festival 2019

03 March  
Mogami Town, Yamagata Prefecture  
[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Nakasato Setsugen Carnival 2019

09 March  
Tokamachi City, Niigata Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Sato Tamagawa Snow Festival

09 March - 10 March  
Oguni Town, Yamagata Prefecture  
[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Echigo Matsudai Fuyu-no-Jin

09 March - 10 March  
Tokamachi City, Niigata Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Shiogama Shrine Hote Festival

10 March  
Shiogama City, Miyagi Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Hodare Festival 2019

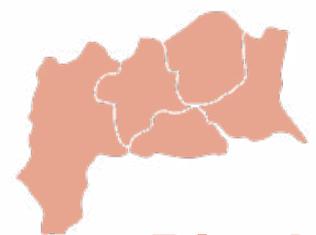
10 March  
Nagaoka City, Niigata Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Aizu Higan Shishimai 2019

21 March  
Aizuwakamatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Natori Spring Festival 2019

13 April  
Natori City, Miyagi Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)



## Block 3

### Wine Fair Suzaka 2019

02 March  
Suzaka City, Nagano Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Takasaki City 28th Haruna Meishi Marathon

10 March  
Takasaki City, Gunma Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### The 3rd USHIKU PIZZA FESTA

10 March  
Ushiku City, Ibaraki Prefecture  
[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Tokimata Naked Festival

10 March  
Iida City, Nagano Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Utsunomiya Castle Cherry Festival 2019

16 March  
Utsunomiya City, Tochigi Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### KOSHIGAYA 15RUN 2019

17 March  
Koshigaya City, Saitama Prefecture  
[Website in English and Japanese](#)





## Block 4

### Haruna Ume Festival 2019

17 March

Takasaki City, Gunma Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Satte Cherry Blossom Festival 2019

25 March - 09 April

Satte City, Saitama Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Koedo Kawagoe Spring Festival 2019

30 March - 05 May

Kawagoe City, Saitama Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Fruits Spring Festival

31 March

Kasumigaura City, Ibaraki Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### The 35nd Castle town Obata Cherry Blossom Festival 2019

31 March

Kanra Town, Gunma Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### The 30th Bando City Furusato Sashima Castle Festival

07 April

Bando City, Ibaraki Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Tanada Camp 2019 in Spring

13 April - 14 April

Ueda City, Nagano Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Pan no Fes 2019 (Yokohama Bread Festival)

01 March - 03 March

Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Funabashi Racecourse Flea Market

02 March - 24 March

Funabashi City, Chiba Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### TOHOKU VIN-DAGE 2019

03 March

Minato-ku, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Shizuoka Oden Fair 2019

08 March - 10 March

Shizuoka City, Shizuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### The 8th St. Patrick's Day Parade in Chiba 2019

10 March

Chiba City, Chiba Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### St. Patrick's Day Parade in Yokohama Motomachi 2019

16 March

Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Oyama Tofu Matsuri 2019

16 March - 17 March

Isehara City, Kanagawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Kouzaki Sakagura Matsuri 2019

17 March

Kozaki Town, Chiba Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Japanese Drum Performance

17 March

Matsudo City, Chiba Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Drumming Entertainment Group KODO Exchange Performance

18 March

Tokyo City, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Akasaka Inari Shrine Mai Kagura Festival

10 March

Kai City, Yamanashi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Holi Festival of Colours

21 March

Tokyo City, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### The Monkey Business at Tokyo

22 March - 23 March

Tokyo City, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Ningyo Joruri Bunraku (Shizuoka) 2019

23 March

Shizuoka City, Shizuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)



## Block 4



## Block 5

### Cherry Blossoms Festival at Atamijo (Castle) 2019

23 March - 07 April

Atami City, Shizuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Minato Ward World Carnival 2019

24 March

Tokyo City, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Odawara Kamaboko Sakura Matsuri 2019

30 March - 31 March

Odawara City, Kanagawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Atsugi Iiyama Cherry Blossom Festival 2019

30 March - 07 April

Atsugi City, Kanagawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Shingen Public Festival

05 April - 07 April

Kofu City, Yamanashi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Shizuoka Matsuri 2019

05 April - 07 April

Shizuoka City, Shizuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### GO OUT JaMBOREE 2019

12 April - 14 April

Fujinomiya City, Shizuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### The 7th Japanese Sake Tasting 2019 in Nihonbashi Area

13 April

Tokyo City, Tokyo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### 13th Inazawa Plum Festival 2019

02 March - 03 March

Inazawa City, Aichi Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Yamakichi Doll Festival

09 March - 10 March

Takaoka City, Toyama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Noto Wakakura Manyo no Sato Marathon 2019

10 March

Nanao City, Ishikawa Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### The 10th Inuyama Castle Sake Festival

15 March - 17 March

Inuyama City, Aichi Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)



## Block 6

### **“Kifuku Performance of Gifu Springs 2019”**

17 March

Gifu City, Gifu Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Odaiba Ramen Park in Fukui Vol.9, 2019**

20 March - 08 April

Fukui City, Fukui Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **All Japan Gyoza Festival Spring 2019**

21 March - 24 March

Nagakude City, Aichi Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Tokiwa Fudo Spring Festival**

24 March

Seki City, Gifu Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Takaoka Sakura Festival**

01 April - 14 April

Takaoka City, Toyama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Daisenji Sakura Festival**

13 April - 14 April

Kaga City, Ishikawa Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Takayama Festival in Spring**

14 April - 15 April

Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Good Food and Japanese Sake Festival in Nishiki 2019**

02 March

Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **The Early-Bloom Cherry Blossom Festival**

02 March - 15 March

Awaji City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Nagashibina**

03 March

Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in English only](#)

### **Yamadanishiki Festival 2019**

09 March - 10 March

Miki City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Shōren-in Light-up**

09 March - 18 March

Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in English only](#)

### **The 3rd "Hino Festival Music Association Concert"**

10 March

Hino Town, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Seiryū-e**

14 March - 15 March

Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in English only](#)

### **Tulip Festival 2019**

16 March - 30 April

Kasai City, Hyogo Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Sazacho Festival**

16 March - 17 March

Omihachiman City, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Omihachiman Sagicho Festival 2019**

16 March - 17 March

Omihachiman City, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Kitano Odori**

25 March - 07 April

Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture

[Website in English only](#)

### **Minamiyama King's Spring Festival.**

04 April

Hino Town, Shiga Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



## Block 7

### Shunie Ceremony 2019

01 March – 14 March

Nara City, Nara Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### WAKAYAMA Folk Performing Arts Festival

03 March

Wakayama City, Wakayama

Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Osaka Motorcycle Show 2019

15 March - 17 March

Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Nabari Sakura Festival 2019

22 March - 15 April

Nabari City, Mie Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Yamato Koriyama Castle Festival 2019

24 March - 07 April

Yamatokōriyama City, Nara

Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

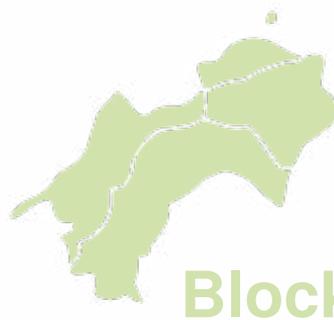
### Magoichi Festival 2019

31 March

Wakayama City, Wakayama

Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)



## Block 8

### Spring Uzu Festival

02 March - 30 April

Naruto City, Tokushima Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Tosa no “OKYAKU” 2019

02 March – 10 March

Kochi City, Kochi Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Iyadani Festival 2019

21 March

Mitoyo City, Kagawa Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Susukigahara Irene Park Spring Festival

22 March - 14 April

Shikoku Chuo City, Ehime Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Iwaki Cherry Blossom Festival

01 April - 14 April

Ochi Town, Ehime Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Tosa food 1 Grand Prix 2019

06 April - 07 April

Nankoku City, Kochi Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Okoyama Cherry Blossom Festival 2019

06 April - 07 April

Nankoku City, Kochi Prefecture

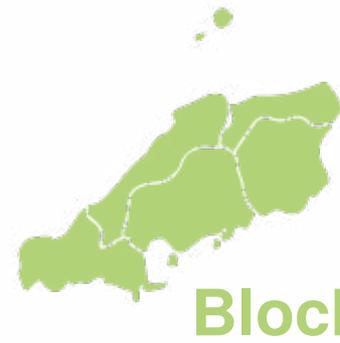
[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### The 36th Flower Festival

13 April - 14 April

Iyo City, Ehime Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)



## Block 9

### Hagi no Mai Fugu Festival

10 March

Hagi City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Ramen Festa

10 March

Ube City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Cardboard Amusement Park 2019 Dinosaur World

16 March - 06 May

Sakaiminato City, Tottori Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### The 13th Omiichi Haiku Festival

16 March - 14 April

Nishinodo Town, Hiroshima

Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Hiroshima Harbor Festa 2019

16 March - 17 March

Hiroshima City, Hiroshima Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### Cherry Blossom Festival

23 March

Sera Town, Hiroshima Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### Hundred Festivals

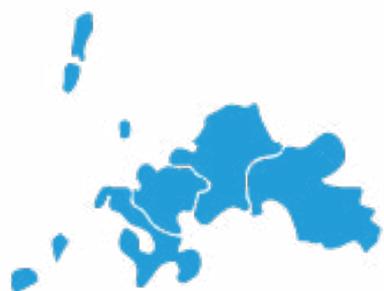
24 March

Ube City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

Photos:  
Rhema Baquero  
Marc Baquero  
Karina Zic  
Karina Zic  
Karina Zic





## Block 10

### **Tsuyama Sakura Festival**

29 March - 14 April

Tsuyama City, Okayama Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Yasugi Park Cherry Blossom Festival 2019**

30 March - 07 April

Yasugi City, Shimane Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Matsue Musha Gyoretsu Warrior Parade 2019**

06 April

Matsue City, Shimane Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Kyokusui no En Festival**

03 March

Dazaifu City, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Hiji Curry Rally**

10 March

Hiji Town, Oita Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Tenzan Open Japanese Sake Brewery in Spring 2019**

16 March

Ogi City, Saga Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Kanoukaen Festival 2019**

30 March

Unzen City, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Hana to Shijimi no Sato Oto Marathon**

31 March

Oto Town, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)



## Block 11

### **Kyokusui no En Festival**

03 March

Dazaifu City, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Hiji Curry Rally**

10 March

Hiji Town, Oita Prefecture

[Website in Japanese only](#)

### **Tenzan Open Japanese Sake Brewery in Spring 2019**

16 March

Ogi City, Saga Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Kanoukaen Festival 2019**

30 March

Unzen City, Nagasaki Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)

### **Hana to Shijimi no Sato Oto Marathon**

31 March

Oto Town, Fukuoka Prefecture

[Website in English and Japanese](#)



# In The News

March 2019 Tresha Barrett (Kyoto)



Couples pose at Chiba's city hall, after receiving partnership certificates.

## CHIBA CERTIFIES RECOGNITION OF LGBT COUPLES AND COMMON-LAW MARRIAGE

With its recent ceremony to issue certificates of recognition to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and common-law partnerships, Chiba has become the latest Japanese city to take a progressive step forward in the acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ rights. Six couples were involved in the ceremony. A member of one of these couples, Ryuta Yanase, 56, stated that the certificate program will make it easier for same-sex partners to visit each other at city hospitals if needed. "I hope this will lead to a reduction in restrictions," said Yanase.

Applicant couples who wish to obtain the official certificate are expected to meet several set requirements, which include being above the age of 20, unmarried, and living or planning to live in the city. Receiving the certificate does not mean special legal status, however. But with it couples will be able to take part in services that

were previously unavailable to them, gaining eligibility for things like public housing.

Same-sex marriages are currently illegal in Japan, and many couples face discrimination, including not being able to inherit their partner's property and not benefiting from spousal income tax deductions. Still, there has been some progress. Chiba is the most recent addition to a string of municipalities that have taken strides towards LGBT partnership recognition. The cities of Osaka, Sapporo, Fukuoka, and the Tokyo wards of Shibuya and Setagaya have previously done so.

Source:  
<https://bit.ly/2WWTMUo>  
Image:  
<https://bit.ly/2WWTMUo>



## KURA SUSHI WORKER CAUGHT ON VIDEO FISHING FISH FROM TRASH CAN

Video footage was recently uploaded online of a part-time kitchen worker at a Kura Sushi restaurant retrieving a piece of sliced fish from a trash can and returning it to his cutting board.

Regarding the incident, which occurred at a Kura Sushi outlet in Moriguchi, Osaka, Kura Corp. said the retrieved fish was not served to customers and was eventually thrown out. Still, they deem the incident serious and are considering legal action.

The company also added that they intend to try and better train their staff so as to avoid such an incident from occurring again. “We deeply apologize for causing disgust and unease to our customers because of this footage,” Kura Corp. said in a statement.

The video footage shows a male worker slicing a fish, then throwing half of it into a trash can before retrieving the fish from the garbage and placing it back on his cutting board.

Kura Corp. is one of Japan’s largest sushi restaurant chains with around 400 Kura Sushi restaurants nationwide.

Source:  
<https://bit.ly/2E4mjg>  
<https://bit.ly/2Dw3V1r>

## MOS BURGER PLANS TO SWITCH FROM PLASTIC TO PAPER CUTLERY ACROSS JAPAN

In an attempt to help curb the pollution of our oceans with plastic waste, popular Japanese hamburger chain, Mos Food Services Inc., plans to replace the use of plastic cutlery with paper ones for takeout services.

The eco-friendly move will begin on a trial basis in February, with an introduction at five restaurants in Tokyo and nearby prefectures. After this, their aim is to introduce the policy to about 250 outlets nationwide by 2020. Mos Burger will also seek to convert some 1,100 franchised outlets to this plastic-free initiative.

Several other food-related companies have already attempted to limit the use of plastic, including Skylark Holdings Co., which stopped offering plastic straws at its 1,360 Gusto restaurants.

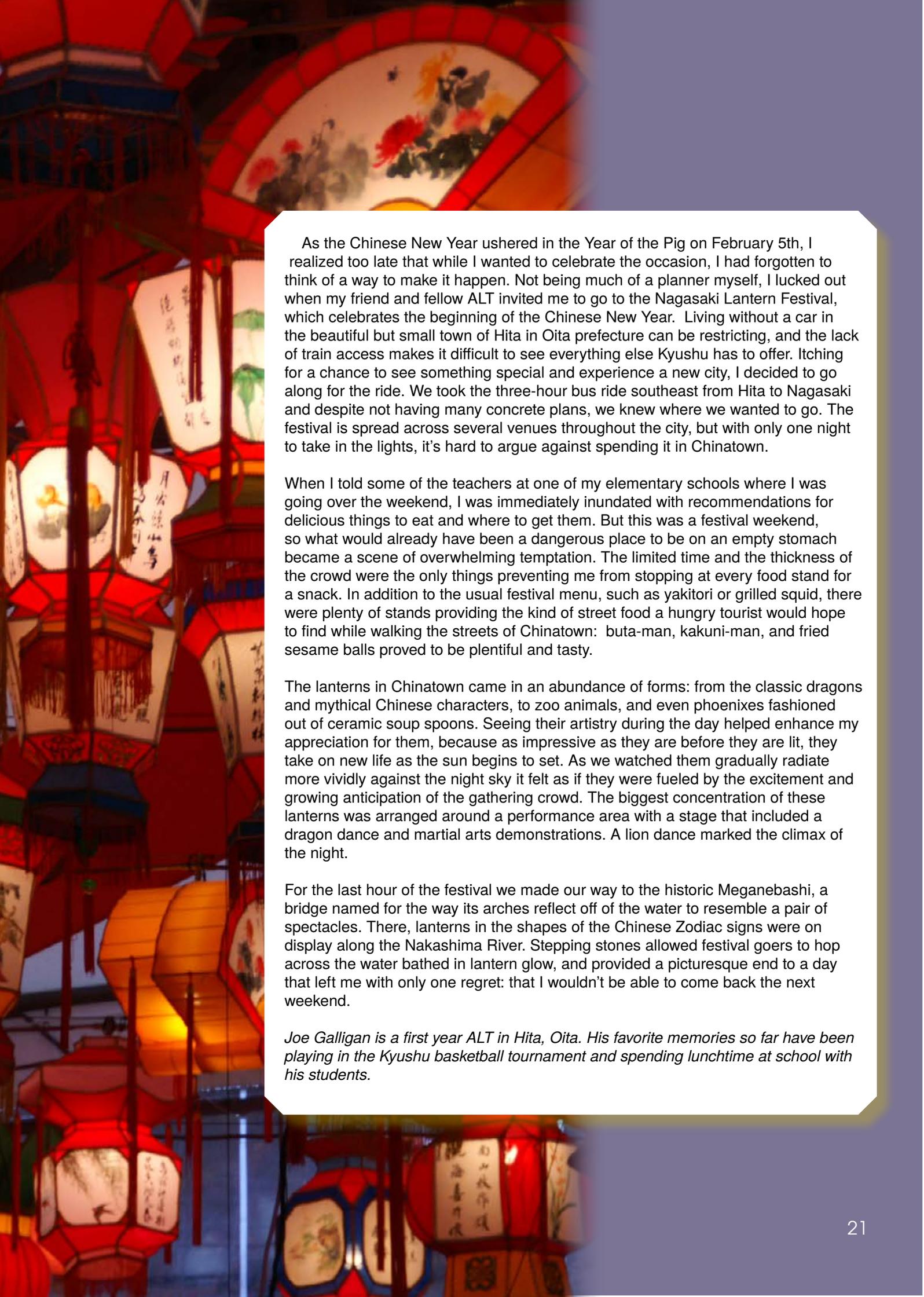
Source:  
<https://bit.ly/2Sk0u7t>



A  
*Lantern-lit*  
*Night*  
in Nagasaki

Joe Galligan (Oita Prefecture)

Photo: Ken Funakoshi, WikiCommons



As the Chinese New Year ushered in the Year of the Pig on February 5th, I realized too late that while I wanted to celebrate the occasion, I had forgotten to think of a way to make it happen. Not being much of a planner myself, I lucked out when my friend and fellow ALT invited me to go to the Nagasaki Lantern Festival, which celebrates the beginning of the Chinese New Year. Living without a car in the beautiful but small town of Hita in Oita prefecture can be restricting, and the lack of train access makes it difficult to see everything else Kyushu has to offer. Itching for a chance to see something special and experience a new city, I decided to go along for the ride. We took the three-hour bus ride southeast from Hita to Nagasaki and despite not having many concrete plans, we knew where we wanted to go. The festival is spread across several venues throughout the city, but with only one night to take in the lights, it's hard to argue against spending it in Chinatown.

When I told some of the teachers at one of my elementary schools where I was going over the weekend, I was immediately inundated with recommendations for delicious things to eat and where to get them. But this was a festival weekend, so what would already have been a dangerous place to be on an empty stomach became a scene of overwhelming temptation. The limited time and the thickness of the crowd were the only things preventing me from stopping at every food stand for a snack. In addition to the usual festival menu, such as yakitori or grilled squid, there were plenty of stands providing the kind of street food a hungry tourist would hope to find while walking the streets of Chinatown: buta-man, kakuni-man, and fried sesame balls proved to be plentiful and tasty.

The lanterns in Chinatown came in an abundance of forms: from the classic dragons and mythical Chinese characters, to zoo animals, and even phoenixes fashioned out of ceramic soup spoons. Seeing their artistry during the day helped enhance my appreciation for them, because as impressive as they are before they are lit, they take on new life as the sun begins to set. As we watched them gradually radiate more vividly against the night sky it felt as if they were fueled by the excitement and growing anticipation of the gathering crowd. The biggest concentration of these lanterns was arranged around a performance area with a stage that included a dragon dance and martial arts demonstrations. A lion dance marked the climax of the night.

For the last hour of the festival we made our way to the historic Meganebashi, a bridge named for the way its arches reflect off of the water to resemble a pair of spectacles. There, lanterns in the shapes of the Chinese Zodiac signs were on display along the Nakashima River. Stepping stones allowed festival goers to hop across the water bathed in lantern glow, and provided a picturesque end to a day that left me with only one regret: that I wouldn't be able to come back the next weekend.

*Joe Galligan is a first year ALT in Hita, Oita. His favorite memories so far have been playing in the Kyushu basketball tournament and spending lunchtime at school with his students.*

# ARTS AND CULTURE



## CULTURE EDITOR

connect.culture@ajet.net

## ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

connect.entertainment@ajet.net

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*"I don't care to be pretty. I care to look on the outside like I look on the inside." - Maggie Stiefvater, The Raven King*

Photo: Ashley Hirasuna

## STYLE AND BEAUTY EDITOR

connect.fashion@ajet.net

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*I reached peak Japanese etiquette when I bowed in thanks...during a phone conversation.*

## ARTS EDITOR

connect.arts@ajet.net

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*"I am a museum full of art but you had your eyes shut"*  
*- Rupi Kaur, Milk and Honey*





# DOUBLE!

## Not Half

Angela Hinck (Fukui Prefecture)

### An Interview With Author Rodney Gottula

Ever since I first saw the initial Kickstarter for the children's book *Double! Not Half.*, I was intrigued by the concept. It explores the Japanese loanword *hafu* — a term used to describe those who are of mixed Japanese heritage, born of one Japanese parent and one non-Japanese parent. *Hafu* is one of those loan words that has taken on an entirely new facet of meaning since entering the Japanese lexicon. To some, it has a straightforward definition. To others, there's nothing simple

about the word *hafu* and the complicated space it inhabits in Japan's largely homogenous social structure.

That might seem like a lot to tackle in a picture book geared toward a young audience, but author Rodney Gottula— a former JET Program participant, current educator, and father of two children who share both American and Japanese heritage— handles the topic with sensitivity and care in his self-published work. The

book has no lack of heart, and its message is clear: to be "half" is not to be "less." It's a matter of addition, not subtraction.

Gottula was kind enough to do an interview with *CONNECT* exploring his time in Japan, the challenges of self-publishing, the central message of his book, and some of the personal experiences that inspired him to write *Double! Not Half.*



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# About the Author

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**Tell us a bit about your journey to Japan and back again. When and where did you live in Japan? What did you do while you were here?**

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I came to Japan on the JET Program in 1998 and remained for what was then the maximum three years, leaving in 2001. During that time, I taught at the Yanagida Agricultural High School and the Yanagida Middle School as well as visited each of the village's eight elementary schools, which have since all been combined into one. While on a trip to Korea with a friend from Kita-Kyushu, I met a Hakata woman on the ferry from Fukuoka to Busan, who would later become my wife. As of January 2, we have known each other 20 years and now have a 14-year-old son and a 12-year-old daughter. So, I'm forever connected to Japan as result of hopping on a plane from Billings, MT over 20 years ago. In 2011-2012, we returned to Japan as a family when I took a sabbatical from my job for a one-year stint with the JET Program once again.

The three years I initially spent in Japan made me realize that I enjoyed teaching and working with people. I finished my M.A. in Linguistics when I returned to Montana and originally hoped to teach ESL and gallivant around the world with my new bride, but soon realized that twenty-hour work weeks at hourly pay with no benefits wasn't going to take us very far, and I ended up getting my teaching license and eventually became a National Board Certified Teacher of English Language Arts. Currently, I'm an assistant principal at a local high school.

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**How did your time in Japan influence your career path?**

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**Do you still maintain ties with Japan/Japanese culture, and how?**

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My wife and I currently volunteer at the local library and teach a very basic Japanese class to teens. I have also taken several small groups of high school students to Japan over the years, with some of my former students going on to become JETs themselves. I'm still friends with many of the folks I met in Japan and have also served as a liaison for numerous Japanese students visiting Montana over the years. I suppose my focus has always been mostly on people and experiencing the world together, as I never dove into karate, taiko, etc. In fact, during my second JET term, an Australian friend and I went on a road trip through Tohoku with two Okinawa college students who'd never been outside of Tokyo or Kyoto, driving all the way from Fukuyama to the tip of Honshu and back. Thus far, I've seen all but Shikoku and two or three other prefectures, just drinking beer or having a cup of coffee with everyday people throughout Japan. There's not much Japanese-related culture in Billings, so I guess I'm always a bit nostalgic. It's been three years since I've been back to Japan, so I'm jonesing a bit!

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**Were you aware of the term “half” and did you often hear it when you were in Japan?**

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I'd never heard the term “half” in Yanagida Village because we were all just straight up *gaijin*, so it wasn't really until I moved to Kobe with my children that I became familiar with the term in any meaningful way, and, to be honest, I'd never really heard it used in an intentionally derogatory fashion, but it brought to mind the way that unnecessary qualifiers unconsciously belittle the people with whom they're attached. The book is partially a message to those who claim that learning a second language or learning about another culture will somehow negatively impact native language ability or loosen one's own cultural roots. I can't speak for the entire country, but I know that if Montana required all students to learn Spanish, the way that all Japanese students must learn English, there would be tremendous pushback— partially driven by legitimate concerns, but also some pushback fueled by racism and ignorance. So, my hope was that the simple message of a children's book could help all of us to adjust the lens with which we view our world and perhaps stretch our arms a little wider in terms of who we seek to embrace.

I think mixed-race children in Japan probably stand out more than do mixed-race children in most parts of the United States, but the struggles they may or may not face are most likely more strongly related to the community in which they reside. When I asked my son if he ever gets any flak for being Japanese, he told me that his friends tease him about being Chinese, that they don't know the difference, and that it didn't really matter because he gave them flak for a variety of different things as well. So, I supposed it depends a lot on how teasing and labeling are received. I mention in the foreword to *Double! Not Half.* that I'm not advocating for “double” to replace “half” as a new label; it's also why the characters joke about being “triple” or “quadruple”. The point is to try and see people as they would like to be seen, to treat them as they would like to be treated. Some hafu reject the term “double” and feel it's stupid.

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**What overlap do you see between American and Japanese culture when it comes to mixed-race children in schools and the struggles they face?**

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**Do you have any advice for current ALTs in Japan when it comes to supporting their “half” students in a classroom setting?**

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I don't think ALTs should necessarily do anything different with hafu than they do with any other students they might have. Start from a place of inquiry, get to know students as individuals and teach them about the importance of kindness and respect toward all people. I recently heard a [TED talk](#) in which a woman said, “the problem with stereotypes isn't that they are necessarily wrong, but that they are incomplete.” I tend to think that's true. There are patterns toward particular tendencies, traditions, and cultural idiosyncrasies, and sometimes it's humorous to shed light on some of them, but we have to be cautious when we begin to be judgmental about cultural characteristics or use them to make assumptions about individuals. That's why dialogue is so important, because it gives people a voice and an opportunity to listen— and why the arts are so powerful, because we can access that dialogue in a non-threatening way. Personally, I have made my own fair share of ignorant, biased, and even bigoted comments throughout my lifetime, and if it weren't for strangers and friends challenging those comments and engaging with me, I might not have the rudimentary level of understanding that I have now. The willingness of others to educate me and help me grow as a person gave me the opportunity to become a better person. So, I think ALTs should provide opportunities for discovery amongst their students and let them find their own identities on their own terms.



# About the Book

## What inspired you to write this story after returning the USA?

The idea for the book had been floating around in my head during the time our family was living in Kobe and would occasionally pop up when I was visiting with Japanese exchange students, watching TV, or reading an article. I'm not sure why I chose to finally put the idea to paper at the time when I did, but I think it was partially influenced by listening to people argue with one another over politics without ever really stopping to hear what was being said. Especially in terms of immigration, I felt that, as a society, we weren't realizing the tremendous impact made by those who are bicultural and/or bilingual and the way in which those who seek to connect should be celebrated. There's something to be said for assimilation, but there is also something to be said for honoring traditions and keeping language and culture alive, and I don't think those ideas have to be mutually exclusive. I wanted those kinds of kids to feel proud of who they were so they wouldn't have to hide any part of who they are based upon which world they were operating in at a particular moment. In Montana, I felt like our Native American students sometimes struggled to walk in two worlds and that who they were and where they came from wasn't always fully respected, which is why I wanted to feature a bit of Native American culture in the book as well. I also wanted kids who weren't bilingual or bicultural, like me when I was growing up, to understand that those benefits needn't be gifted only by birthright, that any one of us can choose to learn and grow in a different language or another culture.

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## Why did you choose this topic in particular?

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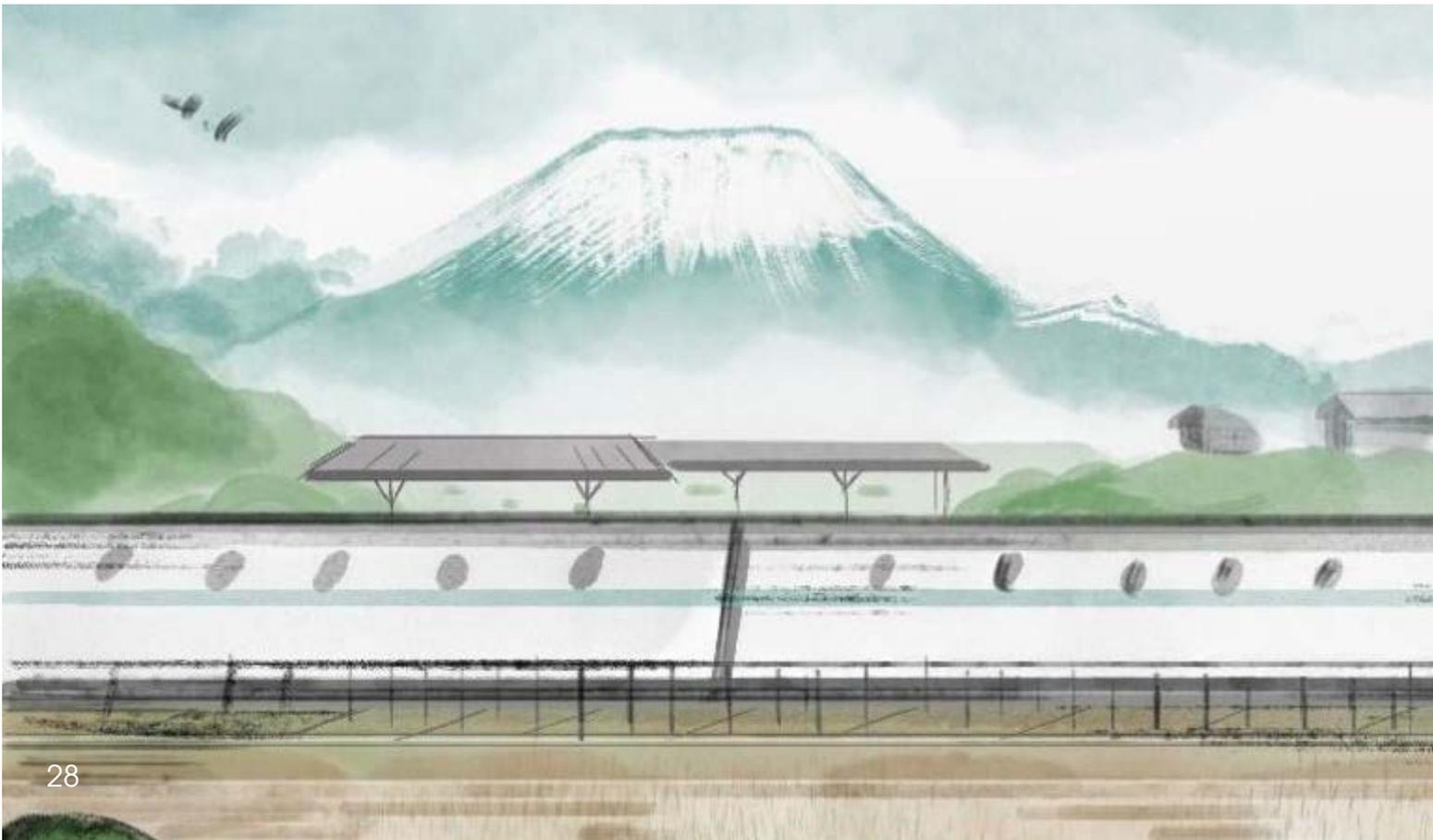
Growing up in a small town in Montana, I couldn't wait to get the hell out and "see the real world." But when I finally did so, moving to Korea after college, I realized that the real world is nothing more than the world we're living in at the moment. I began to love and appreciate where I was from and that, in addition to learning, I also had something to teach.

There are several challenges I've faced with self-publishing. Even after raising almost \$2,000 on [GoFundMe](#), I have invested over \$5,000 of my own money to get the book out. Because it's a full color, hardcover book only available via print-on-demand, print runs are small, which causes the book to have a retail price point of \$25 when other children's books are closer to \$15, which means I must get readers to focus on the value of the book as opposed to the price. Of course, that's difficult to do without effective marketing, and I'm horrible at it. My work as a high school principal keeps me plenty busy, so other than a [Facebook page](#) dedicated to the book, a very [basic website](#), and a handful of local readings, I haven't been able to generate much buzz. This is problematic because it prevents getting the book into the hands of kids who could really benefit from its message. I've tried to stick with a grassroots approach to getting the work out, and we've donated copies to numerous libraries in several different states, but I'm not sure how many people in those locales know it is in their libraries. It's also very difficult to get the book into bricks-and-mortar stores although it is available on Amazon. My goal was never to get rich off the book, and I'll be fortunate if I manage to recover my initial investment, but I had hoped I'd be able to get a few thousand copies out into the public. As it stands, only a few hundred copies have been distributed. Those who've held the book in their hands and have read it from cover to cover have been very receptive to the book, so I need a way to actually get it into more people's hands.

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## What was the most challenging aspect of self-publishing?

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**What audience do you hope for this book to reach?**

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As a children's picture book, the target age is from around 4-10 year olds, but it has a lot of potential for use in classroom settings at any age level. The simplicity of the story allows for older students to generate dialogue about identity, the labels used to describe people, and to offer their own views on such matters. The bridge illustration spanning the cover from front to back is meant to enhance the idea that we are all bound together, and I hope for those in the U.S. that it serves to remind us that our lives have been enriched by different peoples from different cultures throughout our history. In a time when our national discourse is focused on walls, I hope the book helps people see the importance of connection.

I would love to have the book translated into Japanese at some point but would prefer that happen by means of a Japanese publisher being willing to take on publication and marketing of the book within Japan. As of now, I just don't have the financial or marketing resources to make that happen on my own.

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**Do you have plans to translate your book into Japanese at some point in the future?**

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# DOUBLE! Not Half

*Double! Not Half. can be purchased from [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#) . Illustrations included in this article are from the book and were created by artist [Arthur Lin](#).*





# Setsubears

Mike Clapis (Tokyo)

Demons exist everywhere. Whenever you feel a chill run up your spine, miss an elevator, get a brain-freeze, or stub your toe, you can bet there are demons around. Japanese mythology is known for its rich and diverse roster of monsters — vengeful ghouls and bloodthirsty hell spawn that prey upon the weary travelers of some remote mountainside or bamboo forest from which none but the bravest samurai return.

But modern Tokyo is beyond the reach of those fables. Sure, it's still a forest, just a concrete one. The demons here come in the form of routine and disillusionment, of soul-flattening day jobs and liquid coping mechanisms. I count myself among the white-collar masses who flock to train stations morning after morning lest they are roundly shamed by a laser-focused, workaholic office culture that treats emotional starvation as an endurance challenge. How can we hope to banish the demons of depression that threaten to sink in?

Simple: we throw beans at them.

*Setsubun* is a holiday that marks the coming of spring with the banishment of bad luck demons. It was brought over from China in the 8th century



to coincide with the Lunar New Year. A variety of regional traditions exist, from decorating the home with bouquets of sardine heads to the silent consumption of thick sushi cylinders while facing a direction chosen by the current position of the zodiac. But no ritual is as universally loved as *mamemaki* (bean scattering), where people throw soybeans at demons and shout “*oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi!*” (demons out, good luck in!) before collecting the beans to eat. It’s especially lucky to eat the same number of beans as your age, plus one. You can pick up a Setsubun starter pack - a paper oni mask and baggie of beans - at any convenience store on the run up to February 3rd. A co-worker of mine dons the mask each year and regales us with stories of chasing her small children around the house.

This year, I have come to Sensoji Jinja in Asakusa, unsure of what to expect. The only other times I’ve been to this temple were to ring in the New Year. As I emerge from the subway, I realize the magnetic pull Sensoji has on overseas tourists is not confined to the first week of January. To reach the temple, you must first pass through several blocks of souvenir shops. Ravenous merchants display their finest airbrush Godzilla shirts and silk brocade Astro Boy jackets, rainbows of paper fans and dazzling hairclips, watercolor reprints of Fuji landscapes and a sea of toy vending machines. Dudes dressed in traditional garb wave tour pamphlets or pull couples in rickshaws, spouting their scripts. The frequency of selfie sticks increases as I fumble my way through to the massive red gate, trying my damndest not to ruin anyone’s shot.

I am near the *omikuji* station, where people shake drums of wooden sticks for a good fortune paper slip and purchase bundles of incense. I find the largest concentration of visitors clustered at the base of the temple’s right side and politely immerse myself into the crowd. Drums signal the procession of several dozen lantern-bearers marching into the front of the building and out to the sides. They stand on a deck about 15 feet high and set the lanterns into spots atop the red and white banner that covers the wall. After the drums stop, there is a momentary silence before each man reaches into a wooden box and waits. One man gives a small speech, followed by the holiday slogan. “Fuku waaaaa-” he cries as the men wind up for a pitch, “-uchiiii!!!” he exhales as tiny plastic bags of soybeans rain down into outstretched hands. I flail my arms desperately for a chance at snagging some official protein but to no avail.

The men return to the temple, and the crowd dissolves. I watch seven performers in full mascot suits dance away bad vibes. They are the Seven Gods of Fortune, and I am impressed with their coordination. It must be hard to dance around while wearing a giant costume head. I look at the ground littered with some beans that broke from their packaging mid-flight and now rest in the dirt. I think of the squirrels that will eventually get to them and how lucky those squirrels might be in the year to come.

*Mike Clapis is a fifth year Tokyo JET living in Nerima. He is an award-seeking short fiction writer and essayist who collects old video games and makes totally sick beats. One time he went to Space Camp.*





# Revival of the *Taiguruma*

Jessica Ing (Niigata)

While I was exploring the anime museum in Niigata City, I came across a beautiful drawing of fish-shaped lanterns glowing bright in a dark street. Curious about these fascinating lights, I decided to learn more about them. After many hours of internet research, I came across a website dedicated to these fish lanterns, or – as I learned – *taiguruma* (鯛車). I wanted to see if there were any upcoming events dedicated to these lanterns, but nothing could be found. So, I mustered up some Japanese and left an inquiry on the website. A few days later, I received a reply from a Mr. Noguchi. He was

surprised and happy that I came across his website. He mentioned that the summer taiguruma festival had passed, but if I was interested, I could make a fish lantern in an upcoming workshop in Maki, Niigata.

The workshop was nine-weeks long, held on every Sunday. I arrived at a portable beside the community centre in Maki for the first week of the workshop. On the first day, I was given a brief history of the taiguruma. The recipient of my email, Mr. Noguchi, turned out to be leading the revival of the taiguruma craft. Comparing

present day and past memories of his town, Mr. Noguchi realized that taiguruma were dwindling. Something had to be done to keep the lanterns alive. The workshop would be a way to revive the tradition. Experienced mentors provided instructions while we worked on our own taiguruma. I was paired with a cute old lady, and I did my best to communicate with her in Japanese.

The first few weeks reminded me of my first day in woodshop. We learned how to cut wood with hand tools before using a machine. It was exactly the same



in the taiguruma workshop. I used what looked like a dowel with a very sharp metal edge fixed at the end. This tool was used to manually create all the holes that would hold the bamboo skeleton in place. The bamboo was bent to create varying arch sizes that would form the mouth, body, tail, and fins. A strong knot and glue held all the fish skeleton in place. About two-thirds of the way into the workshop, we started to apply rice paper to the skeleton. This was a time-consuming process because I had to manually measure and cut the right amount of paper for each section, but soon enough, the hard work began to pay off, and I was looking at a three-dimensional fish canvas.

The last few weeks were dedicated to bringing life to the fish. We worked with a simple red, blue, and yellow colour palette. First, we lightly drew the design of our fish. We used waxed slightly coloured

in silver to colour the outline. The wax outline also prevented the different colours from bleeding into each other. The final product is something I am extremely proud of. My taiguruma now sits peacefully in my apartment as a reminder of the kindness I experienced in Maki.

Mr. Noguchi continues to work towards his dream of a taiguruma revitalization. There is an island city in Texas named Galveston. Here in this city of some 50,000 people do we find young children gathering at the Galveston Art Center flocking around several taiguruma provided by Mr. Noguchi himself. This sister city of Niigata city is only one of the many places influenced by the revival project. It is in an array of places where we find these beautiful lanterns - Paris, Nantes, Nishieifuku, Omotesando, Nagano, Mai, and Sendai.

As time goes on, these fish are sure to swim across the world, marking the revival of the taiguruma.

*If you are interested in attending a workshop, the cost for first time makers is 3000 yen. The general admission is 8000 yen. Find out more information about the Taiguruma Revival Project [here](#).*

*This year, the summer festival will take place in the middle of June. Check out the Maki event page for [more details](#).*

*You can also order a Taiguruma kit. More information (in Japanese) [here](#).*

*Jessica Ing is a second year JET in Nagaoka. She is an artist looking to explore the various crafts provided by Japan. She will be returning to Toronto in August and hopes to explore more of the country before leaving.*

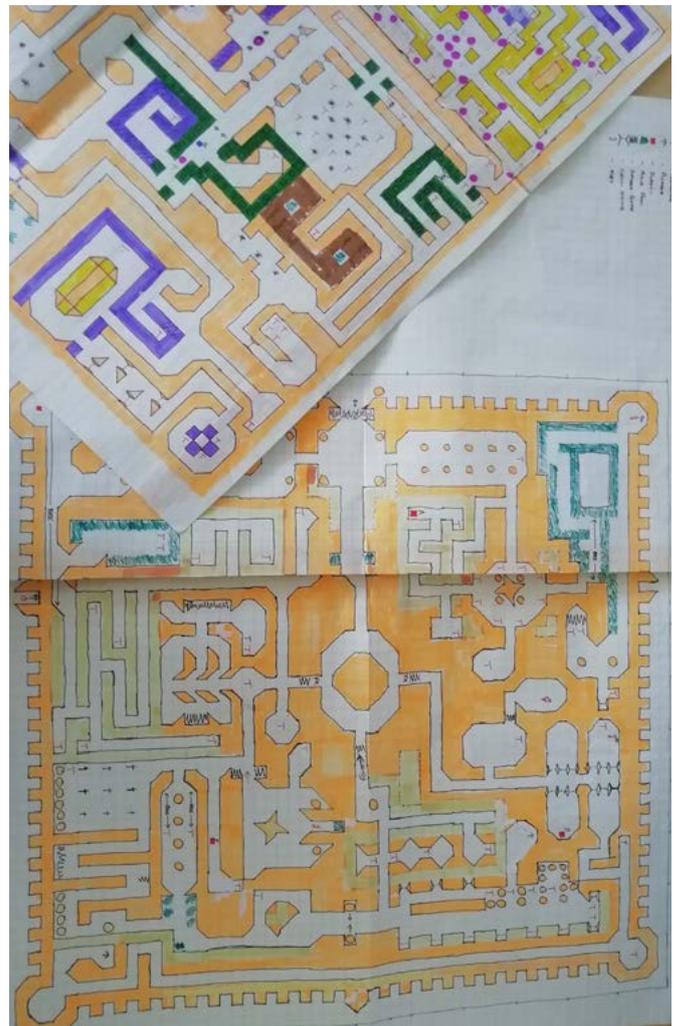
# GAMING WITH DAD:

A Look at  
Accessibility  
in Video  
Games

Peter Underwood ([Previously] Aomori)

Every time my dad scolds me about the amount of time I spend playing video games, I laugh and remind him of our history with the hobby—my earliest memory is sitting on his lap trying to figure out old text adventures. If this doesn't work, I remind him of *his* history with games—the piles of graph paper in his desk drawer covered with maps my mum made for old PC dungeon crawlers.

These histories, though, come with a restriction: my dad is paralysed from the neck down. He has no lower body movement and limited arm movement, and his hands are permanently bunched into fists. This, as you can imagine, makes modern gaming a challenge.



# THE NUMBERS

Statistics on the number of disabled gamers show that they are a large section of the market. Ian Hamilton, an accessibility consultant and speaker, stated in a 2014 Polygon interview (1) that around 20% of gamers have some form of disability—not including colour-blindness, developmental issues or “temporary impairments” such as broken limbs. As recent studies put gamers worldwide at 2.21 billion (2), the number of disabled gamers would be at least 440 million.

However, this paints a very broad picture. Disabilities that affect gaming are as individual and numerous as the players themselves. As Ablegamers puts it, “If there’s 10 people in the room with the same disability, around the same age, you’ll find a slight to moderate difference in the abilities of each person.”(3) So, when considering broad accessibility issues, it’s useful to also relate things to the individual, and in my life, no one is affected by these issues more than my dad.

## THE BEGINNING

My dad’s gaming experience started with a BBC Micro in the early 80s. It was a large all-in-one computer and keyboard that plugged into the TV. It’s a system that’s probably best known for having the original release of the space trading sim *Elite*.

Games were relatively simple at the time. Joystick games meant a fist around the stick and a fist on the single button. Text adventures allowed him to take his time typing commands. Dad could play most of them without much hassle.

Then came the Atari ST with its two-button mouse. Held between my Dad’s fists so each hand could rock onto the mouse buttons, this opened a huge number of experiences. Sports games, point and click adventures, RPGs, strategy games—the focus on new mouse driven interfaces levelled the playing field. Of course, my dad could move his arms. Mouse driven games didn’t work as well for those with more limited arm movement. But in the earliest days of video games, there was a company that briefly aimed to accommodate gamers with more severe physical disabilities as well.



# THE HISTORY OF HARDWARE



The Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) was, and still is, a phenomenon. The best-selling device of its time, it introduced gaming to a much wider audience. To further this mission, Nintendo designed and released the Hands Free in 1989.

A NES controller designed specifically for those with physical disabilities, it was strapped to the player's chest and allowed mouth or tongue movement to control a joystick, and blow or suck motions through a tube to activate the A or B buttons. Only available through mail order directly from Nintendo, it cost a fair amount—in today's money, \$370 USD bundled with a NES, compared to \$185 USD for the console itself—but allowed quadriplegics/tetraplegics and those with extremely limited movement to play games at the same level as their friends and family.

After this promising start came...nothing. For the next 19 years, the Hands Free was the only officially licensed controller for the physically disabled. People had to make do or rely on hardware modders to piece together solutions on a per-case basis.

For those with limited hand mobility, fighting stick-style controllers were often a good go-to as they had a large protruding joystick and big buttons. But for later consoles, shoulder buttons were often absent, and the joystick didn't have analogue movement. Cobbled-together home solutions were and are common. I even made a Frankenstein-esque monstrosity out of Meccano for my dad's *Gran Turismo* outings.

However, for those with money, knowledgeable friends, or tech knowhow, the sky's the limit. Over the years, there have been a variety of widely-publicised controller solutions like the one-handed [Nintendo Switch Controller](#); [GEAR](#), a foot-based controller; or even [Evil Controllers' Xbox 360 pad](#), hacked together as part of a charity contest

in two hours. All of these are incredible products of ingenuity but suffer from the same issue: while hackers often release their designs for free, disabled gamers still need the equipment, the supplies, and the physical ability to be able to construct them—and that's assuming that their own disability would be catered to by one of these very customised designs. There have been “universal” solutions in the past—big, modular controllers designed to be as generally useful as possible—but their cost often reached the hundreds of dollars once all the add-ons were purchased.

This is where charities have stepped in. Organisations like [Ablegamers](#) in the US and [Special Effect](#) in the UK offer assessments to both find out what equipment would be right for disabled gamers and help them source it. While they do excellent work, this is not a long-term solution; waiting lists reach into the months, and in the US, getting an in-person consultation can be difficult. In addition, while Ablegamers provides funding, Special Effect does not, instead having a “library” of equipment that players can use while they save up to buy their own. Instead, part of what Ablegamers and Special Effect campaign for are a range of changes that might make games more accessible by design - putting less emphasis on the hardware to solve the issues players face.

# THE MIDDLE

In my teens, I'd gotten used to basing game purchases around my dad's disability. As game complexity increased, there were more games that we just couldn't play together. Then we found driving games. With a PS1 controller, Dad had just enough hand space to steer with the analogue stick and rock between the O and X buttons to accelerate and brake. We started with *Gran Turismo 2* and worked our way through the series.

Having had so much fun together with racing games, I was excited for *Need For Speed Underground*. Street racing would be a nice change of pace from the simulation style of GT. We opened the options to configure the buttons to our GT preferences, but NFS: Underground didn't allow you to change your controls. It had a few different presets, but you couldn't change button functions freely. As none of the presets worked for Dad, he was relegated to simply watching as I tore down the city streets in a car he'd helped me design.

More recently my fiancée recommended *Undertale* to my dad before qualifying it with "I'm not sure how easy it would be for you to play though."

"Story of my life," replied Dad.

Even so, I began to wonder, as I often do, if there was a solution. We could use a big joystick for directions, assuming it fit his hand shape, but the trigger would have to be disabled so he didn't press it accidentally. It would have to have one easy-to-find button on the base for interaction and menu selection and then two others further away for de-selection and menu. Maybe he could use the keyboard keys for those—but then he'd have to move his hand every time he wanted to exit a menu. Even as I worked it out, I knew what he'd say if I suggested this set up—that it was too much hassle.

# ADAPTABILITY

With the infinite differences in disabilities, hardware and software adaptability is paramount in allowing the largest number of people to enjoy a game. With each player comes unique barriers to gameplay, so the more options players have the better.

There are many lists that organisations have made to try and guide studios towards more accessible gaming experiences, and one of the more detailed ones is Special Effect's "[Accessible Gaming Wish List](#)." It has twenty wishes, and even Special Effect says, "that's a lot, we admit." But many of the suggested features are already in a lot of games. Training modes, for example, can be a "less pressured way to get used to the game controls and/or environment" for those with cognitive accessibility issues. "[Making the] game playable with...no microphone" asks for alternative methods of communication. *Splatoon 2*'s Signal or *Counter Strike*'s radio system both are examples of this. However, these functions are often not treated as accessibility features and are handled in ways that make them less useful; for example, while many games have subtitles, few have closed-captions, and even fewer have different coloured subtitles for each character. Special Effect goes on to say that even including one item from each list "would be a wonderful start." (4) There are many cases that prove that even the most taken-for-granted functions can make a difference.

"[TJ\\_the\\_blind\\_gamer](#)" made [headlines](#) last year for reaching 7,500 lifetime *Call of Duty: WWII* kills while being completely without eyesight. He did this through sound, using the audio feedback from weapons and footsteps. He stated in a Reddit comment that "the sound gives a general direction if you are far away from the enemy. The closer you get, the more distinct the sound becomes...I can identify when I go behind a wall and an enemy is within a clear line of sight." (5) To pull this off he wears surround sound headphones and lowers the

background music as much as possible to better isolate useful sounds — a workaround that would be impossible in a game without individual volume sliders. On the other hand, some of the game's design decisions hinder him. As thrown grenades and dropped guns only have visual notifications, TJ cannot react to that information in-game. He even noticed a drop in performance when a patch lowered the volume of footsteps.

That being said, "no-one expects all of [the wishlist's] features to make it into any one game," (6) as nice as that might be. There will be some games that, by design, will need to eschew some of these features or may be more difficult for those with a certain disability. That's why Special Effect's biggest request is for companies to "openly describe accessibility features."

Eddy Webb, an award-winning writer and gamer with hearing loss, has a presentation on his [website](#) for a talk he gave in 2017 at the East Coast Game Conference, entitled "I Didn't Catch That." In it, he talks about an iOS title *Papa Sangre*, a "survival horror game told entirely through sound," (7) and mentions that as the game's description makes it obvious that hearing is a necessity, it doesn't "surprise [hard of hearing] players." (8) On the other hand, when he played *Left 4 Dead*, it used audio cues without any visual signals. This led to a very difficult game. Even the friend who recommended it to him didn't mention audio cues, as they just took them in as part of the experience.

While the best-case scenario is that every game will contain as many accessibility features as possible, if accessibility features are listed, individuals can make informed decisions for themselves about whether they can enjoy the game given their own accessibility requirements.

# HARDWARE ADAPTABILITY



Other ways to overcome gameplay barriers come from adaptive hardware, and the gaming market today has one very clear option to try and fill that niche: the Microsoft Adaptive Controller. Released late in 2018 and created in partnership with AbleGamers, Special Effect, and others, it aims to be a “unified hub for devices that...makes gaming more accessible.” (9)

Using 3.5mm jacks (the accessibility industry standard for device connection), USB ports and Microsoft’s ‘co-pilot’ function, it can connect to up to 21 devices, along with its two large low-resistance buttons (designed to be used by feet if necessary). The accompanying app allows you to instantly remap buttons and save presets. Even the packaging is designed with physical disabilities in mind. As Brendon Pratt told Kotaku last year, “[it has] things like large loops on the ends of the tape and no cable ties.” (10) It is by far the most comprehensive and easily available physical accessibility solution there has ever been.

However, this comes at a cost - a cost that isn’t entirely Microsoft’s fault. While the controller itself sits at a remarkably reasonable \$99/£75 ([the closest unofficial equivalent] started at \$395 and cost the company \$390 to produce), the switches and accessories needed to use it are often

prohibitively expensive. One 5-inch plastic button retails in Microsoft’s store for \$65/£50 (11). One “grasp switch” (a button activated by squeezing) will set you back \$210. While there are DIY switches which work out cheaper, those that need the controller the most wouldn’t be able to build them themselves. Therefore, to be able to game with this device, many people are looking at an initial outlay of \$1000-2000 USD, assuming they already own the console. This is not Microsoft’s pricing either. It is standard industry pricing for these devices.

This all ties into the wider debate about the expense of accessibility equipment, a debate worth mentioning here. According to a *USNews* piece, essential accessibility equipment is not covered by health insurance in the US, as it is a “productivity tool” rather than a medical device (12). With these costs already mounting, the number of people that will have the resources to get the most out of Microsoft’s controller are slim, but it remains the only option available to many. As one reviewer of Microsoft’s Big Red Switch says, “Everything is wonderful except the price. Need to start a go fund me to afford all I need just to get started. Due to a stroke if I want to play I gotta pay, a little at a time due to living on disability...[but this is] way ahead of PS4 who has nothing.” (13)

# THE FUTURE

Over the past few years, my dad has gone back to point-and-click and puzzle games, games that act as a distraction and painkiller for him. As he has grown older and other health problems have surfaced, many of the adaptations we've made for him in the past have ceased to be of any use. Even the racing games we used to enjoy now cause pain and discomfort.

Even with the recent accessibility push from Microsoft and many years of campaigning, studios are still leaving out the smallest things that make the biggest differences. When Valve's card game *Artifact* released last year, it didn't include any colour-blind modes and had no visual markers to differentiate between card colours. It was two weeks before they released a fix. [TJ\\_the\\_blind\\_gamer](#) talks about how important it is for visually impaired gamers to not have infinitely scrolling menus. With a beginning and an end, it's much easier to find where you are (14). Virtual Reality has the potential to be excellent for disabled gamers, but many devices calibrate to standing position only, meaning it can't be used out of the box by those who can't stand. The list is endless.

But to end the article on such negativity would be doing a disservice to many, including the campaigners that have worked for years and years to garner support from the industry, the hackers whose incredible creations have turned the viral spotlight on these issues, and the gamers that have persevered and tried any number of solutions to keep taking part in their favourite hobby. More and more games have been made recently with disabilities in mind. Games like *Blind Legend* even try to emulate disabilities and put non-impaired and impaired gamers on the same level in a way that will hopefully bring more attention to the topic.

In addition, despite its few cons, Microsoft's Adaptive Controller is an unimaginably big step forward. My dad, in a wheelchair for 52 years now, saw the Adaptive Controller Christmas advert last year. He said how good the controller looked and

how good it was to see a disabled gamer on TV. He thought it was fantastic, especially for people with more severe disabilities that would now get to play games for the first time.

The concept of a big company designing a device in close collaboration with disabled gamers and their charities (all the way down to the packaging!) is, in a lot of ways, something akin to a miracle.

Of course, the hope is that this recent big-name push towards accessibility will mean other companies will embed more accessibility in their hardware and software. Gaming is a 30-year-old industry worth over \$91.5 billion dollars, and the fact that these discussions are only reaching prominence now is regrettable, but it's good that they're finally happening.

As gamer Dominick Evans said in his Kotaku interview, "Games will continue to evolve, and accessibility needs to keep up with that." (15) There's still a lot of work to do, but I'm more hopeful than I have ever been about the future of accessibility in gaming.

*Peter Underwood was a 4-year JET in Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture, before moving back to the UK. When not researching Ethnomusicology, he's primarily found playing music or video games - or, ideally, music video games. Recently he's been getting his butt kicked in Apex Legends, stealing treasures in Persona 5, and trying to pluck up the courage to complete even a single horror game that he has started in the past five years.*

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# MARCH RELEASES

Sarah White (Fukui)

## MOVIES

### March 1

- Green Book (2018)
- Mortal Engines (2018)
- Unfriended: Dark Web (2018)

### March 8

- Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)
- The Mule (2018)
- A Simple Favor (2018)

### March 9

- The Bookshop (2017)

### March 15

- Captain Marvel (2019)
- Mary Queen of Scots (2018)

### March 22

- BlacKkKlansman (2018)
- Bumblebee (2018)
- On the Basis of Sex (2018)
- Gotti (2018)

### March 29

- The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part (2019)
- Dumbo (2019)
- Escape Plan 2: Hades (2018)
- Shock and Awe (2017)

Sources:

<https://www.imdb.com/calendar/?region=jp>

<https://www.vg247.com/2019/01/04/video-game-release-dates-2019/>

Photo: Aneta Pawlik on Unsplash

## GAMES

### March 1

- Dead or Alive 6 (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Toejam & Earl: Back in the Groove (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

### March 5

- Left Alive (PC, PS4)
- Move or Die (PS4)
- Attack of the Earthlings (PS4, Xbox One)

### March 8

- Devil May Cry 5 (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Kirby's Extra Epic Yarn (3DS)

### March 12

- Lego Marvel Collection (PS4, Xbox One)
- The Division 2 (Special Editions) (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

### March 15

- The Division 2 (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- One Piece World Seeker (PC, PS4, Xbox One)

### March 21

- The Sinking City (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- We. The Revolution (PC)

### March 26

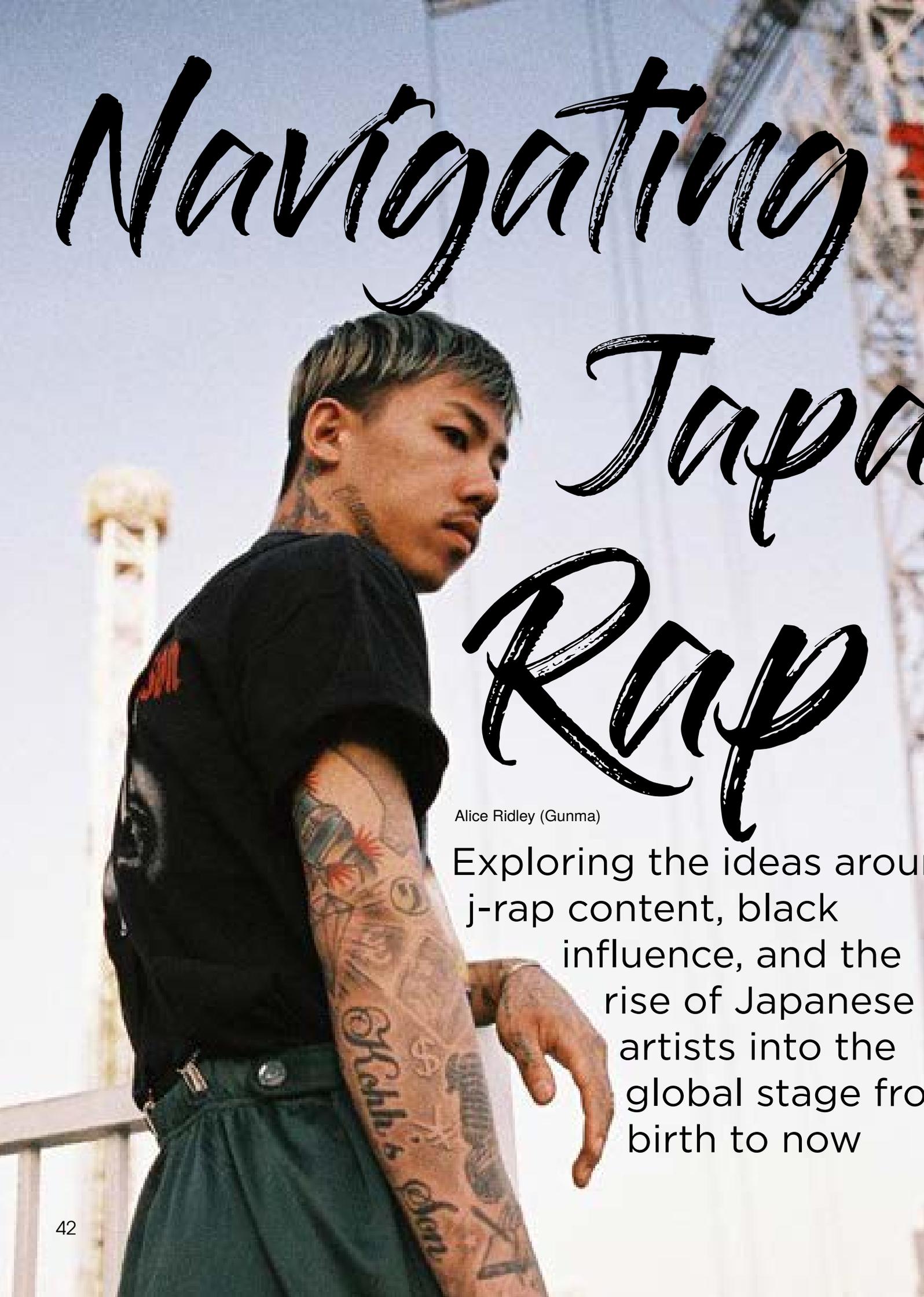
- Generation Zero (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Outward (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Our World is Ended (PS4, Switch)
- Planetside Arena (PC)
- The Walking Dead: The Final Season - Episode 4: Take Us Back (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Xenon Racer (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

### March 28

- Mortal Kombat 11 beta (PS4, Xbox One)

### March 29

- Tropico 6 (PC)
- Yoshi's Crafted World (Switch)
- Assassin's Creed 3 Remastered (PC, PS4, Xbox One)



# Navigating Japan Rap

Alice Ridley (Gunma)

Exploring the ideas around  
j-rap content, black  
influence, and the  
rise of Japanese  
artists into the  
global stage from  
birth to now



When you think of Japanese music, you probably think of very feminine stereotypes which are constantly being portrayed in mainstream media. You imagine the street interviews between the interviewer and the interviewee (usually foreign women) saying surprised remarks about the men like “*Are they a girl?*” and “*Are they gay?*” This is obviously a bit insensitive towards the perceived beauty standards of Japan. But those images of Japanese artists are usually pretty generic and mass produced.

First and foremost, I am not shunning J-pop/K-pop. From time to time, I personally thrash to some *BTS*. I just also think it’s time to shine some light on the more underground sound of Japan. As I talk about further on, J-rap is often mentioned as an imitation of the West when, in reality, Japan has been able to create their own rich culture around this music genre.

Across this article, “J-rap” and “hip hop” will be used interchangeably. Furthermore, whilst doing research for this article, I found that J-rap is not just a music genre but something far greater than that. It is inclusive of how the person dresses, the way they wear their hair, the way they use language, and even how they move their bodies. To its core, hip hop is a way of life that “is fundamentally socially-critical, anti-mainstream, and profoundly creative” (1). In a collective society such as Japan, this behaviour is uncommon. That’s why I find this movement so provocative.

J-rap emerged in the early 1980s with the notorious *Hiroshi Fujiwara* whom was later dubbed the first hip hop DJ of Japan. Hiroshi visited New York (2) and brought back the sound he fell in love with. Things naturally progressed for Hiroshi with him stating in an interview that “the next thing—the remix thing happened. The word was ‘remixer.’ I started doing that for the major record companies. Like we did Yellow Magic Orchestra. Then I became more of a music producer. I think it’s kind of the same as a DJ here—you know, people start as a DJ, and then become producers” (3). Another catalyst was the landing of the cult film *Wild Style* in 1983 (4). The film showcased rap and break dancing culture on the big screen, which caught the eye of Japanese musos. It trickled down into popular streetwear, which I believe still influences today’s fashion, with oversized clothes frequently trending. It should also be noted that this year was also dubbed the end of the punk boom for Japan, so change was afoot in society across fashion, dance, and music (5). J-rap



had its first taste of commercial success in the years of 1994 and 1995 (6). The tracks "Kon'ya wa būgi bakku" (Boogie Back Tonight) by Schadaraparr and "Da. Yo. Ne." and "Maicca" by East End X Yuri sold a million copies (7).

Japan has a projected global image of being a very polite and developed society. This and hip hop seem like an odd contrast. From an outside perspective, it's easy to look at Japan as a place where everything is perfect and society runs with only efficiency and grace. Its economy ranks 3rd in the world for GDP, and the homogenous makeup of the population can make it seem as if racial tensions are virtually nonexistent. In the West, rap is an artform that tackles big issues with hard-hitting and hard-to-stomach lines that are so true it hurts. It would be hard to imagine a song like "This is America" by Childish Gambino being written by a Japanese artist about Japan. It's simply too direct. Instead, J-rap content is subtle, poetic, and impactful. These Japanese musicians *do* have a lot to say. Japan *does* face similar issues as the West,

but the difference is that J-rap artists don't need to slap their listeners in the face for them to get the message. J-rap is tuned for native ears.

The artist Koh has been praised for bringing the topic of poverty and inequality in Japan to light as his fame rises. "One of the things that makes Kohh interesting to the Japanese scene is that he grew up very poor," Thomas, a professor at Cornell University who studies Japanese hip hop, says. "He saw a lot of drug use; he's seen killings, a lot of violence. It's a world that exists in Japan but isn't really seen in the mainstream at all" (8). Kohh is part of a rap crew called Riverside Mobb which was formed from the residents of the slums in Oji, Tokyo, where he grew up. Another crew, Bad Hop, grew up in Kawasaki City, which is infamous for its industrial and air pollution. Vice did an interview with the crew standing in the most polluted junction of Kawasaki while they talked about their personal health struggles from living in the area. You see a trend occurring here with artists living difficult lives, often growing up in slums and using creativity as a positive

outlet, similar to artists the West. The members of Bad Hop have been through many ordeals in the past, which some have been to jail for, but now they have turned their lives around with music. Thus, J-rap and hip hop remain gateways to breaking the cycle of gang involvement and violence.

Racial issues have also been part of the scene. Concerns about the use of “blackface” have arisen. There is even a historically derogatory phrase coined *burapan*, a name given to the fashion sensibilities of those striving to emulate African-American style (9). Some Japanese artists use the act of allowing their skin to naturally be tan as an act of rebellion against the stereotypical beauty standard of pale skin. Despite latching on to stereotypes that we’d cringe about in the West, these artists are still taking their love for western hip hop and creating something of their own. Chinese rapper MaSiWei, who is apart of 88rising, a signed group with the Higher Brothers, summarises the cultural exchange simply with “Black people watch Japanese cartoons. We (Asians) listen to hip hop. It’s the same thing” (10). In an interview done by *Vice* about the rise of Asian rap culture, Ebro Darden, a popular American urban radio host, discusses the historical importance of remembering where hip hop originates. It is 30 minutes long, but it is a fascinating mini documentary. I’ll let you make up

your own mind about this issue. I believe this is a sensitive topic, and there is a tentative line between respectful emulation and gross oversimplification and stereotyping of another culture.

English is also quite common in these tracks. For example, the track “It G Ma,” which is mentioned later on, was 40% Japanese, 50% Korean, and 10% English. Why does English appear so often in Japanese rap songs? The answer is simply that with the way the Japanese language finishes off sentences, there isn’t much variation in lyrics or rhymes, so sometimes a verse will be finished off with a punchy English word. Not to mention English is far better at being crass, with actual swear words built into it. Although English provides more options for lyrics, the real game changer was when hip hop songs stopped being translations of English songs and started being written in Japanese. “I think the secret behind the popularity is that Japanese hip-hop lyrics matured. Before they used to copy American gangster rap singing about guns and violence, which there isn’t too much of in Japan,” says Mr. Tamura, a record shop owner who watched J-rap take off in the 2000s (11). Making their own print and slang and creating their own flavour of the music genre was a key for becoming more mainstream.



There are some clear household names when it comes to old school J-rappers. Common names such as Dabo, King Giddra, and Hime reached peak popularity during the 1990s—2000s. Hime (meaning princess), one of the most popular female artists during that era, often spoke on topics relating to female empowerment and crushing the stereotypes of Japanese women being “obedient.” The 2000s were an important era for hip hop as Japan was the second country where Def Jams went international. Def Jam Japan (デフ・ジャム・ジャパン) has signed various successful artists including Dabo, who was the first signed. May I mention they also signed BTS? Oh, boy, has this gone full circle!

This now takes us into the present day J-rap. Quite possibly the most significant track of modern J-rap, “It G Ma” was released in 2015. It made it into the international charts and was a collaboration between Korean and Japanese rappers. The caliber of this track can be simply put with the article title by Vice’s Noisey: “It G Ma” Made Asian Rap History. Keith Ape, JayAllday, Loota, Okasian, and Kohh brought Japanese and Korean rap together to become new global trap overlords.” This was later remixed by Waka Flocka Flame, A\$AP Ferg, Dumbfoundead and Father with a music video which still remains true to the Asian origins.

It’s difficult to search J-rap without an artist like being the prominent name across search engines. Other artists which you should check out are Kid Fresino, Loota, Mcpero, and Daoko. Lastly we couldn’t be talking about Asian hip hop without mentioning 88rising. Known for being the record label behind the remix of “It G Ma” and plenty of Asian urban artists who are blowing up globally, 88rising is not only a record company but also a multimedia powerhouse for honouring everything Asian. In a New Yorker article about how 88rising is making a place for Asian hip hop, artist Wu describes the momentousness of their work as “Asian fans rarely see their stars venture outside their regional hip-hop ecosystems, let alone stand alongside an established figure like (travis)Scott” (12). Personally, as an assistant language teacher of English, I find it heartwarming watching the crew, who hail from such different areas of the world, be able to communicate together with one language. The 88rising crew seems to be able to pull off a seamless unity together. The most remarkable thing they’ve done together was the Head in the Clouds music festival, which hosted only Asian musicians. This was held in Los Angeles in September of

2018, and Japanese artists Joji, Kohh, and Diablo performed. More recently, 88rising did shows in Tokyo and Osaka.

Overall, I think Japanese hip hop is pretty fascinating and a great window into a more underground world of Japan. It helps us Japanese learners get more exposure to the language and see some alternative viewpoints that Japanese people have on their world. Although there are some question marks about potential insensitivities toward African-American culture, I appreciate that J-rap is still a rebellion against the masses. In writing this article, I personally was made to think critically about race and inequality in Japan and the crossover between black and Asian culture. And I hope this has also provoked some thoughts of your own. I have touched on only a handful of artists, so I urge you to go explore for yourself and find your own favourites. I am patiently waiting for 88rising to do another Japan tour or, even better, for me to be able to attend a more underground show in Tokyo. But for now I will have to appreciate them through online mediums.

*Alice is a first year ALT hailing from New Zealand and finding her way in Japan. She resides in the mighty cabbagepatch of Gunma. She loves a good coating of sarcasm, finding fellow plant-based folk, wearing black clothing 24/7, and constantly refusing plastic bags (and being received with strange looks). Who knew we had arms?! Here are some links to her favorite J-rap playlists on Spotify as well as her favorite song right now. Playlist 1, 2, and 3. @twigsnshit*

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Nick Moulds



# JAPANESE DRUG

Lauren Porter (Yam

Walking into a Japanese drugstore for the first time can be an... experience. You may see brands you recognize or see English in all the right places that lead you to believe you understand what you're buying, but something just isn't quite right. What is "bright milk" anyway? Isn't "Perfect Whip" a quality you desire in a parfait? Why is my moisturizer also "whitening," and are you sure it doesn't mean I'm

bleaching my skin? Where does the sunscreen migrate to for the winter? Why is all the supposed face lotion actually face water? And what is this "milk liquid" right next to it? Should I be uncomfortable?

Sometimes, (hu)man(s) cannot live off of English alone. Sometimes, a trip to the drug store takes days of reading labels to figure out which product

## FACE WASH

Japan has a variety of cleansers available to you, and this is the section of the store that has the most brand names I recognize from the States. Dove and Biore are the familiar suspects, and usually you won't be surprised by what you find in the bottle. However, Japan does have some cheap gems that you might not have found if you've decided to play it safe. If you're ready to choose your own adventure and try Japanese products, you can save space in your suitcase for the important things after trips home, like huge tubs of peanut butter and chocolate.

Products in Japan usually range on one side of the refreshing to moisturizing scale. This isn't to say that products advertised as "refreshing" can't be moisturizing. It's just that the finish will be lighter, less rich and penetrating. In the cases of deodorant, you might encounter powder-like, drier finishing products, which I've put at the end of the spectrum. If you are prone to dry skin, you might want to stick to the moisturizing

side of the spectrum year round, but if you have oily skin or sweat a lot in the hotter months (don't we all?), refreshing might be just the ticket. Here is a list of Japanese words for product finishes, and their translations in order from moisturizing to refreshing.



- うるおい — moisture, richness
- しっとり — gentle, soft, mellow
- なめらか — smooth, velvety (usually used for cream)
- プルプル — bouncing, elastic skin
- もちもち — springy and smooth (like fresh mochi rice cakes)
- つやつや — glossy, bright (skin and hair)
- つるつる — smooth, shiny (usually skin, less-used for hair)
- みずみずしい — young and lustrous, fresh and juicy
- さっぱり — refreshing
- すっきり — refreshed and clean
- すべすべ — smooth, velvety (usually used for skin, drier finish)
- さらさら — silky, smooth (dry finish)

For my morning routine, I usually use an うるおい cleanser, specifically Biore's うるおい with the blue text on the bottle. However, the Senka-brand Perfect Whip face cleanser recently caught my eye, advertising itself as a cleanser with 濃密泡 (のうみつあわ), meaning dense foam. The texture of the foam of this cleanser is incredibly rich, so the foam gets deep into your pores and gently cleanses any dirt and grime you might have gathered. If you have problems with your pores (毛穴, けあな), the Senka-brand White Clay Face Wash might help you gently clean out your pores and smooth out your skin texture (キメ整う、きめととのう) for more もちもちの素肌 (すはだ, springy skin complexion).

# GSTORE BEAUTY

(Iwate Prefecture)

is right for you. In fact, that's what I did. I walked around the daily skin-care aisle at my local Tsuruha Drug Store (not spon) and read labels for an hour, taking notes like the scariest health inspector. They didn't kick me out, but I did make sure to buy some face cleanser to appease the cashier.

After gathering a list of Japanese words you should

know, I have divided them into categories by product type. This article focuses on face wash and moisturizers though the terms covered appear quite frequently in many other products such as hand lotions, face masks, and lip creams. So sit back, hold on tight, and put down your dictionaries. Don't worry. I'm a professional.

## MOISTURIZERS

If you're right off the boat (airplane?) from your home country, you might be confused by the difference between 化粧水 (けしょうすい) and 乳液 (にゅうえき), face lotion and milky lotion respectively. A more accurate translation of these two words would be 'toner' and 'lotion', and these two products are usually used in conjunction with one other. First, you apply a toner for instant and penetrative moisture,

and after that's absorbed into your skin, you seal it in with the 'milky lotion' as a kind of top coat and protective layer. I've gone the toner-lotion route, and I will say my skin has never felt more moisturized and プルプル (bouncing, elastic). However, I am also a lazy person who is barely conscious for the first hour of my day, and the less fuss the better. That's where オールインワン gels and creams do the trick. It means

exactly what the katakana sounds like. These are cheaper than buying two separate products although they don't feel nearly as moisturizing as the toner-lotion one-two punch combo. I have yet to find an affordable all-in-one gel that penetrates as well as the ones from back home although Shiseido's Aqualabel All-in-One Gel in red nearly stole my heart when I was using it.

Here are some qualities in moisturizers and gels you might want to look out for:

- こってり — thick, heavy, rich
- 極潤 (ごくじゅん) — extremely moist (brand name)
- しっかり保湿 - firm moisture retention
- べたつきのない — non-sticky
- 復元 (ふくげん) — restorative, regenerative
- 美白 (びはく) — whitening, brightening



Okay, wait a minute. 美白? Doesn't that last one sound a little... problematic? Don't take the kanji to heart! The kind of whitening that bihaku is advertising has nothing to do with bleach (漂白剤、ひょうはくざい) and everything to do with reducing redness and irritation, brightening your skin and repairing it after sun damage. Don't worry! There's no bleach in these! Instead, they are formulated to control your production of melanin (believed to cause wrinkles and freckles), as well as encourage cell turnover for restored, clear skin (透明感のある肌). If your skin is prone to redness or sensitive to the sun, products advertised as "bihaku" might be just what you need! But remember to still always wear sunscreen!

# USEFUL TERMS



Here's one last vocabulary list I want to cover before I release you into the wild to tackle the Tsuruha or Welcia nearest to you (still hashtag not spon).

- 医薬部外品 (いやくぶがいひん)— quasi drug, medicated product
- 薬用 (やくよう)— for medicinal use
- 補修 (ほしゅう)— repair, mending
- 敏感肌 (びんかんはだ)— sensitive skin
- パラベンフリー — paraben free
- 無添加 (むてんか)— additive free
- 防腐剤無添加 (ぼうふざいむてんか)— no added preservatives
- ラウリル硫酸ナトリウム (らうりるりゅうさんなとりうむ)— Sodium Lauryl Sulfate
- アルコールフリー — alcohol free
- 着色料 (ちゃくしょくりょう)— dye
- 香料 (こうりょう)— perfumes
- 品質安定剤 (ひんしつあんていざい)— stabilizing preservative

First, 医薬部外品 and 薬用 mean relatively the same thing. These products contain chemicals that have been recognized by the Japanese ministry of health to have medicinal qualities, however the percentage of the overall product is small. These products should not be used to medicate or treat a condition, but can have preventative or supplemental qualities if used regularly. Next, if you have sensitive skin, looking for the kanji for 敏感肌 (びんかんはだ) would be a good place to start, though I will say that it is hard to find products that are marketed specifically for sensitive skin. Additive free, paraben free,

or preservative free products are also pretty hard to find in the cheap section. I did find one brand called 'Cow' advertised for delicate skin, with no dyes, perfumes, or preservatives added though I have never used it myself.

Sometimes you're trapped inside of your local drug store searching for just one thing in a sea of things you don't need written in a language most of us barely understand anyway. Let me let you in on a little secret: even some Japanese people don't understand Japanese terms as well as it seems like they do. In

my incredibly thorough interview of one entire Japanese coworker, it became clear that even he didn't understand the difference between うるおい and しっとり and that, in the end, searching for products that are right for you should be approached through trial and error. Hygiene shouldn't be stressful, but taking care of yourself on top of living in a foreign country is. With the help of these lists, I hope you can escape the clutches of confusion by going in with more information to work from than whatever cryptic English they decided to put on the bottle. Happy hunting!

*Lauren Porter is a mountain hermit slash English teacher living in Yamanashi Prefecture. She was granted her N1 qualification in a trial by combat last June, and enjoys hiking, onsen, and hyperbole.*

8TH ANNUAL JUNE 2019

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# COMB CULT CLOT

*My Day in*

Rana Wael (Yokohama Prefecture)

# FINING URAL HING:

## *a kimono*

My name is Rana Wael, and I'm an exchange student from Egypt studying Japanese culture at Yokohama National University. After being in Japan for only three months, I received a ticket for the 2019 Coming of Age Ceremony. This ceremony is for those who became or will become 20 years old this school year (March 2018-April 2019). I was only 19 years old when I received the ticket from the Yokohama City Government, but on January 1st I turned 20, meaning that I qualified for participating in the Coming of Age Day. To celebrate that they have become adults, the girls are expected to wear a kimono, and the boys often wear suits. This meant I had to buy a full kimono to attend the event. When I asked about how much it would cost to buy a new kimono, I was told it was a lot of money. I had asked some of my friends about how they prepare for this ceremony and how much it cost them to buy their kimono - theirs cost from 200,000 to 1,000,000 yen! Unfortunately, I couldn't spare more than 20,000

yen, and I didn't know where I could buy a kimono for that amount; but, luckily for me, my friend Laura did. She took me and a friend of mine (also from Egypt) to buy a cheaper, secondhand kimono. There are lots of recycle shops in Kanagawa where you can do this. I had a great time looking through all the secondhand kimono with them, and there were quite a lot to choose from. Despite this, I was starting to become a little dispirited because I wasn't able to find the right kimono for me.

Finally, the hard work paid off as I found a beautiful one in a small antique shop. When I entered the shop, I saw this perfect kimono right in front of my eyes, and I was really impressed with its colors and design. The only problem was that it did not come with the *obi* belt and the rest of the items you need to create the full kimono look; there are so many extra pieces! So I told the shop owner that I wanted to buy the kimono, and he helped me match the colors with an obi belt he had. He also taught me how to colour coordinate the whole kimono, which was so helpful. After that I asked Laura and my other friend about which color hijab would match the kimono, and they easily suggested the perfect color. I didn't have a hijab in this color unfortunately, but my friend had one, so I borrowed it from her. With that, I finally finished putting together the whole kimono.

The hardest thing was putting on the kimono. I watched a lot of video tutorials about how to put on a kimono, but I really struggled, especially with the obi belt. I tried for ages, and my friend had to help me out in the end. The problem was that she also didn't know how to tie the obi. After a while, my friend finally figured it out by tying it from the front. We then had to twist it to the back, so I was literally hugging the kimono together while my friend was trying to twist it around my body!

After all that, we finally headed out to the Coming of Age Ceremony. It was in the Yokohama Arena at Shin-Yokohama as I was invited by city of Yokohama (I don't know the specific facility). At the Yokohama Arena, there were a lot of people, and we didn't know where to go or what we should do. We just followed the girls who were wearing kimono. After we arrived at the venue, they had to check our tickets before we entered a huge room. There, a woman talked about what our lives would be like once we turned 20 years old, but I couldn't understand everything because the Japanese was too difficult for me to follow all the time. It was really

crowded, and many of the women seemed like they were wearing really expensive kimonos. They were all so beautiful.

We stood out from everyone because of our hijabs, and the other women began asking us where we were from. They were surprised to know that we are from Egypt, and they took a lot of pictures with us. There were a few difficulties with wearing the kimono. The biggest problem with wearing a kimono for a long time is that it is really hard to move around because they are so tight! For example, when I was going up and down stairs I felt that, many times, I would fall over. When I had to go to the toilet, it was so hard to get it in the right position; I was so nervous because I really wanted to pee! Also, when I was sitting in the train, my back was really hurting me because of the obi belt. So even though the kimono was so beautiful, it had its challenges.

In the end I was really happy to have this experience, and my family, who have seen the photos, think that the kimono suits me. I think that the kimono can suit Muslim women because it's somehow covering all the body in a stylish way. It actually looks a lot like a Muslim outfit called the *abaaya*. I loved this experience because, in Egypt, we don't have events when we became 18 years old or adults like they do here. I loved wearing a kimono and feeling that I was taking part in a Japanese custom just like the young Japanese people around me. I felt that the kimono suited me, and I felt great wearing it, like a queen from the age of Ottoman Egypt!

*Rana Wael is an Egyptian girl who is studying Japanese culture and language in Yokohama. In her spare time, she likes crocheting and discovering new places. She wants to be a Japanese language teacher in the future. Her dream is to travel all over the world.*







# 5 Japanese Women Artists you ought to know.

And if you  
don't, you  
can add their  
exhibitions to  
your bucket  
list.

Tayla-Paige van Sittert (Kumamoto)

# Yayoi Kusama



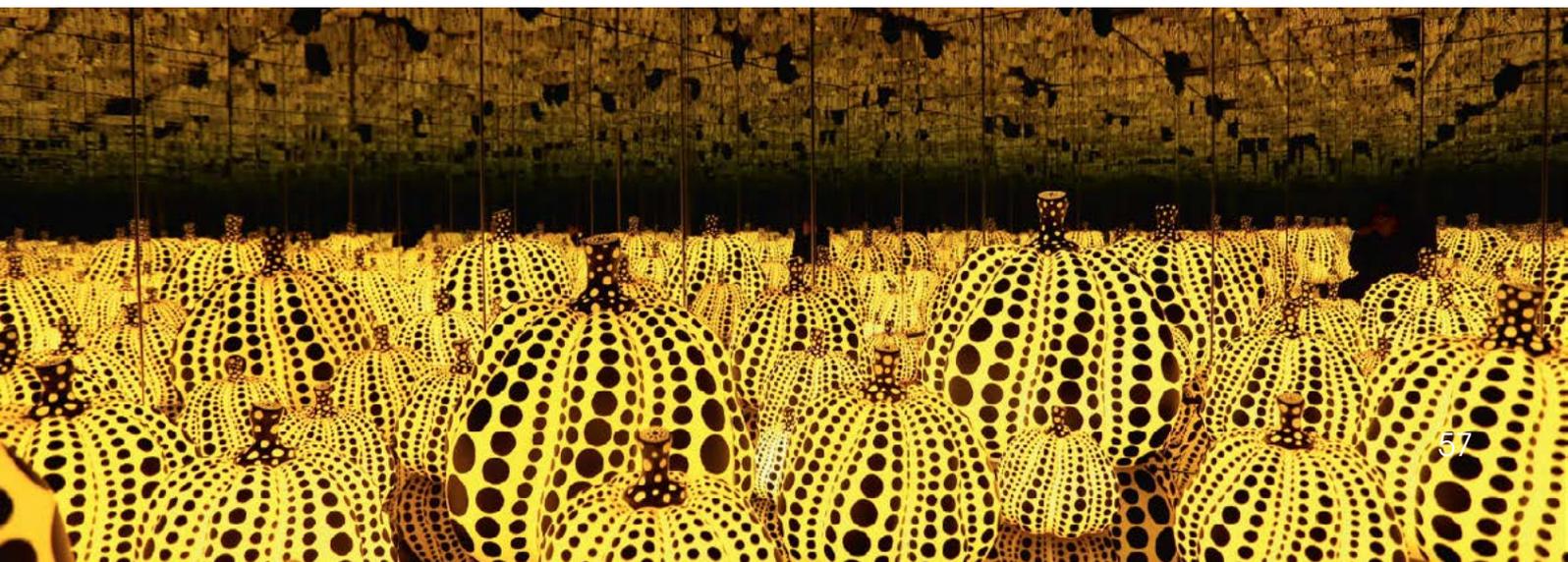
You've probably heard of Yayoi Kusama, one of the more widely popular female artists from Japan, because she is super hard to miss with her zany fashion and infinitely polkadotted artworlds. But she wasn't always so recognized and her artworlds are definitely a way for us all to connect the dots. It began when she fled from her family who refused her perspective, sewed money into her kimono, and trekked to New York only to find herself in the belly of a male-dominated beast that regurgitated her ideas without any credit. Facing all this and more in her lifetime, Kusama uses an inner world of depression and hallucinations to create an outer world of fascination and infinite possibility. She is a femforce to be reckoned with and a buoy in a sea of madness.

## From:

Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture

## Exhibitions:

- Yayoi Kusama Museum at Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo
- Towada Art Centre, Towada City, Aomori
- Matsumoto City Museum of Art, Nagano
- Naoshima Island, Kagawa
- Kirishima Open-air Museum, Yusui Town, Kagoshima
- Forever Museum of Contemporary Art, Kyoto





# Mariko Mori

The future has a way of seeming grim, especially because we are still trying to wiggle our way through the male-centric, capitalistic wasteland that surrounds us. But Mariko Mori makes it all look a lot better; she propels herself (taking us all with her) into elegant futurescapes that make us feel a sense of hope and ease. If she isn't taking us to the future with interesting sculptures, photographs, and interactive displays, she's bringing the future to us here in the dumb present, showing us how silly and plain some things are, the way they are now. With Mori, thank the heavens, the future has a different face; it's female and fantastical.

## Exhibitions:

No permanent exhibitions in Japan

## From:

Born in Tokyo; lives and works in New York



# Chiho Aoshima

Pop art need not be limited to the commercially pretty, cutesy lala lands that we are used to. At least not according to Chiho Aoshima, who shows us a deeper, darker side of it all. Her aesthetic influences include Ukiyo-e (a Japanese art form from the 17th century in which artists painted sometimes erotic images of beauties, kabuki actors, wrestlers, scenes from history and folk tales, and more onto wood blocks), Shōjo (manga aimed at a teenage female readership), and Superflat (a postmodern art movement founded by the artist Takashi Murakami, who Aoshima has worked for) among others. Combined with her interest in the flattened forms of Japanese graphic art (manga and anime), pop culture, the “shallow emptiness of Japanese consumer culture,” and the graveyard beside her home, she draws on diverse aesthetics to create imagery that’s simultaneously cute and grotesque, real and fantastical, futuristic and traditional. She is a true artist, challenging boundaries between numerous opposing forces within and without the human condition (between high and popular art, for example) all while acknowledging the influence of traditional painting and Japanese sentimentality on her work. Paradoxes abound, and we are all totally here for that.

## From:

Born, lives, and works in Tokyo.

## Exhibitions:

No permanent exhibitions in Japan.





# Rinko Kawauchi

We lose sight of the everyday so terribly easily. Rinko Kawauchi doesn't - that's why she's so magical. A photographer, she creates visual poems of things we see all the time. She douses them in delicate light, gives them a respectful nod, makes them stick out beautifully and vulnerably, and suddenly the mundane is transformed into art. As women, we can feel like we have a lot to prove in this life, and so many of us turn to mimic the loud arrogance of the men around us in order to level up. Perhaps that's why Kawauchi's art is so powerful; it speaks quietly but comes across loudly. It guides instead of pushes, and it encourages us to have a conversation with ourselves before we confront the world outside. Whispers are worthy, as Kawauchi makes us realise: "I believe quietness, fragility and anxiety are included in beauty."

## From:

Shiga, Japan. Lives and works in Tokyo.

## Exhibitions:

- The Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum, Shizuoka
- Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Aichi
- Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Tokyo





# Kimiko Yoshida

## From:

Tokyo. Lives and works in Paris, Venice, Tokyo.

## Exhibitions:

- Zeit-Foto Salon, Tokyo, Japan
- Kawasaki City Museum, Kawasaki, Japan
- Grand Marble, Kyoto, Japan

Most of the 'great' philosophical minds and artistic fortunes belong to men. But without making this about identity, which is exactly what Kimiko Yoshida strives towards in her visual arts (photos, sculptures, and installations), she denies and deconstructs the self and what it means to be located, categorized, and understood. She is simultaneously arranging herself as everyone and no one, constantly transforming and transcending the burden of identity, including being a Japanese female. Feeling oppressed as a woman, she left Japan in 1995 and moved to France to pursue art. "I fled Japan to escape an arranged marriage, the servitude of women, social discipline, the burden of submission to the group," she told ArtDaily in an interview.

She defines art as "a subtle process of transposition, an assiduous struggle with the state of things. To be there where I think I am not or to disappear where I think I am; that is what matters. It is in fact a variation after the comments by Jacques Lacan on Descartes, cogito ergo 'I think, therefore I am.' Lacan underlines that 'I think where I am not, I am where I do not,' that is to say the being and the thinking are divided, split, and disclosed. My work is a reflection upon the division between representation and meaning; representation and disappearance; representation and absence; signifier and signified..."



# LIFESTYLE



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### Amanda Muller

*“Dear frozen yogurt, you are the celery of desserts. Be ice cream or be nothing. Zero stars.” -Ron Swanson, Parks and Recreation*

## TRAVEL EDITOR

[connect.travel@ajet.net](mailto:connect.travel@ajet.net)

### Amy Lee

Photo: Nick Moulds



# Seishun 18 Ticket

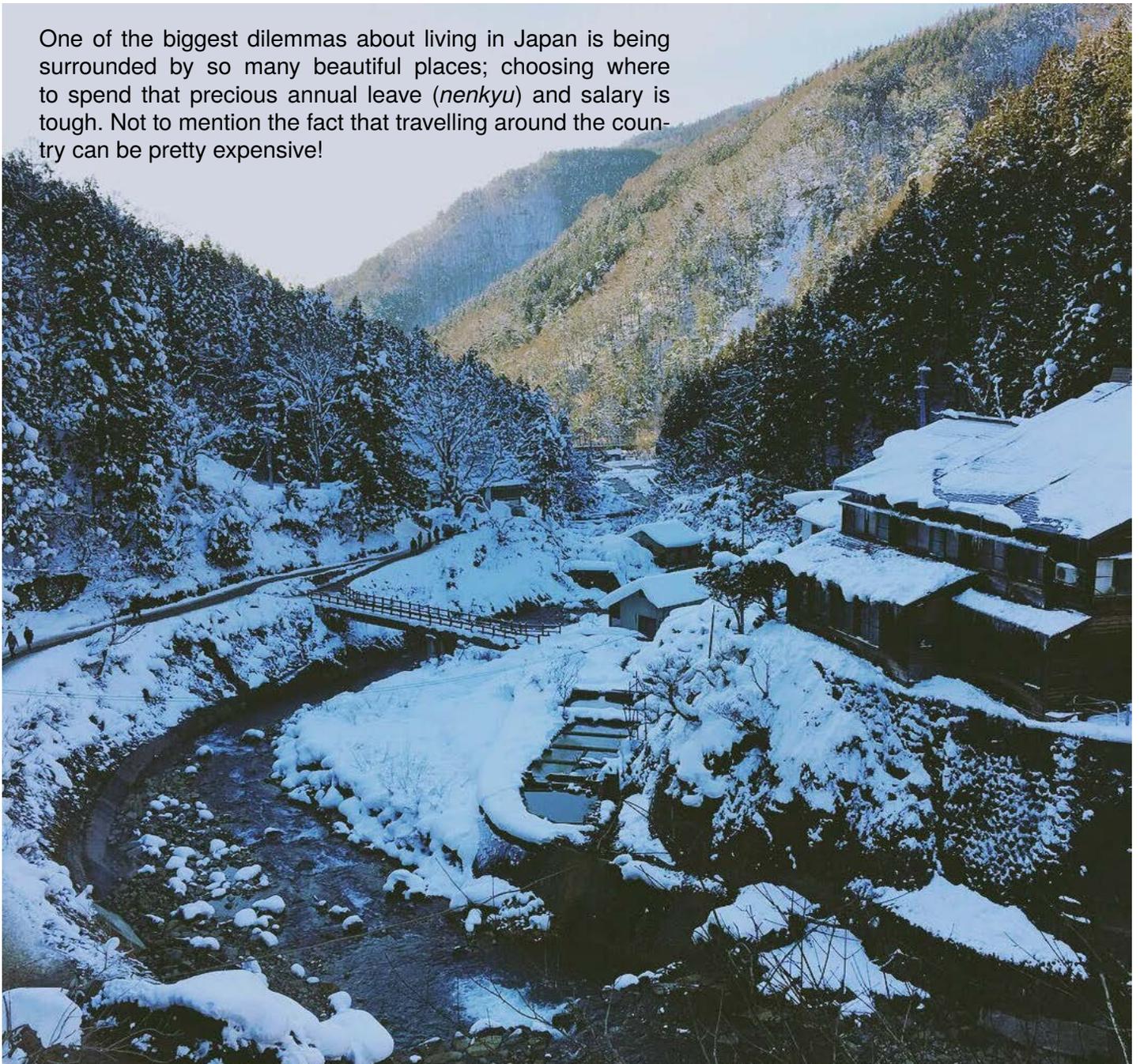
## *Review and Travel Tips*

Joanna Kay (Yamaguchi Prefecture)

Living in Yamaguchi, the last prefecture of Honshu, most of the major tourist highlights on the island are at least a domestic flight or over an hour-long *shinkansen* ride away. Luckily there are ways to make that travel a little more affordable, as I discovered this winter!

Being budget-minded, I decided to travel without the use of expensive shinkansen bullet trains, travelling first to Tokyo on a cheap domestic flight from my nearest airport and subsequently using only JR local lines with the help of the Seishun 18 Pass.

One of the biggest dilemmas about living in Japan is being surrounded by so many beautiful places; choosing where to spend that precious annual leave (*nenkyu*) and salary is tough. Not to mention the fact that travelling around the country can be pretty expensive!



This year, my travels over winter break took me to Tokyo, Hakone, the Mount Fuji area, Nagano and a quick stop off at Matsumoto before I headed back to Tokyo again, travelling across four different prefectures in total.

So you might be thinking — what is the Seishun 18 Pass?

This is a five-day pass which can be used for unlimited JR-only rail travel anywhere in Japan, only available for purchase three times a year during holiday seasons. It offers a flexible period of time in which to use those five days so they do not need to be used on consecutive days.

It costs 11,850 yen for the five-day pass, which works out at 2,370 yen a day. You can easily spend more than that with any kind of lengthy travel, so we made good savings on each day. Over the five days, the pass saved us 4,000 yen in total. The further you travel, the more value you get for your money.

***Before you consider buying it this spring, here are some tips and things I've learned from my recent travels.***



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## Tip #1

***Research your trip route beforehand.***

I cannot stress this point enough. I admit I was a little naive and believed the pass would cover all the areas I was visiting.

Although you can reach most areas with a JR station using the Seishun 18 Pass, some specific tourist areas are run by private companies, so once you arrive there you'll need to purchase their site-specific travel passes. Hakone, Fuji and Nagano are all areas where we had to buy separate tourists passes to

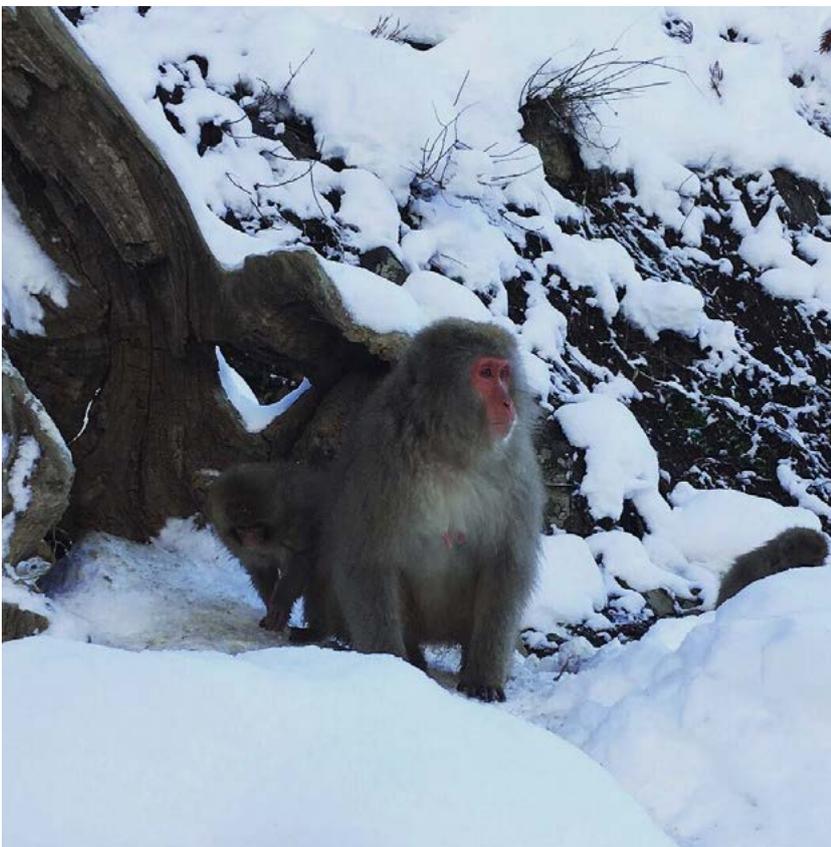
get around. If you're trying to be more budget-friendly, then this is definitely something to consider.

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## Tip #2

***Get to know what trains are local JR lines.***

Always double-check that the train you're taking is a local JR train. Google can be deceptive when you're planning your route, so use the Japan Official Travel app if possible. You will unfortunately be charged an extra fare if you accidentally take a non-JR express line train, which happened to me once.



To prevent this, use the Japan Official Travel app. You can set the filters to avoid routes with express or shinkansen trains. This was really useful to us and something we didn't discover until later down the line!

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## Tip #3

### *Limit the number of places you go.*

As everyone knows, travel is exhausting. Without slowing down a bit, you will really experience travel burnout from the long train journeys as we did on occasion. To enjoy your time on the pass, travel far out but stay in those places for longer than one night.

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## Tip #4

### *Travel during the day.*

If you can, make long journeys during the day time to get the most out of traveling slowly and seeing the landscape outside. We usually travelled at night so we couldn't see a thing outside, but on occasion we did take the train during the day and it was lovely to see the surrounding areas.

---

## Tip #5

### *Make short stopovers on the longer journeys.*

We made a short stop at a lovely castle in Matsumoto on the way to Tokyo at no extra cost. This is another nice little method to help you get the most out of the pass.



## What's the verdict?

Overall, we had an unforgettable experience. The long train journeys, although tiring and sometimes tedious, took us to the most amazing places for much less than other travel options!

I would say the main downside is definitely the longer and more uncomfortable train journeys you have to take in order to get to your destination. The journeys we took on local trains were, on average, four to five hours long with a few transfers in-between. The trains are not normally as comfortable or plush as the bullet trains either.

Navigating our way around was a challenge, but once we reached our destinations by taking the most obscure train routes, we felt a great sense of satisfaction. As someone who likes to save money, seeing how much these journeys would have cost us without the Seishun 18 Pass was an added bonus.

In short: yes, I would recommend the pass, but please do your research carefully to ensure that you can get your money's worth.

Dates for the spring use of the Seishun 18 have not yet been released at this time; however, the Seishun 18 has traditionally been valid from March 1 to April 10. You can check out the terms and conditions of the pass here:

<https://www.jreast.co.jp/e/pass/seishun18.html>

Happy travels!

*Joanna is a first year ALT living in Hofu, Yamaguchi prefecture. She's an ex-London girl who loves art, travel and exploring nature. Her favourite thing to do in Japan is go on long bike rides, climb mountains and learn to cook Japanese food.*

# OSHIRAKURA BAITO:

## THE BURN- ING HUT

Sarah Oeste (Niigata Prefecture)

January 14th is Coming of Age Day across Japan, so one could expect me to have spent the evening at a huge, beautiful temple, surrounded by people in ornate kimono and buying delicious street food. Instead, I found myself in an isolated field, squatting inside a highly flammable hut made of straw and snow with a bunch of drunken farmers.

In Tokamachi, it's simply too cold and snowy to properly celebrate the coming of age ceremony so early in the year. Instead, we have the *Oshirakura Baito*, also known as "Burning Hut," Festival. Local farmers spend two days building a hut out of straw and sticks on a snowy foundation. On the second evening, many people come to sit in the hut on *tatami* mats surrounding a large fire. They eat soup, mountain vegetables,





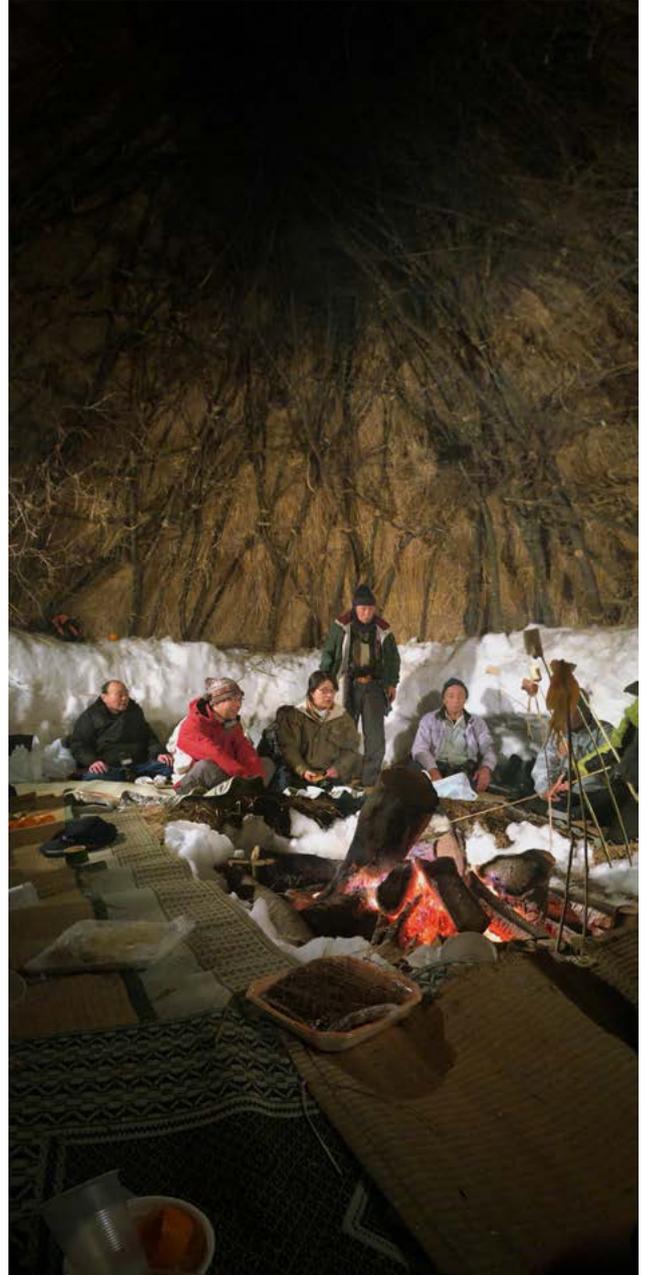
*mochi*, and mandarin oranges, and drink *sake* and *amazake*. At the end of the night the hut is set on fire, and the fire is used to predict the crop conditions for the new year.

Us newbie Tokamachi ALTs had heard tales of last year's event from our regional advisor and fearless leader Taylor, so our crew set out to see what it was all about, with Taylor gleefully riding shotgun next to me as the dutiful and very crucial Designated Driver.

The Burning Hut was in the mountains surrounding Tokamachi, up where there's only a few farmers' houses scattered about. I didn't even know there were roads that went up that way. We pulled up to a small field with a mountain face rising up next to it and disappearing into the night sky. Old men were there to direct us to cramped parking and eventually into the hut itself, through a door that you practically had to crawl through. Inside was warmer than you'd think. We all removed our shoes and gathered around a bonfire. Local farmers kindly served us too-full bowls of soup, even after I accidentally dripped some of the hot liquid down the back of an old man's neck! Even though people were constantly taking pictures of us and I couldn't understand most of what was being said, there was a warmth and hominess to the gathering that could only be captured by small rural events such as these. They made sure we always had food close at hand and tried to chat with us.

Yet there was always, in the back of our minds, this awareness of risk that came with an activity such as this. This fact was clearly illustrated when about 10 minutes into our stay, the floor of our little hut caught fire from the overeager bonfire. The hut filled with smoke as the head farmer calmly but determinedly stamped on the hay floor to put out the flames. My friends and I exchanged highly concerned glances and looked on with a healthy amount of fear, and a few of us mentally planned our escape by either burrowing through the snow or by racing the old farmers to that single tiny door. The head farmer shoveled large chunks of snow from the very foundation of the hut and tossed it with suspiciously accurate aim onto the embers and all around the side of the bonfire. Did this happen often? Only when the snow blanketed the side of the fire

***“The hut filled with smoke as the head farmer calmly but determinedly stamped on the hay floor to put out the flames.”***



pit were we able to relax a bit, covered in ash as Taylor firmly expressed that burning in a straw hut surrounded by old farmers and a bunch of weird foreigners like us was not how she was planning on kicking the bucket.

***“Us Tokamachi ALTs once again felt our own mortality as one of the Nagaoka English teachers struggled to put out the fire.”***



We spent close to three hours in the hut, with more and more people coming in to join us. There was plenty of sake and soup to go around. The farmers roasted dried squid and mochi over the fire, although many were accidentally sacrificed to the bonfire below. We made some new friends when three foreign English teachers from nearby Nagaoka City came into the tent and joined in chatting and general merriment. Although the newcomers missed out on the big fire scare, the hut wasn't about to leave them out in the cold. Behind them, a Styrofoam cup in which a candle was resting burst into flames, nearly making a low-hanging banner a casualty. Us Tokamachi ALTs once again felt our own mortality as one of the Nagaoka English teachers struggled to put out the fire. “Just blow it out! Blow it out!” we yelled, and I involuntarily started reviewing my escape routes again. But this was not nearly as severe as the first fire, and as the fire faded into smoke, we were able to breathe a sigh of relief once again.

As the night went on, the sake began to flow. A Niigata councilman came to say hello, and then the mayor of Tokamachi made an appearance with a camera crew in hot pursuit. The mayor sat right in front of us, practically perched on the lap of one of the Nagaoka teachers. As the expensive sake came out, the mayor poured some ALTs generous “shots” that were more like entire cups of sake. Naomi, our local Strong Zero expert, took it as a personal challenge, and downed hers in nearly one go. The mayor asked her if she wanted some more. “Chotto dake,” she replied. The mayor immediately refilled her cup to the brim.

The farmers finished up the evening in the hut with a short speech, and then the men sang a traditional Japanese song. As the reverberation of the song filled the hut, it made me feel like I was seeing an old part of Japanese culture resurface again for this special occasion.

The party was beginning to heat up, literally – soon the hut would be set on fire. Farmers firmly told us leave the hut, and we didn’t need much motivation, even as the mayor tried to convince us to stay inside a while longer. A group of men did stay behind to begin the preparations to get the fire to spread. We all stood in a circle around the hut, the cold cutting through our winter clothes. You could see in the illuminated doorway men moving around, rolling up the tatami mats and setting fires.

*Pop pop pop!*

What sounded like firecrackers went off inside the tent, and almost instantly, tall flames burst through the straw roof, crackling into the sky. The party was literally on fire. As the hut burned, the men made their way out, staying a surprisingly long time within the temporary building. The heat hit us hard. Standing on that snowy field, I was warmer than I’d ever been in my uninsulated apartment. The bonfire was intense, lighting up the entire field and casting black shadows upon the mountain ridges behind us. There was something satisfying about watching it burn, surrounded by new friends and the local Japanese folks who had worked so hard to build it. I never would have thought I’d be standing there, watching a hut burn in the hopes that it would signal a good crop season in the middle of the mountains of rural Japan and that unusualness only made the night all the better.

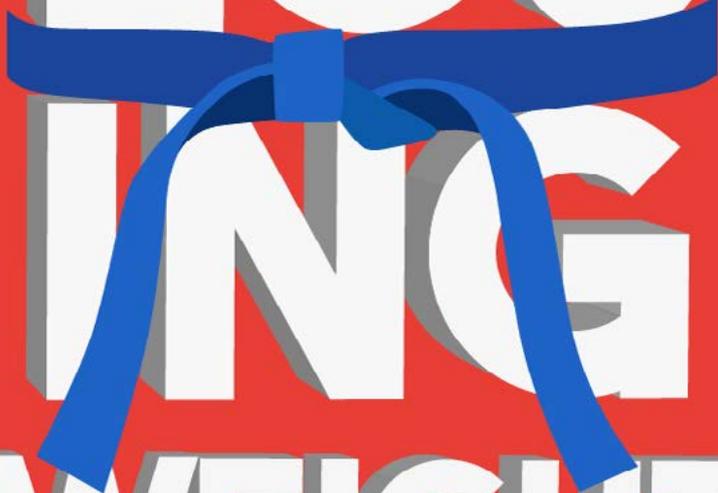
***“What sounded like firecrackers went off inside the tent, and almost instantly, tall flames burst through the straw roof, crackling into the sky. The party was literally on fire.”***

In five minutes, only small pieces of the hut were left smoldering, and that signaled the end of this tiny local festival. It was time to say goodbye to our new friends and make sure all my passengers made it safely to the car. With only a bit of trouble making it to the main road, we were soon heading back through mountain tunnels and rice field paths, on our way home to fill the rest of the night with anti-hangover rituals and a good night’s sleep.

*Sarah Oeste is a first year Canadian ALT based in Niigata Prefecture. She has her M.A. in Canadian history. She loves watching movies, exploring Japan, and talking with her highly entertaining JHS students.*



# LOSING WEIGHT IN JAPAN



Stephan Cowart (Fukushima Prefecture)

The first time I got on a plane was from Arizona to California. The second time was the next day from California to Japan. I was about 485 pounds (220 kg) and it was one of the most uncomfortable experiences of my life. I didn't set out to lose weight in Japan, but eventually that became one of my larger goals. Being 6"4' (about 194 cm) made it hard enough living in Japan, but the weight on top of that made it quite a challenge.

***“I didn't set out to lose weight in Japan, but eventually that became one of my larger goals”***

I lived in a small town in Fukushima. We had no fast food, which was a great help. Without even really trying, I lost about 15 pounds (7 kg). However, the weight started coming off much faster when I actually watched what I ate. I have never been a big fan of breakfast, so I would normally just eat school lunch, which we were given the caloric information for, and then I would eat dinner. This could be anything from chicken, veggies, and rice that I would make myself, or I would walk to my local conbini and eat about 1000 calories worth of food.



My town had no real gym so I couldn't really work out. I got some weights for my house but with all of the stuff from past JETs, and me generally being large, it made it really hard to actually use them. I ended up walking A LOT. My teachers would often comment that they saw me walking around town, and the students started to report their sightings of me whenever I saw them. It was nice in a way, but you get annoyed when you hear it for the fifth time in a row from the same teacher. Yes, I get it, I walk on the path you drive.

I also joined karate while I was in Japan. This really helped keep me focused on losing weight and gave me a nice solid reason to do so. I didn't want to be the fat guy who couldn't kick and was always out of breath. I wanted to be the skinny guy who couldn't kick and was always out of breath! My sensei were great since they would comment sometimes on my weight loss and tell me how much improvement they were seeing. Also, I just loved karate and everyone I practiced with. I didn't have a car, so I had to take the train and then walk to practice, which I would get to an hour early to every time since I had to rely on the train schedules.

Losing weight was the hardest simple thing I ever had to do. Not having any fast food made it a lot easier but my town did have quite a few mom-and-pop type restaurants with amazing food. Also, most social situations revolve around food, which makes it difficult when you are trying to lose weight. I limited my eating out to once a week and that seemed to work well for me.



Losing weight was easier in Japan than it currently is in America, just because it was harder to get bad food and I had less to do. It was easy to go for a two hour walk while on the JET Program since I didn't have much work responsibility and it freed up my personal time. Also I always felt safe walking in Japan, no matter what time of the day it was. I cannot say that for my current city in America.

While in Japan, I lost over 220 pounds (100 kg). I have kept the vast majority off since returning to America, but I have struggled. I forgot how easy it was to get food here, and all of the daily temptations. A *conbini* in Japan will have some healthy options as well as the ice creams and karaage, but an American gas station doesn't really have anything healthy that you can just pick up and eat. Sometimes you'll get lucky and find a sandwich that is a questionable age.

***“I didn't set out to lose weight in Japan, but eventually that became one of my larger goals”***

What tips would I give someone starting out in Japan? Find an active activity you enjoy. For me this was karate, but for you it could be taiko, hiking, yoga, dancing, or anything else. Anything that you want to get better at that makes you use your body. I would also say to tell people what you are doing. Public accountability is a great help and the support you get from people is amazing. Getting fit is hard enough in your home country where you can easily Google everything or just ask others for help. It's a magnitude harder in Japan, especially if you are like me and have terrible Japanese. But my biggest tip is to just start. You will mess up, and you will feel like a failure sometimes, but as long as you keep getting back up you will succeed. Trust me, you've got this.

*Stephen Cowart did two years as an ALT in Fukushima Prefecture. He was often seen walking around his town at all hours of the day. He has since gone back home to teach in math in America where he keeps up his walking habit. He is still working on losing weight, and is working with the difficulties of losing weight in America.*



# STAYING STRONG IN JAPAN

Charlotte Akin (Nagasaki)

“Bar is loaded. *Tsugi wa Akin Charlotta desu,*” is announced over the loudspeakers of a community gymnasium on the outskirts of Fukuoka City. I have found myself as one of three female competitors at the 2018 Fukuoka Prefecture Powerlifting Championships, with Japanese skills that do not extend far beyond *osakini shitsureishimasu*. Powerlifting is a strength sport consisting of three maximal effort attempts at three movements: the squat, the bench press, and the deadlift. This was my second powerlifting competition, but the first where the rules and sequence of events were explained in a language in which I had an infant’s level of comprehension.

The beginning of the competition followed some of the recurrent themes of my life in Japan thus far: confusion, indiscriminate agreement, and acceptance of potential disaster. Due to my poor Japanese, I misunderstood the time I was supposed to be ready and in my place. Consequently, I had only just begun warming up before realizing that I was next in line to put a barbell loaded with 95 kilos on my back, squat, and get back up again. With 300 mg of caffeine in my system, I sprinted towards the red weightlifting platform, in a skin-tight singlet, ready to conquer my first attempt at the squat. As I excitedly stepped onto the platform, I was met by four shocked judges



***“The establishment of a routine early in my tenure helped ease the initial culture shock and gave structure to my day after work.”***

frantically waving their arms into *batsu* Xs. My face ignited with embarrassment and the all-too-familiar thought of, ‘What have I managed to mess up?’ came into my head. After some charades with the main judge, I realized that I was required to bow before and after each attempt. This is Japan after all. With 20 seconds left on my one minute time limit, I had just enough time to bow, complete my squat, and bow again. My anxieties subsided when the judges held up the white flags which indicate a successful lift. The rest of the competition proceeded without any other *faux pas* and I placed first in my weight class (in which I was the sole competitor, but still a win in my book).

After arriving in my semi-inaka placement on the Shimabara peninsula in August 2018, I quickly sought out facilities to maintain my weightlifting hobby. The establishment of a routine early in my tenure helped ease the initial culture shock and gave structure to my day after work. I know what you’re thinking: “Okay, whatever girl. Exercise is good for you. Blah blah blah, endorphins, blah blah blah”. However, I was an unathletic, physical activity-hater for the majority of my life. I only began participating in and *enjoying* physical activity in late 2016 when my sister, a CrossFit coach, suggested I start strength training. Strength-focused training is a refreshing change from the diet and fitness industries which promote the prioritization of aesthetics over health. Lifting is becoming popular among women as it is increasingly understood that touching a weight does not immediately transform you into Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, (although, a girl can dream).

When I moved to Japan, I was apprehensive about joining my local gym as I was unsure of the norms, etiquette, and social currency that I needed to integrate. As a curly-haired redhead with thunder thighs, I do not exactly blend into my city's population of *obaachans* and *ojiisans*. To my surprise, however, there were three young guys lifting big weights off to the side. I felt completely relaxed in this setting despite being the only woman and not speaking Japanese. The commonality of our hobby allowed us to encourage and understand each other regardless of our linguistic differences. While I am still quite conspicuous among the predominantly elderly attendees, I have been pleasantly welcomed into the space accompanied by countless 'ええs' and 'すぞいs'.

Maintaining a fitness routine during my time in Japan has been overwhelmingly beneficial to my mental and physical health. I am able to take time for myself after a chaotic elementary school day where I can listen to music, not look at a screen, and give my brain a break from being surrounded by Japanese all day. Arriving in Japan with such a weak background in the language was extremely challenging and isolating at times. The linguistic alienation could have been a larger problem to my mental health had I not established some sort of habitual activity. Although some days it seems more appealing to hibernate under my electric blanket and wallow in self-pity than it does to walk to the gym, I never regret mustering up the energy to do something active. Prioritizing my mental and physical health, especially while living in a new culture, has comprehensively impacted the quality of my experience.

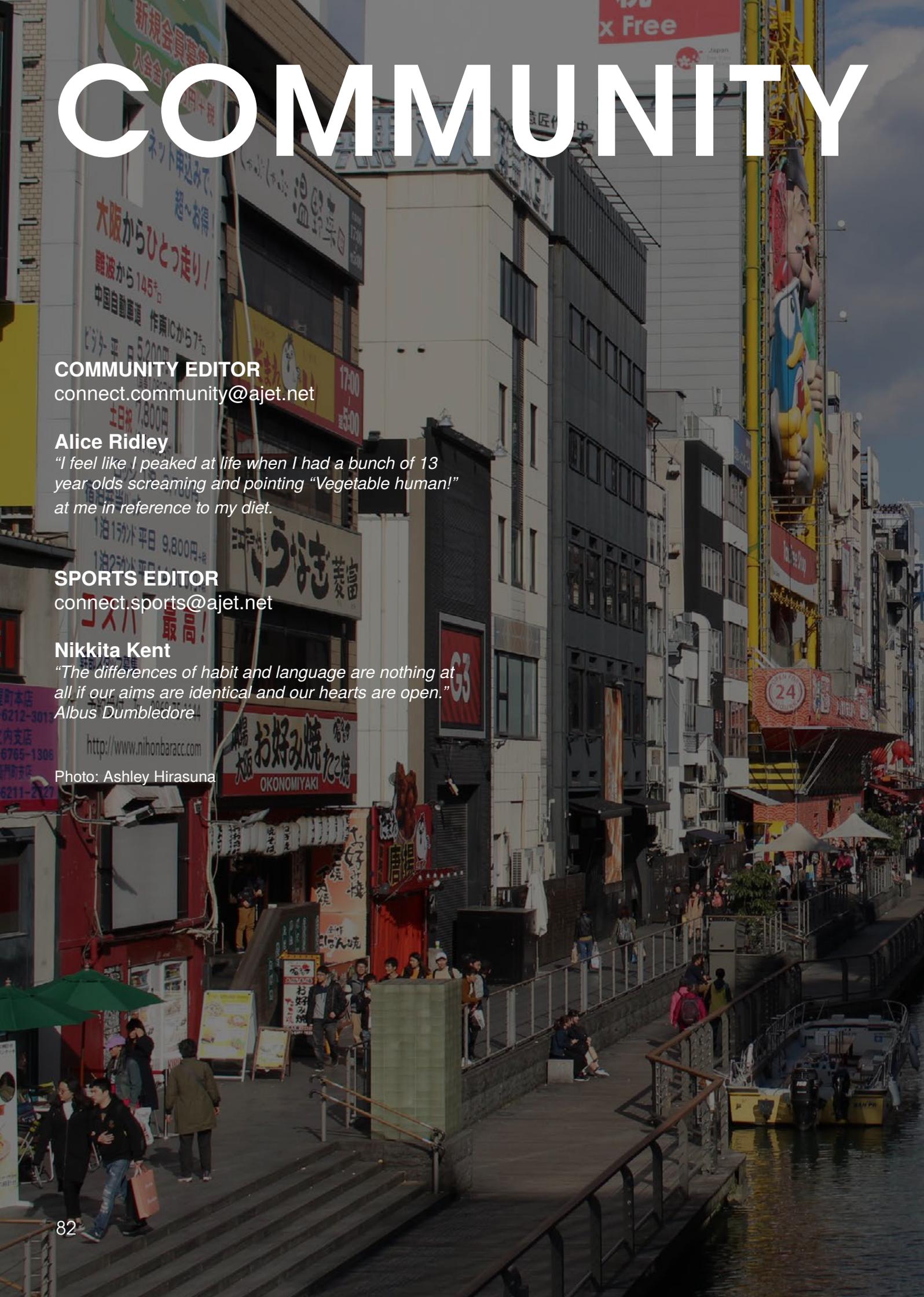
***“Prioritizing my mental and physical health, especially while living in a new culture, has comprehensively impacted the quality of my experience.”***

You do not have to start weightlifting or running marathons to reap the benefits that moving your body can have on your mental health and mindset. Whether it be taking a walk while listening to a podcast, doing some stretches to your favorite album, any type of movement is an indispensable form of self-care. While fitness centers are inaccessible to many people living in rural Japan, school gymnasiums or community centers can be viable alternatives to engage, both physically and socially. The beautiful landscapes of Japan also lend themselves to countless outdoor activities where you can simultaneously practice *shinrin-yoku*, or “forest bathing”. Find something you actually enjoy doing. There is truly something for everyone.

*Charlotte Akin is a first-year ALT on the Shimabara peninsula in Nagasaki Prefecture. A fervent supporter of monoka ice cream sandwiches and anything azuki red bean, she loves doing yoga, thrift-shopping, and making elaborate meals on her single-burner hot plate.*



# COMMUNITY



## COMMUNITY EDITOR

[connect.community@ajet.net](mailto:connect.community@ajet.net)

## Alice Ridley

*"I feel like I peaked at life when I had a bunch of 13 year olds screaming and pointing "Vegetable human!" at me in reference to my diet."*

## SPORTS EDITOR

[connect.sports@ajet.net](mailto:connect.sports@ajet.net)

## Nikkita Kent

*"The differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open."*

Albus Dumbledore

<http://www.nihonbaracc.com>

Photo: Ashley Hirasuna



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http://15navi.com/

**INTAGLIO**

**IN**

**THE**

**INAKA**



Fiona Duell (Saga Prefecture)

*Intaglio*: it sounds like some kind of pasta, or maybe a spell from Harry Potter. Actually, it's the name for the process of printing used to make most modern bank notes, and also a community centre class offered in my town. Using copper plates, designs are engraved and then etched into the plate, filled with ink, and rolled through a printing press. Sounds simple enough, but add the language barrier and nervous drawing ability to learning a new skill, and you've got yourself a challenge!

Every ALT likes to think that their town is simultaneously the best and most challenging placement in all of Japan. You'll often find yourself in a competition amongst *inaka* ALTs, of whose town is the most rural, has a more difficult local dialect, a smaller population. My town often wins in my prefecture, but I know some of you are more isolated, with even less access to a *conbini*.

Genkai (玄海町) is a town in Saga Prefecture on Kyushu, with roughly 6,000 people, from which I teach or interact with about 600. The closest 7-Eleven is a 15-minute drive in any direction, and the grocery store closes at 9 p.m. Known for sea bream, rice and nuclear power, the latter has made my small town fairly rich. Luckily for me, Genkai has put some of that nuclear money towards their education system. Our community centre offers tons of classes including bonsai, quilting, knitting, jewellery-making, cooking and intaglio. Most of the classes are filled with the people who have lived in Genkai the longest, and know the most about everything that goes on.

Let me tell you, there is no better way to ingratiate yourself to a community than by befriending the other socially active people within it. I signed up to three classes at our community centre (町民会館 —

ちょうみんかいかん): bonsai, knitting and intaglio. Bonsai was the best for gossip, as it was attended by all the *obachans* and *ojisans*. Sadly, my tiny bonsai died, and I was too ashamed to show my face or its sad blackened boughs after just three classes. Knitting was great for ladies' chatter, but at 6 p.m. on a Tuesday, it clashed with my other commitments and I had to let it go.

Intaglio was the class that stuck. A lot quieter than the others, often attended by only three or four other students, it gave you a lot more time to really focus on the activity at hand, and interact with everyone involved. By the end of the first class, I was friends with my teacher on Instagram, had seen pictures of one student's cats, become better acquainted with a guy my age from my board of education, and even made jokes with my supervisor over how clumsy she is.



The physicality of prepping the copper, cutting it to size, sanding the edges, pouring the coating,

engraving your design, patiently waiting for the acid bath, inking it and finally printing it, could take anywhere between one class and three — plus homework. The best thing about hands-on activities like

this is that most of what you need to do can be conveyed by both teacher and classmates through gesture and demonstrations. Finally, the language barrier wasn't completely holding me back from connecting with people!

I was enjoying the classes, and gushing about them so much on social media that two local ALTs, Ellisa and Ashlyn, asked to join the classes as well. Posting pictures of the hand-carved bamboo sticks topped by nails, and Instastories of my new classmates goofing their pours must have been

a sweet respite from the snaps of kyuushoku that usually litter my SNS. By seeking to learn a new skill and strengthen my connection with the local community, I had the added bonus of bonding with other ALTs over our shared interest in drawing, making, and generally being creative.

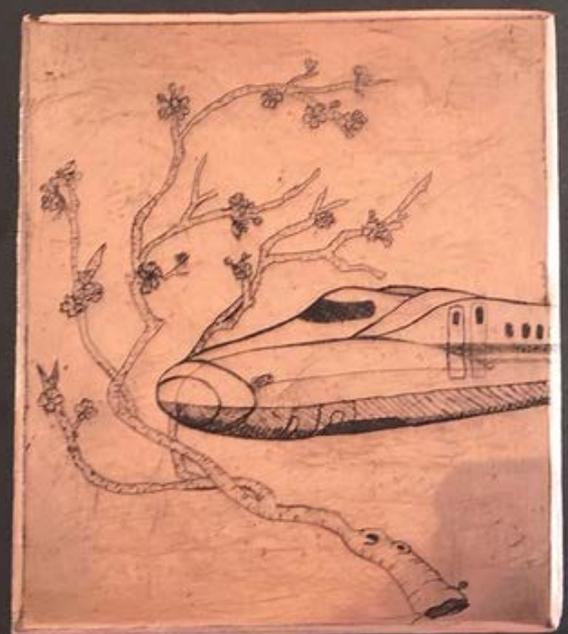
Both Ellisa and Ashlyn made presents for family at home, influenced mostly by local sea life, while I selfishly made densha-otaku fodder of the shinkansen and the trams from my most recent hometown, Melbourne. My supervisor also created a present for herself, but attending classes sporadically meant she was only able to make one print. The magic of intaglio means that she can always re-print from her copper plate. I got to experience a new artistic process alongside members of the BOE (both my supervisor and a community engagement officer), and even our limited classes together have given us something to talk about at school other than schedules, class planning, or awkward gesturing about the weather.

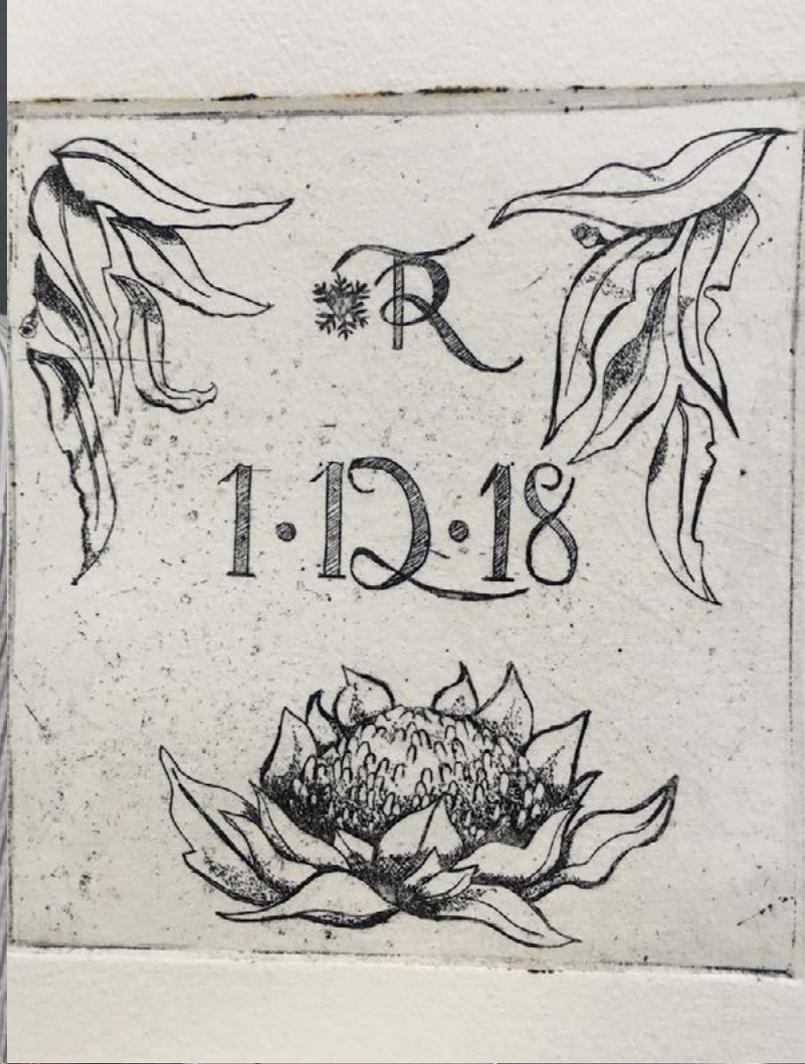
The culmination of all the community centre classes is the annual cultural exhibition, held in the community centre gym. Possibly because Genkai is so small, half of the exhibition/gym is dedicated to school student work (from nursery school through to senior high school students), while the other half is representative of each class taught at the community centre. This meant that my students, their parents, as well as everyone else attending to see their own work had the opportunity to witness my true artistic genius. Sadly, I remain undiscovered and unrecognised for my talents.

Most classes like this will have sign-ups in April, in line with the new financial year. I was first alerted to the option as one of many pieces of paper that cross my desk, but the information was also available posted on a noticeboard outside the community centre. This opportunity has made me an enthusiastic spokesperson for community-based creative endeavours. Of the three classes I attended, bonsai was free, knitting's only cost was photocopying the patterns from the teacher, and intaglio entailed a whopping 500 yen for materials, plus another 500 yen for the framing of my works. If you have the time, I strongly suggest that you investigate what is available at your local community centre, and give your creative juices a boost.



*Hailing from the east coast of Australia, Fiona is enjoys travelling to every nearby Daiso, to compare of Design Arts, you can bet her whiteboard drawing not check some of them out @saga.bujo on her In @heitianzaoxinghuihuajiaoshi on Instagram.*





currently finishing her second year on JET. She  
e their sticker and yarn selections. With a Bachelor  
g and worksheet doodling skills are top-notch. Why  
Instagram? The intaglio teacher is



# The Big Blue Tarp

Charrisa Traverse (Yamagata Prefecture)

The circumstances under which I first joined the Gospel Gleamers will always be one of my favourite memories of my first month in Japan. In fact, it was so surreal that it may end up being one of my favourite memories of my time in Japan, period. You see, it was a meltingly humid August, and I was fresh off the airport tarmac. I was chomping at the bit, looking for opportunities to get involved in the community. I wanted friends, I wanted something to do, I wanted to feel like I belonged... and of course I wanted all of it right now, gosh darn it. I was already connected to my local international centre through a volunteer position I had inherited from my predecessor, so I shot off an email to one of the ladies there.

"I want to join a club of some kind.

I'm interested in taiko, calligraphy, tea ceremony, or maybe a choir. Please let me know if you know of any clubs accepting new members!"

At this point, I feel like it's important to pause and mention how amazing the staff at my city's international centre are. They are friendly and really concerned with helping all the various newcomers acclimate to life here. They truly are awesome human beings, and I am grateful to them for so many reasons.

Anyways, a staff member who is now a good friend of mine replied, enthusiastically listing opportunities in every category I had expressed interest in. It was at this point that I was introduced to the most immediately available option: a small gospel choir, whose leader's name and phone number were conveniently provided. All I was told was that this person knew I was interested so I should talk to her, but also she couldn't speak English.

So, I sent her a tentative text introducing myself and asking if I could come and observe one of her practices. She soon responded, inviting me to come and watch a performance they were having the following week. I agreed, wanting to keep this particular option open even though I was considering other clubs. The day of the performance, I arrived at the address that had been sent to me: the city hall parking lot. I was greeted by a middle-aged woman in very colourful clothing (the group's leader),



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 我らの出会いの中で実を結ぶ  
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 どれほどおおきな喜びでしょう  
  
 Kimiwa aisarerutame umareta  
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and a young woman around my age who I later learned came from Africa to study agriculture at the university here. Turns out the “no English” business was mostly true, although the young woman spoke both English and Japanese almost fluently (as well as many other languages).

We introduced ourselves while they led me down a series of narrow side streets, and as we walked I began to hear music. We rounded a corner and abruptly came upon a small neighbourhood festival. There were food stands selling yakisoba and vanilla milkshakes, people sitting around plastic tables talking and eating, children running and laughing everywhere, and in front of it, hula dancers dancing barefoot on a big blue tarp. Apparently, the neighbourhood



puts on this festival every year specifically for the local disabled community who can't attend most regular summer festivals because of accessibility issues.

Needless to say, I was intrigued. But, much to my confusion, I was led through the crowd and into the back room of a house that seemed to be acting as a green room for all the groups that were performing that day (there were a lot). Inside this room, the rest of the group members were waiting. There were two more middle-aged women, one practicing on a bongo, the other setting up a music stand, and an older man wearing a fedora and a bow tie. A stack of lyric sheets were pressed into my hands. All of them were in English except one, and I knew them from my childhood. All of them were old church hymns and songs: "This Little Light of Mine", "Oh When the Saints Go Marching In."

"Can you sing this?" The leader asked, pointing at the music in my hands. I nodded. Everyone laughed and began to speak excitedly in Japanese and broken English. I found myself laughing with them. Ten minutes later I was standing on that big blue tarp singing "Amazing Grace" in harmony with the choir I had apparently just joined.

It's February now, and I've been practicing and performing with the Gospel Gleamers for around six months. We've performed at a year-end party and a community music exhibition, a charity concert and a Christmas Eve service. Using music, back doors into the community have been opened for me. This weekend we are performing a six-song gospel set at a marriage meeting party. How strange is that? I've gotten to know my group members despite the language barrier, and through them I have had even more opportunities



to explore my city and learn about the people who live here. Whether it be going out for Indian food after a performance, or celebrating a member's marriage during a candlelit Imoni stew party, it's all thanks to the love for music that we all share.

I would encourage anyone with a single creative bone in their body to use that to their advantage in finding a place for themselves in their community. It doesn't matter how deep in the countryside you might find yourself. Music, art, and all the other ways creativity is expressed can be found in each and every corner of Japan. Sometimes the forms may be unfamiliar, but the important bit — creating something beautiful that means something to you — that bit is pretty universal. And when an opportunity to engage comes your way, don't hesitate. Don't shy away from the big blue tarp. Take off your shoes and give it a try.





2:30 集合

3:00 Start. <sup>イブ</sup>

3:10 Gos♪ **Amazing** Ry + カリ + 子  
 3:10 Gos♪ Amazing. カリ → Ry + カリ → 子 + カリ

4:30 Gos♪ **聖者の行進** / Kazuo. <sup>子</sup>

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Free Time 4:45 Gos♪ ① You raise me up. Ry and カリ.  
 5:00 ② 君は愛をくれたため生まれた.  
 ③ This Little Light of mine. 子

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5:15 Gos♪ ① Grace Medley. Ry and カリ  
 ② NAJUA. 子 → カリ → 子  
 5:30 ③ Happy Day 子 → Ry → 子 → Ry

「15分 集合 まで?」



# A New World from a Small Song

Osasha Fertal (Toyama Prefecture)

It was the January of my second year, and — contrary to what is usually told to us — the second year was proving to be the hardest. My workload increased, I was stressed and rundown, and snow was piled deep. I was advised to start something outside work to help my work-life balance. A hobby, a sport, a musical instrument? I had no idea, and I was afraid any new thing might become a burden. I imagined going from work duties to after-work duties. But I decided to trust the advice, and try something “if it was close to home.”

The teacher who had advised me, Yoshikuni-sensei, told me she played *kouta shamisen*. By an incredibly lucky chance, her teacher gave lessons not ten minutes from my workplace. “I’ll try,” I thought,

though without much conviction. That changed when we walked into an unassuming house together and she introduced me to Tade-sensei. It felt like another world: a warm *tatami* room, beautifully decorated with traditional items and seasonally appropriate flower arrangements, the walls lined with shamisens. Best of all was Tade-sensei’s frank manner, sense of humor, and insistence that shamisen was for fun. She didn’t take mistakes seriously, so I couldn’t either. She didn’t treat me any differently, despite my limited Japanese. And she loved not only music, but the





history and traditions and stories that accompanied it. I could tell at once that there was a whole world of knowledge and beauty to be discovered, and I wanted to know more.

I continued to attend lessons together with Yoshikuni-sensei, and thanks to her, I could understand more despite the language barrier. I will always treasure the memories of walking through the bitter snow to enter the special world of Tade-sensei's house, sitting by the stove, and listening to them play while

I waited for my turn. It was only a couple lessons before the sound of shamisen, which at first seemed foreign and a little mournful to me, revealed its unique beauty. *Kouta* — meaning 'small song' — is a type of shamisen developed for entertainment in a small Japanese-style room. It has a gentler sound, being played with the fingers rather than a *batchi*. The songs are like poems, sometimes lamenting a lost love, sometimes retelling a bit of an old story, sometimes satirical verses rich with wordplay.

One of the first songs I learned was about Benten Kouzo Kikunosuke. Shortly after hearing the explanation of this famous character, a chance to see the *Shironami Gonin Otoko* at the Kabukiza in Tokyo presented itself. Watching the play with prior knowledge of one of the characters totally changed the experience for me. The lyrics of the songs became a doorway to Japanese culture, thought, comedy,



and traditions. It also helped me see the true beauty of Japanese language, and the way meaning can be layered into a small verse.

While my shamisen teacher explained the meaning and nuance of the song, Yoshikuni-sensei began making some English translations so I could understand more deeply. We began working together to refine the translations, when Tade-sensei said “It’s better if they can be sung in English too, isn’t it?” This opened up a whole other set of challenges, but we didn’t want to give up. We started to fit the translation to the meter and make it singable with the melody. Several English kouta emerged, and Tade-sensei, in the spirit of the natural playfulness of kouta, decided to put them into the yearly concert as a sing-along. I had some reservations — after all, the English is sometimes clunky and inelegant compared to the Japanese — but when we got up on the stage to sing ‘English kouta’, I was blown away by the audience response. Everyone tried singing along loudly and enthusiastically! Two of my ALT friends came up to the stage and joined us to sing again. It became a great moment crossing linguistic boundaries and bridging the gap between audience and performer. After that, I wanted to work on more translations, to reveal the cleverness and beauty of kouta songs to more people.

I’m still a long way from being able to do that, but my Japanese has improved leaps and bounds since I started shamisen. For one thing, I love the language more. For another, I have many friends now who don’t speak English! I’ve met so many wonderful people through the group. We’ve taken day trips together and they’ve showed me local places. I attended *rakugo* with them for the first time, joined the after-party, and was able to talk with the performers. This New Year’s eve, a shamisen colleague welcomed my mom and me to his temple to try *kanetsuki* (temple bell ringing)

for the first time. The next morning, we woke early to listen to *sutras*, and shared the first toast of sake and ate *osechi ryori* with him and his family.

Even if there had been a chance to do these kinds of things outside the group, I never would have had the courage to join alone. But because of my teacher, I didn’t have to. I could join as one of the group, and now I can be there because I belong. It has been the most wonderful thing to become part of the local community on another level. Practicing has never become a duty, as I feared. It has become the greatest way to relax and tap into a spirit of play and beauty. My colleague who is the priest at the temple told me, “I used to play horn in university. But when I started running the temple, it felt like a nuisance. Shamisen suits this.” I can understand that feeling. The clear resonance of the shamisen’s strings becomes a way to focus my mind, and to become calm. It becomes an entry to another world. I no longer feel such stress about work, and I quietly look forward to all the future songs I will learn, and little interesting facts about culture and language that will be revealed, bit by bit.



*Osasha Fertal is a 3rd year high school ALT in Toyama Prefecture. Originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee, she has lived in the UK, Ireland, and Germany before moving to Toyama in 2016. She holds a Masters in Classics from Trinity College Dublin.*



# From One Centimeter to Eight Hundred

Jayelon Lasseigne (Nagano)

I have fond memories of snow. Growing up in South Carolina, snow meant 'snow days', days in which school was closed and we were left to our own devices. A day filled with scraping enough snow together to make a snowball to throw at your siblings, using the snow from the entire yard to make one tiny snowman, and sledding down steep hills and forgetting there was gravel underneath until you crashed and tumbled the rest of the way down. A day, maybe two, rarely three, of snow a year in a place where one to two centimeters was enough to throw the entire state into chaos. It was with this background that I stared at my JET placement in shock: northern Nagano. Average snow a year: 800 centimeters.

As I soon found out, the only way to deal with that much snow and cold is to embrace it wholeheartedly through one of three snow-related activities: snowshoeing, skiing, or snowboarding. I'd never gotten the chance to do any of these things back home and trying them in Japan gave me an opportunity to 1) get out from under my *kotatsu* and 2) keep the effects of SAD at bay. Let's take a look at what makes each of these great!

# Snowshoeing

Good for roaming around the snowy wilderness, snowshoeing is often overlooked and underrated. Not only is snowshoeing less expensive than skiing or snowboarding, it's also easy on the joints and good for people of all ages and fitness levels. It may be awkward to walk in them at first, but that's nothing a little practice can't fix. Ski resorts often have snowshoes for rent, so even if your friends are in favor of more extreme modes of burning calories, you can still go with and have some fun.

If hiking around the slopes isn't your thing, pay for a guided tour and look for animal tracks, or have them lead you to places inaccessible by other means in winter! Last year, I took a tour through a company called Lamp.



We hiked out to Kagami Lake, famous for its mirror-reflection of the Togakushi mountain range on clear, calm days, and were able to walk on the top of the lake before enjoying a lunch of hot soup on a snow table the guide had dug for the group.

# Skiing

Skiing is an integral part of life here in northern Nagano. My elementary students even have days where they go to a nearby ski resort and learn how to ski with their teachers and classmates! If they can do it, you can too! It's often said that skiing is easy to pick up, meaning that you could

have a nice foundation by the end of your first day. In addition, using poles can give you more stability when going slowly, and it is very, very easy to go over flat surfaces. Ski lifts are also easy to get off of with skis on, and, if you decide to buy your own gear, it is super easy to find at second-hand stores.



My personal relationship with skiing, however, was short and painful. I found skiing was very easy to pick up, and by the end of my second day, I had no problem going from the top to the bottom of an easy slope without falling. On my third day, I dislocated my left shoulder in a nasty crash that sent me tumbling thirty feet. Ski season = over.

# Snowboarding

Ahhh, snowboarding. My latest obsession. As soon as I put the boots on, I knew snowboarding was for me. Ski boots are hard and inflexible, meaning you kind of cla-clump, cla-clump around when you're walking. Snowboard boots feel more like regular shoes, so walking is much more comfortable. Another nice thing about snowboarding is you only have one thing to worry about: your board. You don't have a separate blade for each foot, nor poles for each hand, so you have fewer things to carry from your car (or the rental place) to the slopes. You also don't have to trudge back up the slope to collect everything if you wipe out, and if you do wipe out, your legs will always rotate in the same direction. Less chance of leg injuries.

That being said, snowboarding is very difficult to pick up. Your first day will be spent falling down the mountain. Your first couple times getting off a ski lift will probably also end with you falling. However, I've found that because snowboarding is so difficult to start, everything brings a sense of accomplishment. *Everything*. Figuring out how to stand up, how to skate with one foot strapped in, how to stop; I couldn't help but give myself a pat on the back when I successfully did each of them for the first time. A positive attitude goes a long way with snowboarding!

Whether you come from a place with no snow or a place with 800 centimeters, winter has a lot to offer. No matter your choice – spiked-shoes, blades, or a board – I encourage you to get out there and make the most of the snow!



*Jayelon is a second year JET from the US. When she's not hitting the slopes, she likes to knit, read *My Hero Academia*, and collect **goshuin**. She also has a blog, *A Passport and Chopsticks*, that she's been working on since she studied abroad in Osaka three years ago. Her favorite food is **okonomiyaki**, and her least favorite is **shishamo**, which appears in school lunch exactly once a month, usually on the last Thursday. She hopes to become a competent snowboarder before her time on JET is over.*



A photograph of a person climbing a rock face. The climber is wearing a light blue t-shirt and dark shorts, and is reaching up to grasp a red rock hold. The rock face is covered in various colorful holds (red, green, blue, orange, purple) and a rope is visible on the left. The background is a blurred natural setting.

# As High as a VET

## My Experience Climbing in Japan

Nathan Abel (Gunma)



Ever since I was a kid, I've loved climbing. Whether it be on furniture, out the window and onto the roof of my childhood home, up a nice tall tree, or on the jungle gym at school — if it could be climbed, I would try to scale it. This never really felt like exercise to me. Climbing feels more like a puzzle or a challenge to overcome. So imagine my delight when I discovered at the age of 10 that there was an entire indoor *gym* dedicated to climbing only a short drive from my house.

Shortly after my first experience at the climbing gym, I convinced my parents to enroll me in the youth recreational climbing club. After a short lesson at the beginning of class, we were let loose in the gym to climb at our own pace. Like many kids my age, I had tried out a number of different sports ranging from basketball to lacrosse. I was completely hopeless at each and every one of them. Climbing gave me an outlet for my physicality beyond the high pressure, competitive world of team sports, and taught me to be self-sufficient in a way that few other kids my age were.

Unfortunately, my days at the climbing gym were to be relatively short lived, as I moved several states away after finishing middle school. Climbing gyms, after all, are still relatively rare, and there wasn't one anywhere near where I ended up living next. I had to put my passion for climbing on hold for the next 10 years until I moved back to my home state of Maryland after college. It was during my last year of school that I realized I most certainly did not want to pursue a career in my major, performing

arts. Instead, I became more and more interested in pursuing a career in teaching and I started seeking out any opportunities to work with kids that I could find. While climbing at the gym one day, I saw a staff member teaching the same recreational climbing club I was once in, and a lightbulb went off in my head. “Hey, I could do that!”

And sure enough, I applied for a job at the gym and I got it. I spent the next two years coaching the very same program I had been a part of as a kid. It was a wonderfully rewarding experience, but I knew it couldn't last forever. I wanted to take another step to become a real, bona-fide school teacher. That's what brought me to JET.

Naturally, I was thrilled to be accepted in to the program, and even more so once creeping on my school's website and discovering that there would be a climbing club. Even before considering coming to Japan, the Japanese rock climbing scene was on my mind. As we all know, Tokyo (and Japan as a whole) is gearing up to host the 2020 Olympics — the first Olympic Games to feature the sport.

So... what could I expect from the climbing culture across the sea? As it turned out, things were roughly the same from what I had experienced in America. While I'm sure experiences will vary from gym to gym, overall the climbing community is exceptionally friendly and laid back. For example, my climbing club students knew I worked at a climbing gym before coming to Japan. They did not know that I almost exclusively did rope climbing, AKA “top roping”, which is fairly different from the low-to-the-ground, unrestricted nature of “bouldering”. Bouldering, which is almost exclusively what my school's climbing club practices,

requires a significantly larger amount of strength compared to top roping. You can imagine my nervousness and embarrassment climbing with these students for the first time, imagining them thinking “jeez, he *worked* at a climbing gym and he still sucks?!”.

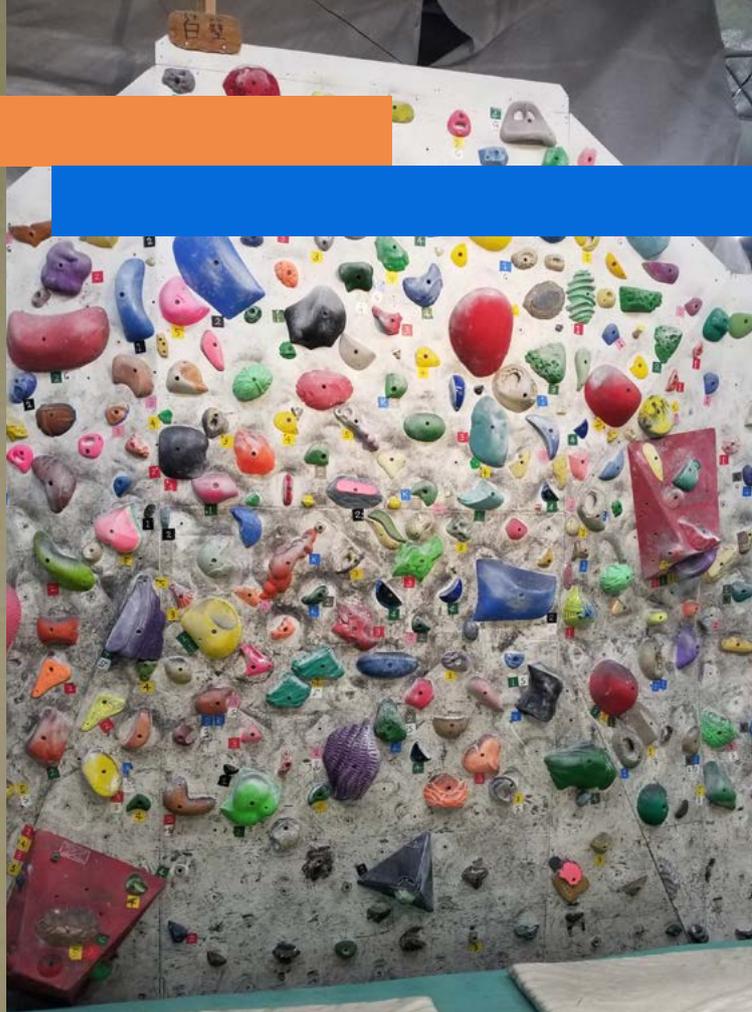
Who knows, maybe they still thought that, but they didn't make it obvious to me. The community at the gym we go to, Wall Street in Maebashi, Gunma, is remarkably similar to what I experienced at home: a close knit, supportive community that is quick to offer up encouragement and advice to newcomers while still having an atmosphere of competition to drive experienced climbers to do better. The line between staff members and fellow friends and climbers is blurred considerably as well. Rather than just checking you in at the front desk and maybe occasionally skulking around making sure everyone is being safe, the staff members are as much an essential part of the gym community as anyone else. They regularly hang out in the climbing area, cheering on gym members who are trying out their climbing

routes and offering up advice to those in need.

I'm really happy that I decided to take the initiative and start climbing with my students. I didn't know what to expect from the club before coming, but I can confidently say it's helped me feel more connected to my school, and experiencing a different culture's take on climbing has been really rewarding. I would encourage any JET to try out climbing in Japan! With most climbing gyms possessing a strong sense of community among their patrons and staff, I believe it will help add to your sense of belonging in Japan. Simultaneously, the independent nature of climbing also forces you to learn the value of self-motivation in order to progress.

As I understand it, bouldering gyms like the one I go to in Maebashi are relatively common, and with the Olympics right around the corner, I'm sure climbing will only increase in popularity in the coming years. You're in a perfect place at a perfect time to start climbing, so give it a shot!

*Nathan is a first year JET originally from Baltimore, Maryland. He teaches at two senior high schools in Numata, Gunma. When he isn't rock climbing, he likes listening to 80's J-pop and playing video games.*



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